PROJECT ON BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

ASIA REPORT

Fourth Quarterly Report on Asia

October to December 2008

Volume: 3. No.1

Reports of December 2008

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INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
ISLAMABAD

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Department of Politics and International Relations
International Islamic University Islamabad

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Reports of **December 2008**

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BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Fertile Crescent

Aisha Rehman

From 21st Nov to 27th Nov, 2008

Presentation: December 3, 2008

Iraq

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- Iraq won't be springboard to attack neighbors – official
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- Kurds say to produce 250,000 barrels a day in 2009

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- Pro-Syrian militants attack journalist in Lebanon
- Lebanese president requests weapons from Iran

Iraq

Political front:

Supreme Court, de-Baathification curb voting on pact – MP

Lawmaker Kherallah al-Basri of the Iraqi List's secular parliamentary bloc said that voting on the Iraqi-U.S. security pact by Iraq's Parliament was postponed on Wednesday due to disputes over canceling the Iraqi Supreme Criminal Court and Justice and Accountability (De-Baathification) law. "The disputes are mainly revolving around those two points," al-Basri told. The Iraqi list occupies 19 out of 275 seats in Iraq's council of representatives.

Only constitution concludes IAF's demands – Kurdish MP

Lawmaker Mohsen al-Saadon of the Kurdistan Alliance parliamentary blo said that many political blocs want to cancel the Supreme Criminal Court, but such demands should be concluded by the constitution not government, referring to the demands of the Iraqi Accord Front (IAF). "This Court was formed by the constitution, and cannot be canceled unless through the constitution," al-Saadon, member of the Iraqi parliament's legal committee, told. "The Accounting and Justice committee is stated in the constitution, and the government cannot omit a constitutional article," he said.

IAF will not vote on pact without reformation document – MP

Lawmaker Abdul Kareem al-Samaraee from the Iraqi Accord Front (IAF) said that his bloc will not attend the parliament's session today which will vote on the Iraqi-U.S. security pact, if there would be no agreement on the reformation document, which contains the blocs' demands. "Discussions are still underway between political blocs to reach an accepted document," al-Samaraee told. "The document aims at reforming the political process," he said. The IAF occupies 38 out of 275 seats in Iraq's council of representatives.

We reject agreement, to vote against it – Arab bloc

MP from the independent Arab bloc said that his bloc rejects the security deal between Baghdad and Washington and will vote against it today. "We have not presented any political demands like other blocs, we reject the troop withdrawal agreement and will vote against it today," Abdul Mutlaq al-Juburi told.

Draft law presented to Kurdish parliament to criminalize female circumcision

Female lawmaker in Kurdistan's parliament said that she, along with a group of lawmakers, presented a draft law to criminalize female circumcision within the parliamentary efforts to face violence against women. "The Kurdish parliament is studying the phenomenon of violence against women, so we prepared two bills in this respect; the first regarding banning and criminalizing female circumcision, while the second is about the violence against women in general," Hala Suheel told. She expected to debate the two draft laws during the new legislative term as of the next year.

IIP denies "arm-twisting" over SOFA

The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) denied the use of "arm-twisting" tactics with the government to prevent the passage of the U.S. troop withdrawal agreement. The party's representatives in the Parliament have clearly expressed "its reserved stance on the agreement because of the existence of some clauses that pose a threat to Iraq's future, including those related to the U.S. forces and the internal situation in Iraq," according to a party statement received.

Sahwa councils "propaganda" for PM – official

A local official in Diala said that the *sahwa* (awakening) tribal councils are nothing but a means of "propaganda" for Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. "There is no need to form *sahwa* councils as the government's exclusive possession of weapons would be the only option in order to restore the rule of law, security and stability," Ibrahim Hassan al-Bajlan told. Diala province, one of Iraq's hotspots, has witnessed the establishment of several formations like the Popular Committees, which declared war on al-Qaeda network, and the *sahwa* councils, usually led by chieftains or tribal notables in the province.

UIA stresses pro-stance on SOFA

The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) has confirmed its positive stance on the U.S. security pact, saying that it safeguards Iraq's national sovereignty. "The alliance held an important meeting with the participation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, during which it stressed its unified stance on the U.S. troop withdrawal agreement," according to a statement published on the official web site of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC). The Iraqi and U.S. sides have been negotiating a long-term security deal throughout the past months. The pact should determine the legal framework for U.S. troop presence when a UN mandate expires at the end of 2008.

Lawmakers demand the government to amend 2009 budget

A number Iraqi lawmakers demanded to return the budget of 2009 to the government to apply a fair distribution of funds on provinces. "The government did not employ lawmakers' prior notes," said the website of Iraq's council of representatives.
But parliament's speaker, Mahmoud al-Mashahadani, and during session, said that the budget will be read by the legislators for the second time after upcoming Eid's vacation.

We still support al-Maliki despite disputes – KA

The Kurdistan Alliance (KA) parliamentary bloc said that it still supports Iraqi Premier Nouri al-Maliki despite current disputes, according to a release issued by the bloc. ***"Disputes between the Presidency Board (PB) and al-Maliki on one hand and Kurdistan's the federal cabinet on the other hand do not affect this support***," said the release that was received by. "Statements made by lawmakers of other blocs aim at escalating troubles in a time that efforts are concentrating on solving current problems between the KA and al-Maliki," it added.

Parl. Speaker in Amman, meets king

Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament Mahmoud al-Mashhadani arrived in the Jordanian capital and met with King Abdullah II, according to a parliamentary media source. "Today, Mashhadani arrived in Amman on an unannounced visit and met with King Abdullah," the source told. The visit will last one day, the source noted, providing no further details.

Parl. debates Iraq's accession to intl. agreement

Under the chairmanship of its first deputy speaker, Sheikh Khaled Atiya, the Iraqi Parliament held an open session to vote on Iraq's accession to the agreement on the establishment of the Islamic Committee of the International Crescent (ICIC). During the session, other votes will be held on a number of draft laws, according to a copy of the Parliament's agenda received.

Sadrist says troop pact readings "unconstitutional"

A spokesperson for the Sadrist bloc described the first and second readings of the troop withdrawal pact with the United States as "unconstitutional," threatening to contest the outcome of the vote. ***"The first and second readings are unconstitutional and null and void. We have informed the Presidential Board of that," Ahmed al-Masoudi told.***

Absolute majority vote on SOFA- MP

An Iraqi parliamentarian from the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) said that an absolute majority vote, rather than a two-thirds majority vote, will be required to pass the controversial security agreement with the United States. "The agreement is on the way to a vote after the second reading has been completed…The Presidential Board may vote on it tomorrow or the day after if debate is complete," MP Qassem Dawoud

People have right to amend pact – VP

Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi said that the Iraqi-***U.S. security pact remains the most dangerous challenge that is facing Iraq since the overthrow of the former regime in 2003, adding the public should be allowed to amend it so that no one would regret their*** decision about it in the future. "Options that we have are difficult and limited," a release issued by al-Hashemi's office. "Politicians have the right to think about the future of their country and warn of any hasty decision," he said. "There are possibilities

of mistakes in dealing with the pact and consequences of such mistakes may lead the country to undesirable results," he added.

URGENT / Court turns down request to strip MP Alusi of immunity

Iraq's Supreme Federal Court handed down a ruling rejecting the parliament's decision to strip independent lawmaker Mithal al-Alusi of immunity for his participation in a conference held in Israel, a legal expert said. "This ruling is binding for the legislative and executive authorities by virtue of article 94 of the Iraqi constitution," Talaat Harb, Alusi's lawyer, told. The Iraqi parliament had voted on September 14 in favor of a decision to lift immunity off legislator Alusi for his participation in a conference on "terrorism" held in Israel.

Geo strategic front:

U.S. army hopes SOFA signed

The media adviser of the U.S. army in Baghdad expressed hope that the political blocs could reach an agreement on the troop withdrawal deal. "The U.S. army administration is optimistic regarding reaching an agreement among political blocs to approve the security deal with Washington," al-Muqdad Jabreel told. ***The spokesman for the U.S. embassy refused to comment on the issue.*** The Iraqi cabinet last week had approved with an overwhelming majority of 27 votes to one the security pact between Iraq and the United States, also known as the status of forces agreement (SOFA), and was referred to Parliament for voting.

125,408 detainees released under amnesty law - source

The general pardon law covered 125,408 people detained in Iraqi jails since it was first applied in late February 2008, an official spokesman for the higher judicial council said. "A total 125,408 detainees in Iraqi jails were released by virtue of the pardon law, in effect as of February 27, while those not covered total 30,116," chief justice Abdelsattar al-Berqadar. The Iraqi Parliament had endorsed on February 13 a law granting amnesty to Iraqis and others residing in Iraq after it was amended by Parliament to include as large a number of detainees as possible, according to Iraqi government officials. The law, ***however, did not include people convicted of genocide or*** mass killing, nor administrative and financial corruption and terrorism cases.

Talabani confers pact with EU ambassadors

President of Iraq Jalal Talabani conferred the Iraqi-U.S. security pact with the ambassadors of the European Union (EU) and Turkey in Iraq, according to a presidential release. "Talabani received the ambassadors today," said the release that was received. "The meeting conferred a number of important axes pertained to the situation in Iraq, including the pact" it added. "***It also discussed methods of dealing with pending issues*** in the country," it noted.

Talabani, Turkish official discuss Gul's visit to Iraq

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani received the Turkish official in charge of Iraqi affairs at the Turkish foreign ministry and discussed with him preparations for Turkish President Abdullah Gul's visit to Iraq, according to a presidential press release. "This visit will contribute to reinforcing friendship and historic and mutual trust relations between Iraq and Turkey," Talabani was quoted by the release as received. "Expanding and strengthening mutual ties between the two neighboring countries is an important issue, to serve both sides' peoples," he added.

Al-Mashhadani mulls political developments with Jordanian king

Iraqi Parliament's Speaker Mahmoud al-Mashhadani discussed with Jordanian king Abdullah II in Amman the latest political developments in Iraq and means of boosting bilateral ties, the parliament said in a statement. "Al-Mashhadani met with King Abdullah II and discussed with him Iraq's ***political developments and means of boosting mutual cooperation for the good of the two countries' interests,"*** ***s***aid the statement received.
The statement quoted the Jordanian king as asserting "***the support of Iraq's security, stability and integrity," noting that Iraq's stability necessary for the while region's stability.***

Turkmen union backs support councils, constitutional amendments

The Union of Diaspora Turkmens (UDT) announced its backing for the establishment of support councils and the introduction of constitutional amendments, which it said serve Turkmen's interests. "In the name of Turkmen institutions, movements and organizations outside Iraq, the Union of Diaspora Turkmens states its support for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's initiative to establish support councils, which boost national unity in Iraq," according to a statement released by the union and received.

Iraq won't be springboard to attack neighbors – official

An Iraqi official reiterated his country's keenness not to be used as a springboard for aggression on any of its neighbors, or as a source of threat to their security. "***We're on the way of deepening our relations with our neighbors based on our belief that the security and stability of Iraq is firmly linked to the security and stability of our neighbors and region," the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) quoted Labid Abawi***, Iraqi Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs, as saying. "We're keen on our neighbors' security in as much we are on own our," said Abawi, who is also the head of Iraq's delegation to the meeting of Security Cooperation and Coordination Committee of Iraq's Neighboring Countries. He ***expressed appreciation of Syria's efforts in hosting the Iraqi refugees in a spirit of fraternity and good neighborliness as well as the firm relations*** binding the people of the two countries. Abawi pointed to the s***teps taken by the Iraqi government in the political and security fields***, stressing importance of "what had been achieved in terms of security improvement thanks to the cooperation with the neighboring countries".

Iranian parliament speaker slams SOFA

Iranian *Majlis* (parliament) Speaker Ali Larijani said that the US troops are not under control or supervision of Iraqi forces and they can enter and leave the country with their own ID documents, which is one of the most serious loopholes in the Baghdad-Washington security pact. ***"The recent security pact***

signed by the U.S. and Iraq would cause crisis in Iraq as well as the entire region," Larijani said in statements carried by the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA). Speaking to reporters, he said this is the legitimate rights of the Iraqi parliament to question the deal. Larijani said that although some clauses of the U.S.-Iraq security pact have been amended but there are numerous problems which would create obstacles for the Iraqi nation as well as the Middle East region. ***The main weak point of US-Iraq security pact which can damage the country's sovereignty is the issue of capitulation, he said, adding that the Americans have promised to remove Iraq from Chapter Seven of UN Charter but not date has been fixed for this.*** Americans have made many false promises to the Iraqi people, Larijani said.

Economic front:

Iran exports $2 billion worth of goods to Iraq

Iran has exported more than $2 billion worth of goods to Iraq since January 2008, a senior Iranian trade official said. Hassan Magaz, Chairman of the Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce, said ***Iranian firms and chambers of commerce were currently holding two trade fairs in Iraq, one in Baghdad and the other in the northern Kurdish city of Dahouk.*** "Iranian firms will open a new trade fair in the (Kurdish) city of Sulaimaniya," Magaz added. ***Magaz is in Iraq, heading a large trade delegation to expand bilateral ties and increase volume of Iranian exports to the country.*** "Iran has a big role in bringing Iraqi reconstruction and development to success," the official added. He said ties with the Kurdish semi-independent enclave were booming.

Missan oil fields' output surpasses 100,000 barrels a day

The Missan Oil Company currently produces more than 100,000 barrels a day and is installing nine electrical pumps to drill more crude oil, a company statement said. The statement said each of Missan's three major oil fields will have "three new electrical pumps." The fields are Southern Faka, Norther Fakka and Abu Ghareb. Last year Iraq issued a tender to drill scores of oil wells in the southern Province of Missan, where the company is based. But output is now estimated at 105,000 barrels a day, according to the statement.

Kurds say to produce 250,000 barrels a day in 2009

Iraqi Kurds say volume of oil produced from their semi-independent region will hit 250,000 barrels a day by the end of 2009. Most of the crude will come from three main oilfields the Kurds have developed via

deals with foreign firms in the past few years. A visit by Oil Minister Hussain Shahristani to the region recently seems to have removed hurdles preventing the Kurds from exporting the crude.

Minister in Arbil over oil contracts

The Iraqi minister of oil arrived in Arbil city to discuss oil contracts with senior government officials, according to a local source. "Minister Hussein al-Shahrestani arrived in Arbil to take up the oil contracts signed by the regional government with foreign oil companies," a foreign relations department official in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Fallah Mustafa, told. ***The official did not provide further details.***

The region had signed several contracts with foreign oil corporations despite the central government's objection and ahead of the Iraqi parliament's final endorsement of a new draft law on oil. Parliamentary debates on the draft oil and gas law were postponed more than once despite strong pressure from the United States on Iraqi parliamentary bloc leaders to accelerate a new law.

Gulf Bank discusses CBI monetary policy

The Gulf Commercial Bank will hold a symposium to tackle the monetary policy performance of the Central Bank of Iraq (CBI), a media official from the relations department said. Entitled 'Evaluating the performance of the monetary policy of the Central Bank of Iraq (CBI), the symposium aims at exchanging experience among state-run and national banks in Iraq, Ammar Maan told. The symposium will be held under the auspices of the Central Bank of Iraq and will be moderated by its adviser, Mazhar Mohammed Saleh, Maan added.

$4B oil refinery to be set up in Missan

The Iraqi Ministry of Oil is planning to build a new oil refinery in Missan province at a cost of $4 million U.S. dollars, Missan's mayor said. "During the coming few days, the Ministry of Oil will sign a contract for the establishment of a refinery with a capacity of 150,000 barrel per day (bpd)," Adel Mahodar told, noting that the completion period is 18 months. "The project will be referred to the cabinet for approval given the high cost of the project," the mayor explained. Missan is a Shiite province. Its capital city is al-Amara. Sitting on the Tigris River, Amara lies 390 km south of Baghdad. Missan, in the east of the country, bordering Iran, is home to many marsh Arabs.

Minister invites Arab organization to meet in Iraq

The Iraqi minister of industry and minerals called on the Arab Organization for Industrial Development and Mining to hold its future meetings in Iraq, according to a media source. "During his today's meeting with the director general of the Arab Organization for Industrial Development and Mining in the Jordanian capital Amman, Mohammed Bin Youssef, Minister Fawzi al-Hariri expressed Iraq's readiness to host the organization's meetings," the source told. The Iraqi minister discussed with the Jordanian minister of power and mineral resources, Khaldoun Qutayshat, means of boosting investment cooperation between the two countries, the source added.

Two new power stations in Baghdad, Najaf

A foreign company will begin executing two new power stations in Baghdad and Najaf next week, with a capacity of 125 Megawatt each, according to a release issued by the national center for media. "The first station will be in service within 16 months from LC opening," the release said. It noted that the Electricity Ministry has a plan to put 12 stations in service within the coming six months, at a total capacity of 540 Megawatt.

FM calls on Spanish companies to invest in Iraq

The Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari called on Spanish companies to invest in Iraq during his meeting with the Spanish State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, according to a release issued by the Ministry. "The two sides discussed means of reinforcing and developing mutual relations between the two countries," said the release that was received. "They also conferred how to activate the Iraqi-Spanish combined committee," it added.

Iranian exports to Iraq in 2008 exceed $2B

Iranian exports to Iraq in 2008 have reached over $2 billion, the head of the Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce said. "Iran has played a major role in rendering success to business operations and economic development with Iraq Hussein Teez Maghz, who is currently among a trade delegation to Iraq headed by an economic and trade advisor to the Iranian president, told. "Our exports to Iraq throughout the current year have exceeded $2 billion, including $1.2 to the Kurdistan region," according to the official.

Cabinet OKs upping Iraqi insurance co. capital

The Iraqi cabinet agreed to increase the Iraqi Insurance Company's capital from 300 million dinars to 1 billion dinars to help it compete with local and foreign corporations, an official spokesman for the Iraqi government said. "The decision was approved in a cabinet session held on Sunday under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki," Ali al-Dabbagh was quoted in a statement by his office. The cabinet also approved a bill by the reconstruction & housing ministry the Republic of Iraq's joining the Arab Insurance Institute by paying $150,000 to purchase 15,000 shares, the statement added. On the other hand, the cabinet also endorsed a contract to carry out a feasibility study and basic designs of two projects for the Missan oil refinery at a cost of $148.6 million and the Kirkuk refinery at a cost of $123.3 million with a production capcity of 150,000 barrels per day (bpd) each.

$50m in compensation for Mosul military operations

A total of $50 million has been allocated by the central government to compensate those who were harmed by the military operations that took place in Mosul city, Ninewa's governor said. "The money has not yet reached the province's treasury," Darid Kashmola. Residents of Mosul's al-Zanjali area will be the first to be compensated, according to the mayor, noting that the second batch will include residents of al-Sukkar neighborhood in northern Mosul.

Minister invites Arab organization to meet in Iraq

The Iraqi minister of industry and minerals called on the Arab Organization for Industrial Development and Mining to hold its future meetings in Iraq, according to a media source. "During his today's meeting with the director general of the Arab Organization for Industrial Development and Mining in the Jordanian capital Amman, Mohammed Bin Youssef, Minister Fawzi al-Hariri expressed Iraq's readiness to host the organization's meetings," the source told. ***The Iraqi minister discussed with the Jordanian minister of power and mineral resource***s, Khaldoun Qutayshat, means of boosting investment cooperation between the two countries, the source added.

Electricity Ministry signs 232 billion ID contract

The Iraqi Ministry of Electricity signed a contract of a total value of 232 billion Iraqi diners (ID) with the Iraqi Ministry of Industry and Minerals, to purchase materials to renew electricity network, a media source from the electricity ministry said "Contracted materials would serve 100,000 electricity consumers," Ali Sultan Jasim told ***He did not mention when the contract was signed.***

Trade minister discusses with UAE amb. mutual cooperation

Iraqi Trade Minister Abdul Falah al-Sudani discussed with UAE ambassador in Baghdad economic and trade cooperation between Iraq and the UAE, the Trade Ministry said in a statement. "***Iraqi seeks greater cooperation with the UAE in various domains through activating the joint Iraqi-UAE committee work's mechanisms to benefit from its experience in the investment field," the statement, received, quoted the minister as saying .***"The next stage will witness more cooperation between the two countries in economic and trade domains," it added. The statement quoted the ambassador as asserting UAE companies' readiness to start partnership deals with the Iraqi private sector, noting that his country's companies have an ability to implement big projects to rebuild the country.

Shell rules out signing gas deal with Iraq soon

Royal Dutch Shell Plc, Europe's largest oil company, is examining possible oilfield projects in Iraq as the nation prepares to issue exploration permits next year, Chief Executive Officer Jeroen van der Veer said today. "Shell may bid for Iraqi fields in the first half of 2009," van der Veer told reporters at a conference in London.
Iraq expects to award contracts by June in its first oil-licensing round since the U.S. invasion in 2003, Oil Minister Hussein al- Shahrestani said last month.

"They've just issued the rules on how to bid," van der Veer said. "It's quite complicated; we will study that and of course then we'll make up our mind on what we are going to do." In September, Shell agreed to help Iraq end fuel flaring and reduce pollution. The two parties formed a venture to process and sell so-called associated gas, which is produced in conjunction with crude oil. About 700 million cubic feet of gas is currently flared, or burned into the air, every day in southern Iraq, Shell said at the time. "This is in itself quite a sizable project," van der Veer said today. "Don't expect miracles in the first and second quarters" because it takes time to work out a detailed agreement, he said. Shell will hold 49 percent of the venture and Iraqi South Gas Co. 51 percent.

Ministry contracts European company to improve tires quality

The Iraqi Ministry of Industry and Minerals said that it has signed a contract with a Romanian company to improve the quality of vehicle tires manufactured by Babel Factory. "The State Company for the Manufacturing of Tires, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Industry and Minerals, has contracted a Romanian company to upgrade the tires produced by the factory," read a ministerial statement quoting an official source from the chemical industries department. Under the contract with the Romanian SC Upruc Rama, the state company will be able to meet the requirements of modern vehicles.

Palestine and Israel

Political front:

Abbas Elected President of Palestinian State

President Mahmoud Abbas was elected, President of the Palestinian State, by the Central Council of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The President pledged, in a speech he pronounced, on this occasion, to continue working with all the Palestinian national forces, institutions and people's activities, to realize the Palestinian aspiration of establishing their independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital. He said in his speech that, he feels the greatness of the responsibility to preserve the Palestinian people's accomplishments, and protecting its unity, and the unity of its only legitimate representative; the PLO. The President reiterated that the Palestinians' rights are based on the Palestinian legitimacy represented by the Declaration of Independence in 1988, and the Arab peace initiative in 2002, and the international legitimacy acknowledging the Palestinians' right to establishing their independent state and that Palestinian refugees have the right to return according to UN resolution 194. President Abbas concluded by calling for simultaneous presidential and legislative elections based on proportional representation, and saying, "our hands are stretched out for a Palestinian national dialogue."

Abbas Calls on Obama to Immediately Deal with Peace Process

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas opened the Palestine Investment Conference - The North Forum, a two-day event, at the amphitheater of An-Najah National University in the northern West Bank city by affirming that “sustainable development is not possible under occupation,” but the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) nonetheless “is seriously working on the reforms,” confirmed that "our hands are still extended to achieve a national unity,” and called on US President-***elect Barack Obama to immediately get involved in Middle East peace efforts once he takes office.*** "We call on President Obama to begin immediately dealing with the peace process based on the relevant United Nations resolutions and based on the Arab peace initiative," Abbas said in his opening speech.

Prime Minister Haniya: truce sustainability depends on halt of Israeli crimes and siege

Palestinian Prime Minister of the ruling Hamas party in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, said that the sustainability of the Palestinian-Israeli ceasefire, Egypt brokered five months ago, depends mainly on Israel halting its crimes and lifting its blockade on the Gaza Strip.

Prime Minister Haniya, speaking to crowds in Gaza Haniya's statement came during a funeral procession of a Palestinian fighters killed by the Israeli military earlier in the day.

" The continuation of the truce deal depends mainly on the halt of the Zionist war machinery against our Palestinian people as well as lifting the repressive siege and reopening the crossings", Haniya spoke to crowds in Gaza city. The Hamas leader also added " the truce was not agreed on from our part as a part of humiliation or weakness, but rather out of strength". Haniya stressed that the Palestinian people's will can not be twisted or broken and that they are keeping up in their drive towards attaining their national legitimate rights and ending the occupation.

If dialogue fails, I will call for early elections," says President Abbas

Palestinain president Mahmoud Abbas said that if ongoing efforts for national unity between the rival Palestinian parties fail, he would call for early presidential and parliamentary elections. Abbas's statement came during a meeting of the central council of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the West Bank city of Ramallah. "We are keen to continue our efforts for national unity among the Palestinian people and for this purpose we will call early next year for early elections," the pointed out. Abbas made clear that the reason for which Hamas was to call off the November conference in Cairo were not realistic, saying that the Arab peace initiative would be the best as a basis for conciliation. Rival Hamas and Fatah parties were about to attend a Cairo-hosted conference for reconciliation on November 9 when Hamas demanded a release of all Hamas detainees inside jails of the Abbas-led Palestinian authority in the West Bank.

Economic front:

Fuel allowed in Gaza generates electricity for 30 hours only

Palestinian petroleum officials in Gaza announced that the quantities of fuel, Israel allowed in yesterday, can generate electricity for 30 hours only. Mahmoud Alkhuzendar, chairman of the fuel stations society in Gaza, called on Israel to allow larger quantities, saying the crisis would surely persist unless the needed quantities are allowed in. Alkhuzendar warned of much bigger crisis in Gaza, especially Israel did not allow any other type of fuel such as Benzene or gasoline or cooking gas. Following three weeks of restrictive Israeli closure of border crossings, Israel reopened temporarily three of Gaza crossings, allowing some food and medicine shipments as well as nearly 53,000 gallons of crude industrialized fuel to generate electricity as many parts of Gaza suffer prolonged blackouts.

First Arab ship against the siege sails from Libya

Official Libyan sources reported that a Libyan ship left the Zowwara port, west of the Lybian capital, Tripoli, and is currently heading to the Gaza Strip carrying humanitarian aid. The ship is expected to reach Gaza in five days. The sources added that the ship, the first Arab ship challenging the Israeli siege, carries on board Palestinian and international activists and more than 3000 tons containing a variety of food products. Palestinian Legislator, head of the Popular Committee Against the Siege, Jamal El Khodary, confirmed that the ship already left the Libyan port heading to Gaza. El Khodary added that the ship carries aid donated by the Libyan people and the government in order to provide humanitarian assistance to the residents of the impoverished Gaza Strip. He also said that this ship is one of a series of ships that will be sailing to Gaza if this ship succeeds in reaching the Gaza coast. He called on all Arab states to actively participate in breaking the Israeli siege as the situation reached a very critical level and added that "actual steps and measures should be taken in order to save the lives of the residents".

Libyan Ship Heading to Gaza with Humanitarian Aid

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Social front:

Student detained after refusing to shake hands with Israeli President

Hebrew University student Ali Bahar was detained for three hours after refusing to shake hands with Israeli president Shimon Peres. Peres was visiting the university as part of a public relations tour. When the President approached Bahar to shake his hand, the ***student refused, stating QUOTE "I will not shake hands with a murderer of children."*** Bahar was referring to the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian land, which has cost the lives of one thousand and fifty Palestinian children since 2000. In the same time period, one hundred twenty three Israeli children have been killed by Palestinian fighters. Immediately following his encounter with the Israeli President, Bahar was detained by university security personnel and his student ID was confiscated.

Israel postpones trial of a Palestinian leader

An Israeli military court postponed trial of the Secretary General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Ahmad Sa'adat, who has been jailed by Israel for the past two years. Sa'adat was accused by Israel of orchestrating the assassination attempt of late Israeli tourism minister, Rahb'am Zaivi, in response to the Israeli army assassination of former PFLP leader Abu Ali Mustafa in the West Bank city of Nablus in the same time period. The Israeli army arrested Sa'adat and other Palestinians after attacking the Palestinian Authority-run jail of Jericho in the Jericho city in March 2006. By then, Sa'adat and other Palestinians accused by Israel were jailed under British and American supervision, within an Israeli-Palestinian deal.

Geo strategic front:

Zionist lobbies led to Al-Manar ban

The director of Hizbullah's satellite TV station says a German ban on the network violates international laws protecting media freedom. Germany banned Hizbullah's television station on grounds that it violates the country's constitution. The station says it violated no laws and vowed the ban would not stop it from doing its job.

Italian President Commited to Peace Process

Italian President, Giorgio Napolitano said in an exclusive statement that he appreciates the indulgence proved by the Palestinian people and President to the peace process.

He said that Italy is strongly committed to supporting the peace process in the Middle East and to reaching a definite and just solution through Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. He stated, “our objective, is the same as the international community’s; to establish an independent and sovereign Palestinian state, that enjoys mutual recognition with the Israeli state, in addition to economic prosperity, capability of

providing concrete opportunities of progress to the young generations, and willingness to live side by side in peace, justice and security with its neighbors. He added that achieving peace and stability would contribute to putting the basics of more development and prosperity for all peoples of the region.

Gaza Receives Restricted Amount of Aid Date

Israel reopened, crossings into the Gaza Strip, allowing limited supplies to reach the 1.5 million inhabitants largely dependent on humanitarian aid. the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) reported that the supplies allowed, into Gaza ***included nine truckloads of goods for the UN World Food Program (WFP), and eight trucks containing powdered milk and rice for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).*** Some 440,000 litres of industrial gas were also pumped through to Gaza's power plant, temporarily reducing the number of blackouts threatening Gaza City. UNRWA stressed that it needed to bring almost double the number of trucks into Gaza to be able to continue running its operation at an acceptable level. Israel had closed crossing points into Gaza this month, leaving the Strip without access to fuel, humanitarian supplies or commercial commodities and forcibly confining the population to the territory.

PLO Central Council calls on UN Security Council to Lift Siege off Gaza

Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Central Council called on the UN Security Council to lift the siege off the Gaza Strip. In its statement pronounced by President Abbas advisor for PLO Affairs, Ahmad Abdul Rahman, the Central Council affirmed, in its closing session its commitment to the Egyptian Initiative for Palestinian National Dialogue on the basis of forming a national reconciliation government, that puts an end to the siege on Gaza and prepares for the simultaneous presidential and legislative elections.

The Central Council also called on the PLO Executive Committee to approve of the elections system for the PLO National Council based on proportional representation.

UN: Continued Talks between Palestinians and Israelis Encouraging

The top United Nations political official voiced, regret that Palestinians and Israelis will probably not reach a peace agreement by the end of this year under the negotiating track launched last in the United States city of Annapolis, but noted that ongoing direct talks between the two sides are a positive sign. “The parties stated that negotiations would continue uninterrupted, and that their goals remain a comprehensive peace agreement addressing all their issues, without exception,” Under-Secretary-General

for Political Affairs B. Lynn Pascoe told the Security Council in an open meeting. The ***inability of Israeli Prime Minister-designate Tzipi Livni*** to form a coalition government has prompted elections, which will be held next February, while the Palestinians "remain divided," he said. "Unfortunately, recent developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and in Israel underscore that the gap between the political tracks and the situation on the ground remain large, posing considerable obstacles to the path that lies ahead," Mr. Pascoe added.

Blair Expresses Concern at Gaza Situation

Tony Blair, representative of the United Nations-backed Middle East Quartet has added his voice, to the growing international concerns about the humanitarian situation inside the Gaza Strip. Tony Blair, the former United Kingdom Prime Minister, issued a statement saying that he was ***"deeply concerned by the unfolding events" in Gaza,*** echoing a similar statement from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's spokesperson. Israel's closure of Gaza crossing points has left the 1.5 million citizens of the Strip without access to many humanitarian supplies on which they are largely dependant. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has warned that the situation is deteriorating quickly. He stressed that the truce agreed upon in June, must be maintained as it has provided much-needed security for the area.

India: No Justification for Denial of Essential Supplies to Gaza Civilians

"There can be no justification for the ***denial*** of essential supplies including food and fuel to the civilian population of the Gaza Strip numbering over a million people," Indian Minister of State for External Affairs E Ahamed said in New Delhi. Ahamed was speaking at a function held to mark the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. Underscoring the need for an end to the expansion of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, ***Ahamed also called for an early and significant easing of restrictions on the free movement of persons and goods within*** Palestine. He called for an end to violence in violence in the Gaza Strip that has deprived the civilian population of essential supplies like food and fuel. The minister stressed that lasting peace in the region requires sustained and substantial negotiations among the parties. ***Ahamed reiterated India's advocacy of dialogue to achieve a just, comprehensive and*** lasting peace in the region so that a sovereign, independent, united and viable state of Palestine can live side by side within secure borders with the state of Israel.

Arab League Supports President Abbas, His Peace Efforts

The Arab foreign ministers, meeting at the headquarters of the Arab League in Cairo decided that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas "should continue his responsibility as president of the Palestinian Authority," confirmed their "support for the Palestinian leadership in its efforts to achieve a just,

negotiated settlement" with Israel, said they could not accept and were deeply disturbed that a Palestinian dialogue conference originally set for November 10 did not take place as planned, and urged both Hamas and Fatah to work together to "regain the Palestinian unity." In a statement released, the Arab ***ministers called for an immediate end to the Israeli blockade of Gaza and decided to send medical and food supplies to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and to receive sick Palestinians who have not been able to receive adequate*** medical care because of the Israeli blockade. The statement said that Arab governments would coordinate with the Egyptian and Jordanian governments "to ensure the supplies would enter the Gaza Strip." The foreign ministers called on all Palestinian factions to leave their differences aside and support national reconciliation. Recognizing the legitimacy of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), they said that presidential and parliamentary elections should take place in "all Palestinian territory simultaneously" and they asked Abbas to remain president until the elections are over.

Qatar Charity' Launches New 'Save Gaza' Campaign

Qatar Charity has resumed its humanitarian campaign for Gaza under the title of "Save Gaza," saying it is the second stage of supporting the Children Specialized Hospital in Gaza via ***providing artificial kidneys, and speculums, and furnishing the neurology and cardiology sections with medical equipments.*** This program could cost Q.R 1968000, of which Q.R.970000 for kidneys and speculums sections (Q.R. 765000 and 157 000 respectively, 47000 for offices and sanitary service), Q.R.998000 for neurology and cardiology sections (Q.R.417000 and 528700 respectively). According to 'Abdullah Husain al-Ni'mah, the General Manager of the Charity, "Lives of ten thousands of Palestinian children are in danger due to bad health, conditions and siege. Only one apparatus is available for brain-graphy and 10% of Gazans are in need of speculums." The ***project mainly aims at helping*** 85 children experiencing semi / renal failure, in addition to hundreds of children who are experiencing renal diseases. The Children Specialized Hospital in Gaza offers its specialized services to children of 12 years old and general services to those of 15 years old. Al-Ni'mah added: "There are only 100 beds in this hospital, and the Charity has decided to increase this number to be 250 beds in its new developing plan."

King Hamad Orders Transfer of Palestinian Patients to Hospitals at Bahrain's Expense

King Hamad of Bahrain has personally stepped in to ease the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza, Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa said, adding that "the directives of His Majesty aimed at offering facilities to transfer patients to hospitals at Bahrain's expense," the Gulf Daily News reported. Shaikh Al Khalifa added a royal order urged the formation of a working team from the Ministry to follow up this issue and offer all help urgently.

Jordan's king Abdullah II:Israel's Blockade Creates 'Humanitarian Catastrophe' in Gaza

Jordan's king Abdullah II told a meeting of EU ambassadors to Jordan that Israel's continue blockade creates a "humanitarian catastrophe" with destructive impact on Palestinians, according to Xinhua. He urged international community to move quickly to break the Israeli blockade and facilitate entry of humanitarian aids. Meanwhile, Jordan sent aid convoys to the Gaza Strip to

help ease the suffering of Palestinians caused by the Israeli blockade, according to the Jordanian Hashemite Charity Organization (JHCO). ***Secretary General of the charity group Mohammad Majid Aitan said the 10-truck convoy is laden with medicine and food. The aids will be distributed in cooperation with the Palestinian Red Crescent, United Nations Relief and Works Agen***cy for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the Palestinian National Authority.
Despite requests from the EU and the UN, Israel continued a complete lockdown of the coastal Gaza Strip, keeping cargo crossings, a main passageway for fuel and humanitarian aid, shut in response to rocket and mortar fire at Israeli border towns. The JHCO has so far dispatched 243 convoys loaded with humanitarian and medical aid to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people, said the organization.

Bush: Two-state Vision Still Alive Because of Olmert

The United States President George W. Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert met in the White House and both men declared that the two-state vision remains the preferable solution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. "We strongly believe that Israel will benefit by having a Palestinian state, a democracy on its border that works for peace," President Bush said, adding: "Mr. Prime Minister, that vision is alive because of you." Olmert, who ***appeared emotional according to Ynet thanked Bush and lauded him as a*** friend who helped Israel immensely throughout his term in office. Olmert also thanked President Bush for removing what he characterized as one of the greatest threats faced by Israel, the Iraqi threat.

"**Withdrawal from the Golan will only be under Israeli conditions"**

Israeli President, Shimon Peres, said that if Syria wants the Golan Heights back it must prove that it is ready for peace, and must change its policies, such as its relation with Iran and Hezbollah. Peres added that any withdrawal from the Golan Heights will only be done under Israeli terms, stating that Egypt and Jordan signed peace deals with Israel and retrieved their lands. The statements of Peres came as he was receiving an honorary doctorate at London's Mansion House. He also said that a comprehensive peace with the Palestinians is nearly possible, except that there will be no peace with Hamas. Peres further stated that there will be no peace with Iran and Hezbollah. The Israeli president claimed that most of the obstacles surrounding peace with the Palestinians are now resolved. He added that Israel would keep 4 – 5% of the West Bank under its control. Yet, the official Israeli position does not include any withdrawal from Jerusalem and the Jordan valley. The visit of Peres to Britain came amidst tension between Israel and Britain after the UK decided to place labels on products produced in Israeli settlements

US, Israel to boycott the Durban conference

Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, stated that Israel decided to boycott the second Durban conference for human rights which will be held in Geneva in April 2009. The United States and Canada also said they are boycotting the conference, the Arabs48 news website reported. The Conference, "the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discriminations, Xenophobia and related intolerance", is a follow-up to the first conference held in Durban in 2001. Livni claimed that "this conference, which should be meant to counter racism, will be used by Arab countries and Iran in uttering accusations and racist statements against Israel". ***The United States and Canada said that they will be boycotting the conference in solidarity with Israel.*** Over the past several months, Israel sent numerous letters to senior officials at the United Nations demanding guarantees that "the conference would not be used as a stage for criticizing Israel" and demanded guarantees that this conference will not "turn out to be anti-Semite". Israel believes that Arab countries and a number of Human Rights groups, tried to pass resolutions against it during the first conference. Some of the Israeli objections are describing it as a racist state; describing Zionism as racism, describing settlements as ethnic cleansing against the Palestinians, accusing Israel of carrying offensives to annihilate the Palestinian people, and stating that the Holocaust is similar to other incidents that happened in the history of human kind.

A London demonstration protesting at Israel's president visit to the region

Scores of British Palestinians and some solidarity campaigners staged a demonstration in front of the UK parliament premises, in protest against the visit of Israeli President Shimon Peres, to the region. Blackout in Gaza, due to the Israeli blockade Palestinian community-based organizations in the UK along with British ones, ***expressed rejection to the visit of a state's president 'that violated all humanitarian laws and norms on daily basis as well as besieges Palestinian civilians***'. The organizers, represented by the Leave the Palestinians campaign , Rami Abdo, will deliver a speech before the UK parliament , explaining the Gaza situation under the Israeli blockade. Also, British MP and human rights activist , Gorge Gallawi, will deliver a speech, outlining the situation in Palestine.

Hamas denies intention to allow extension of Abbas's term in office

The ruling Hamas party in Gaza denied its intention to allow the extension of the Palestinian president's term in office, saying the issue depends mainly on Palestinian law and the constitution. Hamas' spokesperson in Gaza Fawzi Barhoum responded to some media reports by saying, "The extension of the president's term in office will depend on Palestinian law and the constitution". Regarding his party's contacts for dialogue with president Abbas' Fatah party, the Hamas spokesman maintained that there were current contacts with various Arab states in order to end the division between Ramallah and Gaza. He reiterated his party's stance that any dialogue should proceed only after the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, releases all Hamas detainees in its prisons.

An Arab ministerial meeting discusses Palestinian developments

An emergency meeting of the Arab foreign ministers is due to be held in Cairo, to discuss latest Palestinian developments. For this purpose, the league of Arab states, has outlined the ***main items of discussion, including the Palestinian national unity dialogue, as the Egyptian foreign minister, Ahmad Abu Elghiet, has already prepared a comprehensive report on the latest Egyptian efforts regarding that dialogue.*** Secretary of Arab states league, Mr. Amr Mousa, had stated " the Israeli siege being imposed on Gaza will be a part of the upcoming meeting's agenda, as a humanitarian crisis in the Strip is looming" Palestine will be represented by head of the negotiations department of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Mr. Saeb Eriqat, with the ruling Hamas party in Gaza excluded. Sources at the Arab league hinted that such a convention might take a couple of days , before taking any decisions.

U.S's Rice defends her administration's failure to achieve Palestinian-Israeli peace

The U.S Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, defended her administration's failure to achieve Palestinian-Israeli peace by the end of 2008. On her flight back from the World Economic Partnership conference in the Peruvian capital, Mrs. Rice believed that her outgoing administration has laid the foundations for a serious Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

US official calls for end to Israeli occupation

General James Jones, the US State Department Security Advisor for Israel-Palestine, has called for a NATO (North American Treaty Organization) force to be deployed in the West Bank to replace the 40-year long Israeli occupation. Palestinian officials have, in the past, expressed support for a NATO deployment in the West Bank. But Israel has refused, saying that only Israeli intelligence forces have the ability to maintain control of the Palestinian population. Jones challenged the Israeli assumption that Palestinians cannot be trusted to run their own country, saying that the NATO force would eventually be replaced by Palestinian security forces that would be in charge of the security of the future Palestinian state. ***The US Security Advisor, deployed to the region by current US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, is rumored to be US President-elect Barack Obama's*** pick for National Security Advisor. In that position, he could potentially help shape US policy toward the Middle East. According to Israeli sources, Israel has demanded that any future Palestinian security force be completely disarmed, and under Israeli control.

International media heads call for end to Gaza media blackout

In a strongly-worded letter to the Israeli Prime Minister, the heads of the world's major media organizations have called on the Israeli state to end its two-week long blackout on media from the Gaza Strip. Israel closed the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory of Gaza to the media when the state began a new attack in violation of the ceasefire agreement with Palestinian armed factions. ***In the letter, the heads of major media networks, the executive editor of the New York Times, and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon all called on Israel to allow journalists to enter Gaza in order to do their jobs.***

The Israeli Defense Ministry stated in response that media coverage of the Gaz*a* Strip had been unfairly biased against Israel, and the ban on journalists would not be lifted until the firing of homemade shells by the Palestinian resistance in Gaza came to a complete halt.

Journalists around the world expressed their outrage at the Israeli position, stating that perceived bias in media coverage is no excuse for the repression and censorship of journalists. In addition, the ban on media violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers."

Israel agrees to release 220 detainees, number does not meet minimal demand

Israeli reported that Israel showed some "leniency" in the indirect talks for the release of the captured Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, and submitted a list of 220 detainees it is willing to free. Most of the detainees who are on the list were sentenced to high terms, but the gap between the demands of Hamas and the official Israeli position is still wide. According to Hamas wants the release of 1400 detainees and Israel will most likely agree. The main conflict is regarding 450 detainees Israel insists not to free. 350 of the detainees demanded by Hamas are leaders and detainees who were sentenced to very high terms. Israeli sources said that Israel is gradually increasing the number of detainees who will be freed.

Syria

Political front:

Al-Shara Briefs National Progressive Front on Arab, Int'l Political Situations

Vice President Farouk al-Shara briefed the participants in the eighth regular meetings of branch and political leaderships of the National Progressive Front (NPF) in Syria on the latest political regional and international developments and Syria's stances over them. ***Vice President al-Shara conveyed President al-Assad's keenness on the success of the meetings in reaching the national and pan-Arab aims, stressing the importance of the speeches and interpositions presented by representatives of the NPF.*** Mr. al-Shara stressed that that the Middle East is now passing in a transitional stage which is not easy to specify its future aspects, saying "all of us remember the killings and repressions perpetrated by Israel since 2002 starting from Jenin in occupied Palestine in a reaction to the Arab peace initiative…we all cannot forget what happened to Iraq in terms of invasion and destruction in 2003, and Israel's aggression on Lebanon in July 2006 and the repercussions of all that and their local and regional reflections which had been subjected to analysis and studies around the world." Vice President al-Shara added that "the sacrifices and sufferings in Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon were paid dear, and in Syria and in several Arab countries were postponed." He added that "in short, the results were not decisive or final here and there… but what is sure is that the will of the advocators of pre-emptive wars has been broken in the Middle East and in the world as a whole … this is the basis which we must not differ on we as Arabs and Muslims…what remained is only details that could be agreed upon and make solidarity around."

Social front:

President al-Assad Awards the Syrian Order of Merit of the Excellent Degree to Samir al-Kintar

President Bashar al-Assad awarded the Syrian Order of Merit of the Excellent Degree to Samir al-Kintar, the Lebanese freedom fighter who was recently liberated from Israeli captivity, in appreciation of his history of struggle, his resilience and his national and patriotic stances. During his meeting with Samir al-

Kintar and his brother Bassam, President al-Assad stated that Samir al-Kintar wasn't just the dean of Arab captives, but also the dean of noble and free people, adding that his resilience and adherence to Arab rights despite everything he went through has made him a symbol of struggle and freedom across the Arab nation and the world. In turn***, al-Kintar expressed pride and honor for meeting President al-Assad and receivin***g the Syrian Order of Merit, saying that Syria's bold stances under the leadership of President al-Assad and its course of supporting resistance and refusing unjust settlements are a credit to all freedom fighters and an aid for captives to help them bear their ordeals in Israeli prisons.

He added the meeting came as a crowning for a struggle stage of 30 years-long, and the honoring that he gained from the President was an honoring for all Arab captives and fighters of freedom.

Economic front:

Syrian and Cypriot Telecommunications Sign Agreement to Expand Marine Cable

An agreement on expanding the marine cable linking between Tartus and Antacikhinos was signed between the Syrian General Establishment of Telecommunications and Cypriot Communications Authority CYTA. ***The agreement includes three documents which are as contracts between the CYTA and the establishment.*** The first contract stipulates for securing a relatively large capacities as a start to the requirements of Internet in Syria. The second contract is a kind of understanding memo between the two establishments for putting the plans and the needed studies as an economic feasibility for establishing a second marine cable between Syria and Cyprus. And the third contract focuses on the application of account prices for the fixed and cellular calls. Director of General Establishment for Telecommunications Nazem Bahsas and Chairman of CYTA Stavros Kremmos co-signed the agreement.

Syrian and Tanzanian Foreign Ministry Sign Consultation & coordination Agreement

Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Fayssal Mikdad and Tanzanian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Seif Ali Iddi inked a consultation and coordination agreement between the two Ministries. During the final session of talks at the Foreign Ministry, both sides completed the discussion of regional developments in the Middle East and Africa. They rejected the unjust siege imposed by Israel on Gaza for being a collective punishment contradicts the international humanitarian law, calling for lifting it immediately.

Al-Abrash and Polish Delegation Review Parliamentary Relations

Speaker of the People's Assembly Dr.Mahmoud al-Abrash said the realization of peace in the Middle East is the key to the economic building and prosperity, calling for more efficient European role for achieving peace in the region and supporting the construction and development process. ***That came when he received a Polish delegation headed by Chairman of the Polish Parliament Foreign Relations Committee Krzysztof Lisek. Both sides reviewed bilateral parliamentary relations and the peace process in the region.***

He underlined the active and important role of parliamentary diplomacy in boosting and developing the relations between the two countries, affirming the need to intensify parliamentary visits to consolidate relations and coordinate positions in international forums regarding issues of common concern for both sides. Lisek, for his part, stressed his country's desire to reactivate the European role in the region, noting

the importance of exchanging expertise and benefiting from Polish economic experience in transformation from the socialist economy to the market economy. The meeting was attended by Chairman of the Arab and Foreign Affairs Committee at the Assembly Suleiman Haddad, head of the Syrian-Polish Parliamentary Friendship Association and Polish ambassador in Damascus.

Premier Ottri Gives Economic Presentation during Meeting of Branch Leaderships of National Progressive Front

Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Ottri gave an economic presentation during the meeting of Branch Leaderships of National Progressive Front, reviewing progress in economic, financial and monetary reform programs and in development plans and projects for 2008.

Ottri said ***that the data from 2006 and 2007 show that the economic reform policies are progressing as planned according to the 10th five-year plan, with preliminary data showing an increase in economic growth by 6% in 2008, with the GDP increasing from SP 1151 billion in 2005 to SP 1211 billion in 2006 and SP 1288 billion in 2007.***

Preimer Ottri pointed out to the increasing participation of the economic sector in the GDP in 2007, with 13% of the GDP produced by mining industries, 21% by the agriculture sector, 20% by the trade sector, 12% by the transport sector, and 5% by the financial and insurance sector, with a marked growth the participation of services sectors.

The participation of the private sector in the GDP has increased from 64.6% in 2005 to 65.8% in 2007. Exports also increased, with exports during the first half amounting to SP 412 billion and imports amounting SP 405 billion, of which SP 100 billion was used to supplying the country's reserve of petroleum products. ***Regarding monetary policy, Premier Ottri underlined the significant reforms in this sector such as the increased number and variety of private banks and insurance companies*** and the founding of money-exchange offices and establishments and banks for financing for financing small projects, in addition to the development of the Central Bank of Syria and its monitoring role for controlling the exchange rate of the Syrian Pound. The number of licensed private banks has reached 11 banks, with active branches increasing from 300 branches in 2005 to 442 branches in September 2008. ***He also pointed out that the Syrian Stock Market is expected to launch at beginning of 2009***. Ottri concluded by pointing out that all the achievements are the result of a group effort by the government and the various political and legislative establishments and the various organizations and activities, adding that these achievements are part of the goals which the government is working to achieve through the development of establishments, combating corruption, routine and bureaucracy, increasing production and growth, diversifying national economic sources, improving livelihood, increasing the GDP, providing work to younger generations, and developing the investment environment, all which would bolster the process of overall development and support the national economy and decision-making in the face of the various challenges and pressures imposed on Syria.

Al-Shallah Discusses Economic and Trade Relations with Tanzanian Delegation

Chairman of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce Dr. Rateb al-Shallah discussed on Wednesday with Tanzanian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Seif Ali Iddi and the accompanying delegation means of bolstering economic and trade relations between the two countries. Dr. al-Shallah stressed the importance of bolstering economic and trade relations and cooperation between the two countries and using their capabilities to benefit their peoples. He pointed out to the abundance of raw materials that are being exported, which calls for establishing joint projects to manufacture these materials and increase their added value. For his part, Iddi underlined the vast opportunities for economic cooperation that need to be invested, stressing the role of businessmen in this field and in expanding trade exchange. The meeting was attended by Deputy Chairman of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce Ghassan Qala'a and a number of businessmen.

President al-Assad Meets a Polish Delegation

The talks of President Bashar al-Assad this morning with a Polish delegation headed by the Chairman of the Polish Parliament Foreign Relations Committee Krzysztof Lisek, ***dealt with bilateral relations between the two countries*** and with prospects of developing them particularly on the parliamentarian level. ***Talks also touched upon the situation in Iraq and the occupied Palestinian territories and prospects of peace in the region in the light of the regional and international changes.*** The meeting was attended by Presidential Political and Media Advisor, Butheina Sahaaban , Chairman of the People's Assembly Arab and Foreign Relations Committee, Suleiman Haddad, and the Polish Ambassador to Syria. ***Syria and Poland have signed a number of agreements on avoiding double taxation, bases of goods'*** shipment and recognition of scientific certificates in each of the two countries, in addition to several cultural and scientific agreements.

Al-Moallem, Iddi Discuss Syrian-Tanzanian Relations

Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem discussed Tanzanian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Seif Ali Iddi bilateral relations between the two countries and means of bolstering them. ***Talks also dealt with the situation in the Middle East, particularly in the occupied Palestinian lands and the unjust Israeli siege imposed on Gaza Strip, stressing the need for unifyin***g regional and international efforts to lift this siege. Al-Moallem and Iddi ***also discussed the situation in the Horn of Africa area***, particularly in Somalia, in addition to developments in Darfur and the efforts exerted by the Arab League and the African union in that regard, with the two sides stressing the need for supporting Sudan and preserving its unity and safety. The meeting was attended by Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Fayssal Mikdad, the Director of the Africa Department at the Foreign Ministry, and the delegation accompanying Mr. Iddi.

Geo strategic front:

President al-Assad Condoles Over Victims of Terrorist Attack in Mumbai

President Bashar al-Assad sent a cable of condolences to President Pratibha Patil of India in which His Excellency expressed deep sorrow over the death of tens of people in a terrorist attack that targeted several areas of the Indian city of Mumbai. President al-Assad wished quick recovery for those wounded in the accident. The attacks, which targeted Taj Mahal Hotel, Oberoi Trident and eight other sites including the main train station, a hospital, a restaurant yesterday night, claimed the lives of more than 100 people.

President al-Assad, Erdogan for Concerted Int'l Efforts to Break Israeli Siege on Gaza

President Bashar al-Assad received a phone call from Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan evening during which they expressed deep concern over the sufferings of the Palestinian people who live a humanitarian tragedy in Gaza Strip under the siege imposed on them. President al-Assad and Erdogan stressed necessity of international concerted efforts to break this siege. The President and the Turkish Premier also agreed to work to send urgent aid to the Palestinian people in Gaza Strip.

Under the Directives of President al-Assad , Moallem Sends a Letter to Ban Ki-moon and to Chairman of the Security Council on the Tragic Situation in Gaza

Under the directives of President Bashar al-Assad , Foreign Minister , Walid Moallem sent a letter to UN. Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon and to Chairman of the UN. Security Council Ambassador, Georgy Orbina, on the tragic situation in Gaza , and on the necessity for the United Nations to move because of the catastrophic situation in Gaza , resulting from the criminal Israeli occupation measures against the Palestinian people.

The letter said that Israel continued to practice the policy of aggression, and forcing the Palestinian people to suffer from hunger in Gaza, in a dangerous violation of international laws , agreements and principles. The letter added :"In the light of the growing human tragedy in Gaza due to the Israeli unjust siege, I was empowered by President of the Syrian Arab Republic, Bashar al-Assad , in his capacity as President of the Arab Summit , to write to you so that the international organization will shoulder its responsibility for immediate halting of the Israeli immoral , and inhuman practices that constitute a flagrant violation of the international laws and principles." The letter added that the life of the Palestinians in Gaza is in danger due to this siege and the hospitals are using candles and there is a sharp shortage of

food stuff and fuel , and consequently the lives of hundreds of patients in Gaza , particularly children, have become endangered and the number of victims so far is 260 including 57 children.The letter said that in spite of the efforts and repeated appeals of the UN. organization to bring these practices to

a halt , yet Israel has not respond to them so far.

German Pensioners Expertise Program Offers Free Service To Syrian Companies

Coordinator and Representative of the German Pensioners Expertise Program , Derrick Lehmi , has underlined the necessity for the Syrian companies to get benefit from the free services which his program offers. Reviewing the services of the program at Damascus Chamber of Commerce, Lehmi said that his program focuses on medium and small enterprises in Syria since the Syrian economy depends mainly on them. He indicated that any company in need of an expert in any domain , will only bear the expenses of his accommodation and pocket money that doesn't exceed Sp 650 and the benefiting company shall sign a separate contract with the program and has nothing to do with the expert.

Syria elected Deputy Chairman of International Conference on Education in Geneva

Syria was elected as Deputy-Chairman of the International Conference on Education which started its 48th session at International Conferences Center in Geneva under the motto "Comprehensive Education... the Road of Future". ***The 4-day conference discusses and holds workshops on the comprehensive education, curriculums, public education policies… transfer processes, situation of students and tea***chers. Ministers of education, experts, researchers, and professionals from all over the world are taking part in the conference. Minister of Education Ali Sa'ad is heading the Syrian delegation to the Conference.

President al-Assad Condoles Brazilian Counterpart Over Floods' Victims

President Bashar al-Assad sent a cable of condolences to President Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil. His Excellency expressed deep sorrow over the death of tens of people in the floods that hit some areas of Brazil and left thousands families homeless. President al-Assad wished speedy recovery to the wounded.

Al-Attar Underlines Necessity to Take Advantage of Cultural Cooperation Prospects Between Syria and Armenia

Vice President Dr. Najah al-Attar underlined the depth of the historical Syrian-Armenian relations and the need to take advantage of the broad prospects of cultural cooperation between the two countries.

Receiving Armenian Minister of Culture Hasmik Pogosyan and an accompanying delegation, Dr. Al-Attar said: “The Syrian-Armenian relations have contributed in the development of art movement, in particular extending bridges of friendship and amity through the role played by the two countries' communities." The Vice President called for the promotion of cultural relations, particularly in field of Arab manuscripts in Armenia, noting that Syria, through al-Assad library, the departments of historical documents and reviving the heritage, is collecting Arab manuscripts around the world, photographing and listing their names and dates. For her part, Pogosyan pointed out to the need to make the world acquainted with the important civilization activities which Syria witnesses and using the media to promote the real bright image of this country and the brotherhood and tolerance which it enjoys. ***She mentioned that the Syrian-Armenian relations are in constant advance, referring to events of Armenian cultural days to commemorate Damascus, Capital of Arab Culture for 2008 and to Syrian cultural days scheduled in Armenia next year***. The meeting was attended by Assistant Culture Minister Ali al-Qaiem and Armenian ambassador in Damascus.

Al-Ahmar and al-Abrash Separately Meet Capucci, Review Situation in Palestine

Assistant Secretary General of the Baath Arab Socialist Party Abdulaah al-Ahmar reviewed with Jerusalem Archbishop in exile, the situation inside Palestine and suffering of the Palestinians due to the Israeli siege on Gaza, which constitutes a violation of the international laws, principles, human rights and norms and reflects the Israeli terrorism and racism. ***Both sides stressed the necessity of restoring the Palestinian unity and overcoming the*** division state which is exploited by Israel to continue its aggression and impose a fait accompli policy. They underlined the need for Arab states to shoulder their responsibilities to support the Palestinians and break the unjust siege imposed on Gaza Strip. Ahmar said: " The Arab-International Right of Return Forum reflected Syria's permanent keenness on all rights of the Palestinian people on top of which is the right of return." ***For his part, Capucci hailed Syria's positions and her efforts at the Arab and international levels*** to lift the unjust siege on Gaza and to support struggle of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.

Minister of Endowments, Archbishop Capucci Affirm Importance of Dialogue among Peoples

Minister of Endowments Dr. Mohammad Abdul-Sattar al-Sayed and Archbishop of Jerusaelm in exile Hilarion Capucci affirmed the importance of developing dialogue culture among peoples, stressing the role of spiritual values in achieving the nation's goals of defending its rights and standards and liberating its holy sites from Israeli occupation.

Minister al-Sayed pointed out to the strong national unity in Syria, its national identity and its role as a host of nationalist and patriotic thought, in addition to Syria's role in defending the causes and rights of the Arab and Islamic nation.

For his part, Archbishop Capucci praised Syria's national and patriotic stances and its defense of the Palestinian cause, underlining Syria's efforts for lifting the injustice and suffering imposed on the Palestinian people and its support for them in their struggle to establish an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.

Under the Auspices of President al-Assad, Meeting of Branch Leaderships of National Progressive Front Kicks Off

Under the auspices of President Bashar al-Assad, the 8th regular meeting of Branch Leaderships and Political Leaderships of the National Progressive Front kicked off on Wednesday, discussing over three days the political and economic situation and means of developing the Front's work. Deputy Chairman of the National Progressive Front Dr. Suleiman Qaddah gave a speech affirming the importance of the meeting in enriching the process of national work and providing means of developing it in various ways. ***He pointed out that the National Progressive Front is a democratic bastion, a vital institute on all political and economic fields, and a vital participant in Syrian politics that*** embodies national cohesion and unity. Dr. Qaddah called on the Front to take up its responsibilities in strengthening parties, connecting with the masses, expanding activities, spreading national and patriotic awareness, caring for youths and providing work opportunities for them, improve livelihood, and confront corruption.

He stressed that ***Syria's policy is based on its commitment to standards based on the independence of its decision-making and the interest*** of its people and the Arab nation, and that Syria has confronted all challenges with resilience and adherence to principles, adding that events proved the correctness of Syria's vision and stances, which bolstered its standing in the international community and in Arab, regional and international issues.

He also underlined the massive efforts of President Bashar al-Assad in his meetings, visits and communications, pointing out to the positive results of Syrian policy that granted Syria a distinguished standing and an active Arab and international presence.

Dr. Qaddah concluded by affirming adherence to standards and principles, the people's interests, and the ideals of the National Progressive Fronts.

Al-Moallem, Senior Polish MP Discuss Regional Situations & Gaza Sufferings

Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem discussed with Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Polish Sejm (Parliament) Krzysztof Lisek the bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and means for bolstering them, in addition to the role of parliamentary institutions in developing these relations. ***Talks touched on the situation in the Middle East, particularly in Lebanon and Iraq and the peace process, in addition to the tragic humanitarian situation in Gaza Strip caused by th***e Israeli

unjust siege. The meetings was attended by Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee at the Syrian People's Assembly (Parliament) Suleiman Haddad, the Director of Europe Department at the Syrian Foreign Ministry, the Polish Ambassador in Damascus, and the delegation accompanying Mr. Lisek. He added that talks also touched on Syria's relations with the EU, adding that it is possible to sign the Partnership Agreement between the two sides soon. He concluded by pointing out that his visit to Syria allowed him and the delegation accompanying him to meet members of the Foreign Affairs Committee at the People's Assembly, with the two sides agreeing to form a Syrian-Polish parliamentary committee at the People's Assembly and a similar committee at the Sejm of Poland.

Ottri for Special Periodical Cabinet Sessions on Vital Issues

Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Ottri on stressed importance of holding special Cabinet session once every two months to discuss specialized top vital issues in various sectors. The Council of Ministers, in its weekly meeting headed by Premier Ottri, decided that the next meeting should be assigned to discussing the new labor law so that it would be reviewed in a detailed and comprehensive way prior to approving it later. As part of enhancing communication among various state institutions and adopting of a mechanism to improve their performance, the Council of Ministers decided to organize joint meetings every six months attended by the Ministers and Governors to follow up on the scheduled plans, developments and services programs. The Council then was politically briefed by Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem on the latest regional and international developments. As part of expanding the support granted by the state to elderly, the Council of Ministers approved to reduce the price of transport tickets for internal public transport utilities by 50 percent for those over 60 years old. The Council also approved a proposal presented by the Ministry of Information on settling the situations of some licensed newspapers and magazines.

Al-Shara, al-Qaddoumi Discuss Situation in Palestine

Vice President Farouk al-Shara discussed with Head of the PLO Political Department Farouk al-Qaddoumi the situation in Palestinian arena and the importance of bolstering the unity of the Palestinian people to reclaim their firm national rights. Mr. al-Qaddoumi expressed the Palestinian people's appreciation of Syria's stances regarding the Palestinian cause and the efforts exerted by Syria on the Arab and international levels to end the Israeli siege imposed on Gaza Strip. He stressed the need for uniting the efforts of the Palestinian peoples in the face of the Israeli occupation's hostile practices, noting the important political results of the Arab International Right of Return Forum held in Damascus. The meeting was attended by Director of the PLO Office in Damascus Mahmoud al-Khaledi.

Mikdad & Tanzanian Counterpart Discuss Latest Mideast & African Developments

Deputy Foreign Minister Fayssal Mikdad discussed with his Tanzanian counterpart Seif Ali Eidi the bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and ways of further developing them. Mikdad and Eidi also reviewed the latest developments in the Middle East and the African Continent. The two sides expressed agreement on the topics discussed and determination to activate the bilateral relations in political, economic and cultural areas, as well as joint coordination over issues listed on the UN agenda and other international organizations and circles.

Moalla Discusses Cooperation with DAAD Delegation

Rector of Damascus University Dr. Wael Moalla discussed with Head of the North Africa, Middle East Department at the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) Dr. Renate Dieterich means for developing scientific and academic cooperation between the two sides. Talks touched on the need for providing support to the German Language Department at Damascus University by providing more German teachers and the necessary curriculums as per the agreement signed by the two sides in June 2008. The two sides also discussed the summer grants which the DAAD will provide to students, allowing them to visit Germany and develop their linguistic skills. They discussed the possibility of Damascus University's participation in funding these scholarships in addition to the possibility of establishing summer schools for training students.

Syrian Lawyers Cease Work for Hour in Protest of US-Iraq Security Agreement

The Syrian lawyers temporarily ceased work in courts across the country from 10 to 11 AM, as called for by the Syrian Bar Association, to protest the security agreement between the Iraq government and the United States due to the dangers and negative effects of this agreement which legalizes occupation and threatens neighboring countries. Lawyers participating in the protest at the Palace of Justice in Damascus were joined by Secretary General of the Arab Lawyers Union Ibrahim al-Simlali, who gave a speech underlining the importance of this stance across the Arab nation. Al-Simlali praised Syria's role in national and patriotic stances, warning against the US-Iraq security agreement.

Jordan

Political front:

Premier calls for speedy implementation

Prime Minister Nader Dahabi highlighted the importance of accelerating the ***implementation of the Disi Water Conveyance Project,*** which is projected to supply the capital with 100 million cubic metres (mcm) annually in three-and-a-half years time. Chairing a meeting at the Ministry of Water and Irrigation the premier was briefed on the latest developments of the initiative which is expected to be under way in March 2009. ***Dahabi was also briefed on the financial disclosures of companies that will carry out the $1 billion project, led by GAMA, the Turkish***

winner of the latest bid floated by the government for the scheme, according to Petra. ***The project is one of six strategic plans*** initiated by the Water Ministry to address the country's water deficit, which currently stands at 12.7mcm a year, a figure the ministry hopes to cut down to 5.5mcm through the 48 artesian wells that have been put into service this year. As part of Disi Water Conveyance Project, 45 water wells will be dug, in addition to nine standby wells.

'Proposed law to streamline regulations governing mining sector'

The Kingdom's mining sector will receive a boost under a new mineral resource draft law, Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources Khaldoun Qteishat said. The law, which will be presented to Parliament during the current ordinary session, will update legislation related to mining to simplify and streamline regulations, and provide incentives for local and foreign entities to invest in the sector, according to the minister. Qteishat's comments came during opening of the 10th Arab Conference on Mineral Resources, where he underscored the importance of minerals to the economic and social well-being of Jordan and the rest of the region. ***Qteishat highlighted the Kingdom's exports of phosphates, phosphoric acid, potash and Dead Sea products, in addition to the untapped reserves of uranium and oil shale, which he placed at 130,000 tonn***es and 40 billion tonnes respectively. The minister stressed that the Arab world needs to cooperate in order to fully take advantage of the wealth of mineral resources in the region. National Resource Authority (NRA) Director Maher Hijazin told that the proposed draft law will establish a commission for energy and minerals, which will be under the umbrella of the Prime Ministry. The commission ***will deal with*** licensing issues, bids for contracts, electricity, renewable energy, mining and energy pricing, he said. Under the law, licensing mining agreements and issues pertaining to mineral resources will fall under the authority of the commission, leaving oil concessions and the mining and extraction of oil shale under the NRA's jurisdiction.

Agriculture Ministry assures cow anthrax case 'under control'

The Ministry of Agriculture reiterated that the situation at the livestock farm where an anthrax case was recently detected is under control, despite reports alleging that a cat was found infected with the anthrax bacteria in its vicinity. One week after a case of anthrax was detected among cattle at a farm in the Dulayl area of Zarqa, no further cases have been found, Assistant Secretary General for Livestock Affairs Nasser Hawamdeh told The Jordan Times in a phone interview yesterday, adding that the farm will remain under quarantine for another 14 days. ***The official pointed out that a ministerial committee was recently formed in order to follow up with area farm owners to ensure the case was an isolated incident.*** The case was reported last week following the sudden death of a cow. Ministry teams responded by conducting the required laboratory tests which confirmed the presence of the causative agent of anthrax. ***According to the official,*** the infection might have been transmitted from migratory birds or from fodder as the farm follows sterilisation procedures. He confirmed that the disease only transfers to humans in cases of direct contact. ***According to experts, anthrax bacteria is killed through the pasteurisation pro***cess, which requires a boiling temperature of 120oC.

Government consents to 11% salary raise - MP

The government has approved an 11 per cent raise on salaries of public servants and pensioners in response to a recommendation made earlier by the Lower House Financial and Economic Committee, the committee's rapporteur MP Yousef Qurneh (Amman, 2nd District) told a House meeting. Of the 11 per cent raise, 7 per cent will be added to the basic salary, while the remaining 4 per cent will be in the form of "cost of living allowance" to be added to salaries, Qurneh told noting that this increment does not include the routine annual raises civil and military employees receive. ***The 2009 state budget draft law provided for a 7 per cent increase in the salaries of public sector employees, including the military and security agencies, plus the usual*** annual 4 per cent raise, but the panel insisted the increase was not enough, and recommended it be raised to 11 per cent, in addition to the annual raise.

Lower House to address concerns over 2009 draft budget

The Lower House is scheduled to meet today to discuss the House Financial Committee's recommendations on the 2009 draft budget, which is estimated at around JD5.9 billion. The recommendations call on the governments to revise general expenditures to reduce the budget deficit. After foreign assistance, the 2009 budget deficit is estimated at JD689 million, or 4.6 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), compared to JD380 million, or 3.4 per cent, this year. Before assistance, next year's budget deficit is expected to stand at JD1.373 billion, 9.2 per cent of the GDP, according to the draft budget. According to the committee, the draft law was devised before the current global financial crisis, an issue that should be considered before further action is taken. The panel called for opening new markets for local exports and increasing support and incentives for the sector, expressing concerns that the Kingdom's exports will struggle in face of the global economic slowdown. Committee members also urged the government to increase capital expenditures to contribute to the economy.

Gov't drafting new law on Petra - MP

The government is drafting a new law to regulate the administration of the southern Petra Region, a lawmaker told. MP Hani Nawafleh, who represents the area at the House, cited a memo addressed to him, signed by Prime Minister Nader Dahabi, saying that the government was working on a new law after the deputy complained of "multiple authorities" controlling decision making related to the area. Dahabi did not give further details in the memo, which was sent in response to a proposal by Nawafleh, who suggested that the area, where the unique ancient city of Petra lies, be transformed into a special development and tourism zone to be run by one authority, Aqaba style. The envisioned administration, he added, is expected to draw up a master plan for the region and set plans to attract tourism investments. Petra, 260km south of Amman, was selected as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World last year and has witnessed a steady increase in the number of tourists since the beginning of the year. Around 100,000 tourists visited Petra during the month of October, according to official figures.

King to visit Korea Sunday

His Majesty King Abdullah will start a several-day visit to South Korea where he will hold talks with President Lee Myung-bak on means to foster bilateral ties in different fields and current developments in the Middle East. ***Several bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding will be signed during the visit, where King Abdullah is scheduled to meet with South Korean businesspeople and*** officials. The deals are intended to increase trade volume and encourage the private sector in both countries to implement joint investment projects, according to the Jordan News Agency, Petra. Jordan's ***exports to South Korea tripled*** since last year. In the past six months of this year, the Kingdom's exports to the Southeast Asian country reached about $67 million, while its imports stood at about $228 million, according to Petra. During the visit, talks will include the possibility of building nuclear reactors as South Korea is very advanced in this regard, the envoy said, adding that the Korean Power Company has sufficient expertise in the nuclear field and will be more than willing to cooperate in training Jordanian staff.

Prince Hassan calls for redefining poverty

HRH Prince Hassan has called for redefining poverty in terms of human well-being rather than in terms of dollars and cents. In a keynote speech at a conference on "Politics and Religion" organised by "La Fondation Monaco Méditerranée" in Monaco, he said possessiveness, greed, fear and apathy have led to poverty, crime, drug abuse, violence and war. "It's an economic crisis, yes, but at a deeper level it is also a spiritual crisis. By adopting the marketplace as our religion, we have forgotten who we are and why we are here on Earth. Reverence for life has been replaced with love of money and consumer goods," the Prince noted. He stressed that "only a new realisation of the meaning and purpose of life will steer us from the edge of disaster. While our financial structures collapse around us and we lose our worldly bearings, it is only our spiritual selves that can provide the compass we are seeking". The Prince pointed out that "the movement for interfaith dialogue and cooperation should be accelerated and applied directly to the universal issues facing the world. When people from different religions meet, they often forget the historical animosities and conflicts which divide them". He said peace in the Middle East "depends in large part on tolerance and understanding. But to achieve this understanding, we must first develop comprehension of the fact that each of us harbours his or her personal pain and anguish". He said the "Barcelona Process: Union of the Mediterranean" was an encouraging example of what nations can do as good neighbours in promoting economic growth, employment, regional cohesion and socioeconomic integrat.

Economic front:

ASE hits historic low; gov't urged to intervene

Amman Stock Exchange (ASE) dropped to historic levels, with analysts and experts expecting the successive declines to continue unless the government intervenes. share price index closed at 2,561 points, decreasing by about 3.6 per cent, while trading volume hit a low level of JD18.3 million. According to analysts, by Monday, the index dropped by about 50 per cent, down from its highest point registered in the July-August period. Experts estimated that market capitalisation in the ASE has dropped

by 60-70 per cent since July, when it stood at more than JD42 billion. Though agreeing that the market hit low historic levels yesterday, President of the Association of Certified Capital Market Professionals Jawad Kharouf expects that the worst is yet to come.

Jordan, China sign nuclear energy deals

Jordan and China signed two agreements in the field of nuclear energy, in addition to other accords on economic, technical and scientific cooperation. Under the ***first nuclear agreement, Jordan will purchase a subcritical assembly from China which will be used*** for training students at the Jordan University of Science and Technology (JUST), according to the Jordan News Agency, Petra. ***The second is an executive protocol for the*** nuclear cooperation agreement the two countries signed in August, according to Jordan Nuclear Energy Commission (JNEC) President Khalid Touqan. The protocol focuses on cooperation in the areas of mining and enriching uranium in two areas in the Kingdom, as well as collaboration in the field of training and related research. According to JUST President Wajih Owais, a "subcritical assembly is a simplified model for research that can be accommodated in a laboratory and used to train students on nuclear engineering programmes". JNEC and JUST will share the cost of the facility, estimated at $2.65 million, he added. JUST is the only university in Jordan which offers a programme in nuclear engineering, Owais noted. The agreements were signed at the prime Ministry yesterday in the presence of Prime Minister Nader Dahabi and Jia Qinglin, head of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. The premier said the Kingdom highly values China's support for regional stability. He also highlighted the Kingdom's favourable investment legislation and invited Chinese companies to launch and expand their business ventures in Jordan.

Oil shale deal with Shell imminent

The Kingdom is close to finalising a mega-deal with the Royal Dutch Shell Oil Company to tap the Kingdom's vast amounts of oil shale resources, an energy official said. "We are close to finishing negotiations and we expect the agreement to go before Parliament for approval within the next month," Natural Resources Authority (NRA) Director Maher Hijazin told The Jordan Times on the sidelines of the 10th Arab Conference on Mineral Resources. According to Hijazin, Shell will survey and develop 22,000 square metres of land, nearly one-quarter of the country, in the central and southern regions of the Kingdom. The project will be transferred to the government after the end of the concession. ***Under the potential concession agreement, which is expected to be between 15 and 20 years, Shell will use their patented In-situ Conversion Process***, under which the ground is heated over several years, to extract oil shale in oil form. If approved by Parliament, it will mark the first large-scale application of the firm's In-situ Conversion Process, according to the company's website. ***Shell officials could not be reached for comment.*** Meanwhile, Hijazin noted that some oil shale mining and exploration activities have been temporarily suspended in areas rich in uranium reserves.

Central Bank lowers interest rate

The Central Bank of Jordan (CBJ) lowered the interest rate by a half-point and the bank's reserves by 1 per cent. The Open Market Committee, chaired by CBJ Governor Umayya Touqan, decided to lower the key interest rates at the CBJ by 50 basis points as of November 25, according to a statement. Under the decision, the rediscount price decreased from 6.75 per cent to 6.25 per cent annually. The price of repurchase agreements was lowered to 6 per cent, down from 6.5 per cent annually. In addition, the price of overnight window deposit for the Jordanian dinar became 4 per cent instead of 4.5 per cent annually. The committee also decided to lower the obligatory monetary reserve percentage on clients' deposits denominated in Jordanian dinars or foreign currencies at licensed banks by one point, to 9 per cent. ***The measure is also aimed "to i***llustrate the bank's eagerness to maintain monetary stability and create an appropriate environment to preserve economic growth rates", according to the statement.

Kingdom reiterates commitment to achieve Millennium Development Goals

The Kingdom reiterated its commitment to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by 2015. In 2000, the UN adopted eight MDGs to be met by all world countries. They include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating diseases such as HIV/AIDS, ensuring environmental sustainability and creating global partnerships for development. During the annual review meeting for the programme of cooperation between Jordan and UNICEF, Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Suhair Al-Ali highlighted its achievements to identify main constraints, weaknesses and measures taken to achieve sustainable social and economic development in Jordan. Meanwhile, UNICEF Jordan Representative Anne Skatvedt highlighted the strong partnership between Jordan and the agency. "The ***key objectives of this meeting*** are to review achievements and constraints and agree on the way forward for the coming year, providing input into next year's work plan and budget," she said. The report, however, confirmed that child labour is a problem and that more needs to be done to improve prenatal care, monitoring of high-risk pregnancies and postnatal coverage.

Jordanians support renewable energy plants

An overwhelming majority of Jordanians support greater reliance on wind and solar energy, according to a recently released report. In a study conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org released, over three-fourths, some 76 per cent of respondents, said they favour a greater emphasis on installing wind and solar energy systems. According to the report, which was carried out in cooperation with the Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, approximately 77 per cent favour the government requiring establishments to use more renewable energy sources, even if such a policy would mean short-term increases in energy costs. In addition, the report indicated that around 69 per cent of Jordanians support making buildings more energy efficient, to "save money in the long run", something long-advocated by energy experts. Starting next year, houses under the Decent Housing for Decent Living initiative will be the first to be built under a green building code and a thermal insulation codes, which require units to be established in a way which minimises the percentage of energy loss in order to rationalise the country's consumption of energy. ***In terms of the private sector's effect on energy-demand, 62 per cent*** reported that they would support the government requiring businesses to use energy more efficiently, even if that led to increased prices for some products.

In ***terms of nuclear energy,*** which the government has placed as a priority in addressing the Kingdom's energy needs, 58 per cent of citizens favour greater emphasis on building nuclear power plants, the second-highest favourable rating in the 21-country report. The poll of 20,790 respondents across the world was conducted between July and November by a collaborative research project involving research centres from across the world and managed by the Programme on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland.

Jordan to go ahead with Sudan agricultural project

Prime Minister Nader Dahabi said Jordan will forge ahead with a project to invest in agricultural lands in the Sudanese state of Al Jazeera. Dahabi made the remarks during the meetings of the Joint Jordanian-Sudanese Higher Committee, which convened yesterday. ***The Sudanese government has set 2009 as the deadline for the implementation of an agree***ment signed in 1998 with Jordan, allowing it to rear livestock and grow crops on around 250,000 dunums of agricultural land. Chairing the Jordanian delegation to the meetings, Dahabi voiced confidence in the possibility of increasing the trade exchange volume between the two countries. The step will help bring up trade exchange, which stood at around $78 million during last year, the premier noted. The figure stood at $77 million in the first nine months of the current year. He voiced the meetings will result in activating the agreements and the memoranda of understanding signed between the two countries in the fields of trade, investment, transport, health and labour. The two ***sides signed 18 agreements***, memos and protocols and executive programmes that cover most aspects of cooperation between the two countries. ***The two sides discussed the possibility of increasing the number of flights between the t***wo countries as well as cooperation regarding the registration of Jordanian pharmaceuticals in the Sudanese market. They signed deals to govern cooperation in both fields. Talks also examined prospects on increasing the number of Sudanese patients who come to Jordan for treatment. ***The Sudanese side said a medical adviser will be appointed soon at the embassy of Sudan*** in Jordan to facilitate the process.

Bank of Jordan, JMRC sign JD15m agreement

The Bank of Jordan has recently signed a loan agreement with Jordan Mortgage Refinance Company (JMRC) in order to assist citizens in purchasing houses and residential units through the bank's housing loans. In accordance with the agreement, JMRC has granted a JD15 million loan to the Bank of Jordan for a one-year term to refinance the bank's housing loans under which the property is mortgaged. The agreement was signed by Bank of Jordan CEO Shaker Fakhouri and General Manager of JMRC Ibrahim Daher.

Jordan economic outlook is positive - IMF

Despite the ongoing global financial crisis, the Kingdom's economic outlook is positive, according to a report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released recently. ***In the summary of an IMF commission visit to the Kingdom released last week, the fund*** projected the Kingdom's economic outlook as "generally favourable", but warned that some vulnerabilities exist in the short-term, noting that growth is expected to slip below 5 per cent in 2009.

According to the report, the recent turmoil in global financial markets has had "limited impact" on the Kingdom, noting that although the Amman Stock Exchange has declined, its 2008 performance has been better than other markets in the region as inflows from foreign investors have remained positive in September and October. The impact of global economic hardships on the Jordanian economy is expected to remain "manageable", according to the report, which said the decline in international commodity prices will ease pressures on the Kingdom's trade deficit, the budget and inflation, which it projected to stand at 7 per cent in 2009. ***Economic experts agreed with the IMF's*** findings, and shared general confidence that the Kingdom's financial markets will do well despite global upheaval. The IMF report called the government's move to lift fuel subsidies earlier this year "bold but necessary", noting that with the steep rise in oil prices on the global markets this summer, the government's budget deficit would have "deteriorated sharply" had they remained. Though the lifting of fuel subsidies helped limit the budget deficit, the continuation of food subsidies, due to rising global food prices, led to a widening in the fiscal deficit, according to the IMF. The commission reported the Kingdom's real GDP growth for the first half of this year to be 6 per cent, which they attributed to "robust expansion" in the finance and tourism sectors as well as increased productivity.

Export-Import Bank of China to finance housing project in Jordan

A Chinese delegation from the Export-Import Bank of China (China Exim Bank) will extend $29.3 million to Jordan for financing housing complexes for military servicemen. A press release from the Ministry of Planning quoted Minister Suhair Al-Ali as saying that this credit is the first such loan agreement to be signed between the Chinese bank and the government of Jordan. "It is an important first step towards developing cooperation with the bank," she indicated in the press release. Al-Ali met Sunday with the delegation headed by the bank's chairman and president, Li Ruogu. The meeting was attended by Central Bank of Jordan Governor Umayya Touqan along with officials from the Ministry of Finance. The planning minister referred to His Majesty King Abdullah's numerous visits to China to stress that Jordan is keen on enhancing bilateral relations. Al-Ali discussed with Ruogu future cooperation between Jordan and the bank, and highly valued the upcoming visit of the Chinese head of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Jia Qinglin, and the accompanying senior officials to Jordan. The Chinese official thanked the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation for facilitating the soft loan agreement to be signed Monday and assured the minister of the bank's willingness to develop its cooperation with Jordan.

Geo strategic front:

Prince Hassan calls for world cooperation on global commons

HRH Prince Hassan addressed both the challenges and the opportunities currently facing the world and, in particular, the Middle East at the universities of York and Durham last week. At York, the Prince specifically highlighted the regional nature of the problems and the need for a regional approach to include a social charter. Prince Hassan addressed a broad range of topics relevant to the contemporary human condition, ranging from questions of resources and risk, to

war and water. These are considered to be pivotal issues in the ultimate challenge to re-establish global political and economic stability. Referring to Arab-Israeli tensions and the continuous pursuit of peace, he called for the need to genuinely pursue a two-state solution, noting that doing so will require not only compromise on both sides but also the reduction of internal divisions within the Israeli and Palestinian political systems. The Prince also highlighted the effects of the ongoing global financial crisis on development, employment and stability in the region. This lack of diversification means that the declining price of oil and ongoing reductions in humanitarian assistance will present the region with grave challenges, the Prince noted. Overcoming this challenge will require a greater emphasis upon developing talent and local productive capacities in order to ensure that greater internal economic stability exists, he pointed out. The Prince also addressed the question of "global commons" and the need for regional problems to receive regional solutions and treatment. ***The greatest potential for fostering regional cooperation, according to Prince Hassan, is within the realms of water and energy. Both are major challenges for the Middle East, but may be converted into opportunities that contribute to stability, peace, economic growth and environmental protection, he said.***Collaboration on practical and shared issues such as water and electricity will reveal the potential benefits of greater collaboration on additional challenges, Prince Hassan said. These include conflict, post-conflict reconstruction, economic diversification, transportation, telecommunications and infrastructure, among others.

New partnership to enhance scientific, technological activities

The USAID Jordan Economic Development Programme (SABEQ) and the Higher Council for Science and Technology (HCST) entered into a partnership to enhance scientific and technological activities in general and research and development in particular. ***A memorandum of understanding (MoU) to this effect was signed at the HCST pre***mises yesterday, in the presence of HCST Secretary General Anwar Battikhi, USAID Mission Director Jay Knott and SABEQ Chief of Party Laith Al Qasem, according to a USAID statement. Through this ***MoU, SABEQ aims to realise*** its overall goals of enhancing productivity and creating jobs for Jordanians, the statement said, adding that these goals can be achieved in the R&D sphere through strengthening and promoting relations between the science and technology community and the private sector. ***In addition, activities under the MoU will provide for joint SABEQ and HCST support*** for R&D projects to ensure their successful conclusion for the benefit of the sector and the economy at large, according to the statement. He added that the HCST works towards contributing to the sound transformation of Jordan into a knowledge economy that serves sustained development on concrete scientific bases. ***The HCST, which has recently signed several MoUs with European and American research institutions in a bid to enhance cooperation, is currently*** focusing on innovation and leadership through encouraging qualitative scientific research.

EU press award to recognise 'excellence in writing'

The European Commission Delegation (ECD) in Jordan launched the "European Union Press Award for Excellence in Writing" in order to further develop and promote independence of the media and freedom of expression in the Kingdom. Ambassador Patrick Renauld, head of the ECD in Jordan, made the announcement during an open meeting with journalists organised by

the Jordan Press Association (JPA). The award, which aims at raising professional standards of investigative journalism, will shed light on how the media can be beneficial to the development process through communicating information, spreading awareness and developing citizenship, Renauld added. The winner will receive a cash prize of 3,000 euros, while the second and third place awards are 2,000 and 1,000 euros respectively.

Jordanians detained in Syria freed

The three Jordanians freed from a Syrian jail arrived home. Nidal Kayed, Ayman Hawarat and Ahmad Abu Durais, all from the town of Subaihi, near Salt, who went to Syria for a three-day vacation on November 6, were held in jail for 16 days for charges of allegedly inquiring about "sensitive locations", the men said. They said they were asking the usual questions about places they saw when they were in a taxi and the moment they arrived at an apartment they rented, police raided the place and arrested them. ***The three youths declined to provide further information or comment on their prison conditions in Syria*** Meanwhile, one of the three youths said that during their time in jail, they met other Jordanians who have been held "for years without trial". Abdul Karim Shraideh, who heads the Jordanian Committee for Defending Prisoners and Missing People, said that the number of Jordanians missing in Syria is around 256 people.

EU water conference delayed again

The Euro-Med Ministerial Conference on Water has been postponed for the second time to be held at a later date yet to be determined, EU diplomats have announced. Patrick Renauld, head of the Delegation of the European Commission (EC) in Jordan, said Monday there are no political reasons behind the delay, but the EU was trying to set a date that is suitable for all participants. French Ambassador to Jordan Denys Gauer also announced the postponement on Sunday at an open meeting organised by the Jordan Press Association (JPA) aimed at discussing Jordanian-European relations, also attended by Renauld.

King, Turkish speaker discuss peace process

His Majesty King Abdullah discussed means to bolster bilateral relations, particularly in the economic and parliamentary fields, with Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of the Republic of Turkey Köksal Toptan. During the meeting, King Abdullah expressed his satisfaction over the level of economic cooperation between Jordan and Turkey and the growing volume of Turkish investments in the Kingdom. ***The two sides also discussed current regional developments, particularly efforts to push the peace process forward and opportunities to enhance Turkey's role in reinforcing secu***rity and stability in the region. Toptan expressed his country's appreciation of Jordan's efforts to achieve peace and stability in the Middle East, highlighting his country's interest in boosting Turkish-Jordanian cooperation in various sectors, including the legislative and parliamentary fields. Lower House Speaker Abdul Hadi Majali and MP Munir Sobar, rapporteur of the Jordanian-Turkish Parliamentary Friendship Society, attended the meeting.

Sri Lankan delegation explores opportunities

The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce wants to expand business ties with Jordan and other Arab countries, according to the Sri Lankan ambassador to the Kingdom. Ambassador Andrayas Mohottala told that a Sri Lankan delegation, which is due to conclude a two-day business promotion mission to the Kingdom, met Jordanian traders this week in order to increase commercial exchange between the two countries. "There are no trade obstacles but we need to create awareness about potential business opportunities," the diplomat stressed. Delegation leader Sarath Chandra De Silva said Sri Lankan businesses seek to boost trade volumes by bringing new products into the two markets. De Silva highlighted Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, as well as free trade agreements with Pakistan and India, to encourage investment into the Asian Pacific country.

Drop in Jordanian exports to US does not reflect weakening ties

Jordan's exports to the US during 2008 dropped by 14.8 per cent, according to US Ambassador in Amman Robert Beecroft, who stressed that the decline in exports, which comes at a time the world is witnessing a financial crisis, does not reflect a weakening in ties between the two countries. "The worldwide economic slowdown is exactly that - worldwide. It threatens and may affect all of us... the current decline in exports form Jordan to the US is not unique to Jordan and in no way reflects a weakening of our relationship," the diplomat said during a dinner hosted by the Jordan Exporters Association. He said the decline in exports is a reflection of the US' weakening demand for particular products. For example, US garment imports are down worldwide, not just from Jordan, he said. In his speech at the event, Beecroft said Jordan's most recent worldwide trade figures showed $4.7 billion in exports in 2008 with particular increases in commodities like phosphate and potash, and also in pharmaceuticals and produce.

Financial closure deadline extended

The government decided to extend the financial closure deadline for the contractor selected to implement the light railway project between Amman and Zarqa. The four-month extension is the second granted to the Jordanian-Kuwaiti Company in one year. The government's previous deadline set for the financial closure was November 30. The Jordanian-Kuwaiti Company is the second bidder that qualified for the project and was entrusted with carrying out the scheme, after the concerned authorities terminated the agreement with the original bid winner, a Pakistani-Chinese-Jordanian consortium. Back then, a top official cited "legal reasons" for the decision to terminate the deal. Jameel Ali, director general of the Public Transport Regulatory Commission, said yesterday's decision was taken upon a request by the contractor and funding parties so as to give the consortium enough time to complete a study to determine the impact of the global financial crisis on the plan. The JD236 million project entails putting into service a commuter train that runs on a dual-track railway from Zarqa City to Raghadan station in Amman city centre.

Banks required to meet the financing needs of SMEs - survey

Banks are required to meet the financing needs of small- and medium-size enterprises (SME), which are major employers and contributors to Jordan's economy, according to the findings of a financial services survey. The study was carried out by the USAID Jordan Economic

Development Programme (SABEQ) in cooperation with the Association of Banks. Its results were announced during a workshop gathering representatives from local and international banks, heads of SMEs departments and credit officers to announce the survey results, a USAID statement issued on Wednesday said. The development of appropriate banking products and services for the sector will allow SMEs to grow and make a larger contribution, Asma Abu Taleb, SABEQ financial services component leader said.

Social front:

Prince Ghazi receives Eugen Biser Award

HRH Prince Ghazi, Personal Envoy and Special Adviser to His Majesty King Abdullah and Chairman of the Royal Al al Bayt Institute of Islamic Thought, received the third Eugen Biser Award in Munich, Germany, for the "A Common Word" initiative, together with Grand Mufti Mustafa Ceric and Shaykh Al Habib Ali Zain Al Abidin Al Jifri. The Eugen Biser Award is presented to those who have worked at creating "a common basis for the tolerant, peaceful coexistence of all religions and nations, both at national and supranational levels."

Arabic daily rejects peace ad over Israeli flag

An independent Jordanian newspaper said it has refused to publish a Palestinian advertisement promoting an Arab peace initiative with Israel because it contains the Jewish state's flag. "We refused to publish the paid advertisement because the source, the Palestine Liberation Organisation's negotiations department, refused to remove the Israeli flag," a senior editor at the Arabic-language Al Arab Al-Yawm told AFP. "We also rejected the advertisement because it seeks to promote the idea that Israel accepts the peace initiative, although Israeli officials have rejected the initiative." The advertisement shows the flags of all Arab and Muslim countries, in addition to the Israeli star of David, saying all these states have accepted the Arab peace initiative.

Lebanon

Social front:

Amnesty International calls on Lebanon to acquit Muhamad Mugraby

On the eve of the expected decision in the case against lawyer and human rights defender Muhamad Mugraby in which he is accused of slandering a public official, Amnesty International is calling on the

Lebanese authorities to drop the charge. Amnesty International is also appealing to the Lebanese authorities to end the pattern of repeated prosecutions brought against him. In the organization's view, these amount to harassment and appear to be aimed at intimidating him from carrying out his work as a human rights defender and punishing him for publicly criticizing the country's judicial institutions.

Given that the charge against Muhamad Mugraby relates to a speech he made before the European Parliament, Amnesty International is also calling on the European Union (EU) to make representations to the Lebanese authorities to halt the prosecution, as well as other harassment he is facing. Muhamad Mugraby is being tried before a criminal court in Beirut on account of a speech on human rights he made on 4 November 2003 at the European Parliament in Brussels. This prosecution was brought despite the fact he had already been tried and acquitted of the same charge (Article 383 of the Penal Code), as well as of slander of the military establishment and its officers (Article 157 of the Military Penal Code), before the Military Court of Cassation in April 2006. Under international law, as set out in Article 14(7) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Lebanon is a party, no one may be tried or punished again for a criminal offense for which they have been finally acquitted in a previous trial in the same jurisdiction. In his address to the European Parliament, Muhamad Mugraby criticized the military court system in Lebanon. He made particular reference to frequent allegations that suspects being brought to trial before military courts are tortured in order to force them to "confess" and to the lack of legal training of the courts' judges. Concerns that procedures before military courts fail to comply with international fair trial standards and that detainees are subjected to torture and other ill-treatment in pre-trial detention have been well documented by Amnesty International and the UN Human Rights Committee, among others. ***Amnesty International would like to remind the Lebanese authorities of Principle 23 of the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, which states:*** "Lawyers like other citizens are entitled to freedom of expression, belief, association and assembly. In particular, they shall have the right to take part in public discussion of matters concerning the law, the administration of justice and the promotion and protection of human rights". In addition, Muhamad Mugraby has rights as a human rights defender and the Lebanese state has an obligation to protect those rights, as stated in the UN Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Individuals, Groups and Institutions to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders):

Geo strategic front:

Israel threatens to turn Lebanon into a battleground again

Escalating rhetoric between Hizbollah and Israel over the past few months has led to claims this week by Israeli intelligence officials that the militant Shiite group based in Lebanon more than tripled its capabilities since the July 2006 war in violation of the UN-brokered ceasefire implemented in Aug 2006. Ehud Barak, the Israeli defense minister who as prime minister ordered Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000, claimed in an interview this week that Hizbollah had expanded its missile

arsenal to more than 42,000 projectiles today from 14,000 rockets in 2006. Although the claim cannot be directly verified, Hizbollah militants have long bragged about their increased manpower and weapons systems since the 2006 conflict, which killed more than 1,000 civilians, hundreds of militants and soldiers and displaced more than a million people on both sides of the border. Mr Barak did not make the intelligence on which he based his claim public, but said any conflict with Lebanon would likely expand much beyond the 2006 war, which mostly saw the Israelis target only infrastructure and structures associated with the group. His threats follow similar statements by Israeli defense officials that the new role of Hizbollah in the Lebanese government could turn Lebanese political and government facilities into legitimate military targets in the case of a new conflict. Hizbollah's head of foreign relations, Nawaf Moussawi, immediately responded in a local paper to claims that the Israeli military lacks the capability to assault the newly bolstered militant group, which is largely armed and funded by Iran.

A Hizbollah military wing member said, "We are definitely stronger than in 2006. We have increased our manpower, our weaponry and our knowledge. We cannot wait for them to try and enter Lebanon again. We have tasted the meat of the Israeli and it is easy to swallow."

Pro-Syrian militants attack journalist in Lebanon

Worldwide press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders said it was sickened by an attack today on television journalist, Omar Harqous, of the channel Future News, owned by the Future Movement party headed by Saad Hariri. The journalist was covering a demonstration by militants of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in the Hamra district of western Beirut who were trying to prevent council staff from tearing down political posters, his family and colleagues said. "Press freedom in Lebanon is threatened by these increasingly frequent attacks against journalists. It is vital that the authorities quickly open an investigation to identify and try Omar Harqous's assailants", the organization said. Threats from Hezbollah militia stopped broadcasts and publication for five days in May 2008 of terrestrial and satellite Future TV, satellite news channel Future News, the daily al-Moustakbal and Radio Orient. Below are photos of the events in May. An opposition militant from the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party throws a molotov cocktail at the Future TV studios in the coastal Raoushe in Beirut A poster of Lebanon's assasinated ex-premier Rafiq Hariri burned by SSNP militants

Lebanese president requests weapons from Iran

President Michel Suleiman requested medium weapons from Iran during his visit to Tehran, that would help the Lebanese army combat terrorism and maintain national security. Suleiman visited Iran early in the week where he met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Supreme Guide to the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iranian Defense Minister. Suleiman also toured the Iranian Military Industries Exhibition. Sources close to the delegation accompanying President Michel Suleiman on his recent visit to Iran said Tehran has expressed its readiness to provide Lebanon with defensive weapons. Suleiman made clear during his official visit to Tehran Nov.

24-25 that he was not seeking to obtain long-range missiles or jet fighters, but modern medium arms that would help the Lebanese army combat terrorism and maintain national security. Ahmadinejad whispered to Suleiman as he bid him farewell: "Meeting Lebanon's demands is subject to one signal from you. You should not worry." ***Regarding Iranian assistance to the Lebanese Army and Security Forces, the source said "an agreement was*** reached during bilateral talks and following the president's tour of an Iranian weapons exhibition, to provide Lebanese Armed Forces with arms allowing it to rapidly and flexibly move in confronting and preventing any criminal and terrorist action, including difficult missions." Suleiman stressed Lebanon's rejection to the naturalization of Palestinians and urged Iranian support in this regard. ***Iranian side promised to "use its good offices to help Lebanon in this*** regard." The Iranians also vowed to support Lebanon in all key dossiers, particularly national dialogue. Meanwhile, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called on Lebanese factions to unite against Israel as he met Suleiman. The supreme leader praised Suleiman for "supporting the Islamic resistance (Hizbullah), his efforts to strengthen national unity and maintaining the national character of the Lebanese army."A ***Lebanese government official*** said that talks with Iranian officials would include efforts to forge a "national defense strategy" for Lebanon, where Hizbullah's arsenal remains a thorny issue.

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

Madiha Kaukab

Weekly Report: from 22nd November 2008 to 28th November 2008

Presentation Date: 3rd December2008

NEWSMONITORING REPORT

This weekly report is about the important political, social, economic and International events occurred in Gulf Cooperation Council States with the review.

Review

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Towards Mumbai Attacks

- Saudi Arabia, OIC lambaste attacks
- UAE condemns Mumbai's terror explosions

IR Desk

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Regional Desk

- Alawi says panel okays proposals for coming GCC summit

BAHRAIN

Social Desk

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- Put education before marriage Bahraini girls told
- Bahrain helping UK fight disease
- Document for tolerance signed in Bahrain

Political Desk

- Bahraini Premier pledge to MPs
- Co-operation vital between govt and parliament: Bahraini PM

Foreign Labor Desk

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- Bahraini court to debate recruitment of foreigners in public sector
- Human trafficking victims can stay in Bahrain

KUWAIT

Political Desk

- Kuwait emir to allow parliament to run its term: speaker

- Kuwait's ruler puts cabinet resignation on hold
- Kuwait Speaker hails HH Amir; says no dissolution of parliament
- Kuwait in new crisis as cabinet quits
- Kuwaiti govt to attend quiz debate
- Kuwait MPs seek to defuse political crisis
- Everything is calm says Kuwait National Assembly speaker
- Move to grill Kuwaiti PM will hurt political environment: expert
- Grilling aimed at enforcing Sharia: Kuwaiti MP
- Kuwait interior minister denies rumors

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- Kuwait urges int'l community to act quickly on Gaza blockade
- Iraqi officials to brief Kuwait with details of agreement with US
- Kuwait parliament to join Asian parliament meeting in Jakarta
- Iraq eyes stronger relations with Kuwait - Senior diplomat
- IPU president visits Kuwait early December to explore ways of cooperation
- Ban Ki-Moon will be in Kuwait to open UN-House: FM
- Inter-Palestinian dialogue must continue: Kuwaiti official
- Nuclear Iran could trigger more troubles in M.E.: UN official

Economic Desk

- Kuwait's stock market has been tumbling as oil prices have plunged

OMAN

Social Desk

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- Oman gives women equal rights to own land

IR Desk

- Saudi minister receives Omani Haj official

QATAR

Social Desk

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- Treat honor killing as homicide: Jurist
- Qatar art museum aims to show Islam's true values
- Qatar education council planning to start community colleges

IR Desk

- Qatar has retained its character, says ex-envoy
- Kuwait interior minister denies rumors
- Jordanian King, Qatari Amir hold summit talks
- US lauds Qatar's role in Darfur
- Braille version of UN rights declaration unveiled in Doha
- Sudan praises Qatar's peace efforts to tackle Darfur conflict
- French President to meet Sudanese leader during Qatars visit
- Cooperation between Qatar and Egypt in health sector discussed

SAUDI ARAB

Piracy Desk

- Saudi minister opposes negotiations with pirates
- We'll fight back, Somali pirates warn
- Pirates will infest Gulf if US quits Iraq too soon: minister
- Saudi supertanker moved to unknown destination: Somalia govt
- No lowering of ransom: Pirates
- Pirates move supertanker farther from coast

Social Desk

- Saudi cabinet discusses economy, piracy
- Saudi health ministry beefs up preventive care program
- Saudi health ministry has enough bloodstock
- Saudi forum suggests measures to protect divorced women

IR Desk

- Egypt supports Saudi presence in G20 – minister

- Saudi plans to build mosque, Islamic Centre in Moscow
- Saudi denies offering asylum to Taliban leader
- Abdullah meets with Blair in Jeddah
- Arab FMs to hold extraordinary meeting Nov. 26
- Saudi minister receives Omani Haj official
- New Zealand decries 'inaccurate' reporting about Saudi's death
- Shun extremism, Prince Naif tells students

Terrorism Desk

- Saudi cabinet panel studying law to combat terror

UAE

Social Desk

- UAE education minister opens "My Family Reads Project" in Ajman
- Judge hails support of Fatima on women issues
- 'UAE adopts unified national strategy to provide education for all'

Regional and Domesti Desk

- Instability in Arab World hampering development, says Shaikh Khalifa

Human Trafficking Desk

- UAE Police exposes int'l human trafficking gang

Foreign Labor

- Sudan praises UAE's role in Arab expatriates welfare
- Pilot scheme another step aimed at protecting foreign workers in UAE

Nuclear Energy Desk

- Power to meet 15 pc of UAE energy needs

IR Desk

- Zardari's UAE visit will focus on development, investment
- Khalifa, Zardari hold talks
- Arab-German dialogue opens today
- UAE-Egypt ties key for joint Arab action: Khalifa
- Abdullah Bin Zayed meets Lebanese President

YEMEN

Social Desk

- Treat honour killing as homicide: Jurist
- Yemenis seek return of loved ones missing in war
- Somali pirates hijack Yemeni cargo ship
- Yemen parliament postpones local elections
- Yemen police clash with protesters at election boycott rally

Terrorism Desk

- Bin Laden's former driver to leave Guantanamo for Yemen: report
- Alleged Qaeda members go on trial in Yemen

Review

In **Bahrain**, government has decided to create 200 more jobs for the nationals with the establishment of National Contact Center, government also announced that expatriate victims of human trafficking will not be deported to their homelands if they want to continue living in Bahrain. Leaders and followers belonging to a number of religious, social groups and cultures signed the Bahrain Document for Religious Tolerance and Social Coexistence.

In **Oman**, New Amendments of Land Law give women equal rights as men to own residential plots.

Saudi Arabia is facing a serious piracy issue since the last week. Somali pirates captured the Sirius Star supertanker and its 100 million dollar load of oil last Saturday off the coast of Kenya and demanded from the Saudi owners of the vessel 10 days to pay a 25 million dollar ransom. Pirates announced that they would fight back in case of any attack from forces to free the vessel.

While the Saudi Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal opposed any negotiations with pirates, reiterating his assertion that sea piracy was "like terrorism."

Another important issue is being observed in **Kuwait**'s political scenario; as a rift between the Kuwaiti Parliament and the government of this oil-rich country over the visit of a controversial Iranian cleric has escalated into yet another political crisis.

On Tuesday, the Kuwaiti cabinet announced its resignation as three legislators prepared to question His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah for allowing the cleric, Sayyid Mohammed Al-Fali, whom they accused of offending Sunnis, to enter the country a few weeks ago. The cleric was previously accused of making insulting remarks about the Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) companions, whom Sunnis respect. Al-Fali left the country immediately after the protests started but crises still continued. There are other reasons behind this political instability like the of charges of corruption and economic mismanagement. The Speaker of Kuwait's National Assembly, Jassim Al-Khorafi, insisted that there would be no dissolution of the Parliament, which could intensify the political crisis.

UAE and **Saudi Arab** strongly condemn series of terror explosions which shaked Mumbai, India's commercial capital.

DETAILED REPORT

GCC

Towards Mumbai Attacks

Saudi Arabia, OIC lambaste attacks

Saudi Arabia yesterday denounced the terrorist attacks in India's business capital Mumbai and expressed its condolences to the Indian government and people.

"The Kingdom has been following up the terrorist explosions in Mumbai with indignation and expresses its strong condemnation of this criminal act," an official source said. Arab and Islamic

organizations yesterday denounced the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) condemned the attacks, saying violence had no justification. “These acts of violence contradict all human values and can be justified by nothing,” an OIC spokesman said at the group’s headquarters here.

UAE condemns Mumbai's terror explosions

The UAE today vehemently condemned the series of terror explosions which rocked Mumbai, India's commercial capital, last night, killing and wounding scores of people.

"The UAE, while condemning this brutal and appalling crime, affirms its complete solidarity with the government of India and standing with its side in confronting and overcoming these criminal acts," Foreign Minister HH Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan said in a statement today.

IR Desk

Arab ministers take no side between Fatah and Hamas

Arab foreign ministers steered clear of taking sides between Palestinian groups Fatah and Hamas on Thursday, at their first meeting to review the state of Middle East peace talks since the U.S. presidential election.

The ministers told Palestinian groups they should resume without delay an internal dialogue meant to bring the West Bank and Gaza Strip back under a single Palestinian authority. They also called for an immediate end to the Israeli blockade of Gaza and promised to send food, medicines and medical supplies to Gaza immediately.The Islamist group Hamas has run the Gaza Strip since defeating Fatah forces there in July. The Fatah group of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas runs the West Bank.

Regional Desk

Alawi says panel okays proposals for coming GCC summit

Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdallah, Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, said the GCC ministerial council discussed important economic issues related to infrastructure and the current global situation. He added that there was mutual agreement on all the key issues. He said at the conclusion of the preparatory ministerial council’s 109 session, the consultative body presented three very important themes and proposals and recommendations on them will be referred to the upcoming Muscat summit.

BAHRAIN

Social Desk

National contact center to create 200 jobs for Bahrain nationals

The government plans to create 200 more jobs for the nationals with the establishment of National Contact Center, worth BD109, 500. Most of these jobs are expected to be filled by women candidates.

The first-of-its-kind center will be run by the Bahrain e-Government Authority. It aims to improve public access to government departments by providing a range of services under one roof — including information on office locations, document requirements, government procedures, laws and visa regulations, among other things, a statement highlighted last week.

Put education before marriage Bahraini girls told

Girls are being urged to put education before marriage, under a campaign urging them to at least finish high school before they tie the knot.

Bahrain helping UK fight disease

British health officials could copy Bahrain's efforts in tackling genetic blood disease.

A Bahraini doctor will advise National Health Service (NHS) officials charged with tackling the problem in the UK. Dr Shaikha Al Arrayed will help the NHS establish a screening programme for sickle cell disease and thalassemia.

Document for tolerance signed in Bahrain

Leaders and followers belonging to a number of religious, social groups and cultures signed on Tuesday the Bahrain Document for Religious Tolerance and Social Coexistence.

The signatories said they believed tolerance and coexistence are fundamental for the progress of humanity. The document called for spreading tolerance, eliminating violence, hatred, extremism and fanaticism and consolidating the culture of dialogue. It also called for peaceful coexistence regardless of religious, ethnic or intellectual belonging.

Political Desk

Bahraini Premier pledge to MPs

The Premier yesterday assured MPs they had full government backing - in a surprise visit to parliament. Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa's pledge follows allegations that ministers were refusing to show up to answer MPs' questions.

MPs had initially threatened to boycott yesterday's session because ministers had not appeared to provide answers for more than six weeks. Angry MPs suspended last week's session early for the same reason.

Co-operation vital between govt and parliament: Bahraini PM

Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa pledged that more co-operation between the government and parliament would be witnessed in coming days, with His Majesty's support.

The Premier yesterday received parliament chairman Khalifa Al Dhahrani, members of the council's committee and MPs who extended thanks and appreciation to him for crystallising the strong co-operation between the government and parliament. Shaikh Khalifa said that the government always deals in transparency with MPs, stressing that the parliamentary process, launched by His Majesty on Islamic principles and Bahraini traditions, is based on respect and had to be a local and international example.

Foreign Labor Desk

Bahraini workers feeling victimized can seek rights group help

Expatriates who are forced to work in poor occupational safety standards at worksites could seek assistance of a human rights group.
The Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society (BHRWS) through its Al Doy Center has established an office to receive complaints and file legal cases against employers who endanger the lives of their workers by forcing them to work in dangerous worksites. The General Secretary of the BHRWS Faisal Fulad said on Sunday that the office was formed in response to the ever-increasing number of death and work-related accidents among expatriate workers. "The office is not only limited to help the victims, but anyone who could help from preventing disasters from happening such as people reporting sites with high accident risks," Fulad explained**.**

Bahraini court to debate recruitment of foreigners in public sector

Bahrain's constitutional court would debate recruitment of foreigners in public sector entities.

The Parliamentary Legal Affairs Committee has referred the Civil Service Law to the court for 'the unconstitutionality' of some of its clauses, especially article 51 that regulates the recruitment of Bahrainis in government organisations, head of the panel and member of Al Wefaq bloc Khalil Marzooq told Khaleej Times on Thursday. He said the court would have a minimum of six months to review reasons given for the unconstitutionality of the law. "The article states that foreigners could be recruited only if their employment leads to public benefit but it does not explain the types or kinds of benefits that could legalise their recruitment."

Human trafficking victims can stay in Bahrain

Expatriate victims of human trafficking will not be deported to their homelands if they want to continue living in Bahrain.

It was decided by a panel formed recently to evaluate the conditions of human trafficking victims during a meeting last week. The panel also discussed an initiative to establish a national centre to

address problems of such people. Head of the panel and Assistant Under Secretary for Social Welfare and Rehabilitation, Badriya Al Jeep, said that the victims could continue living in Bahrain after correcting their situations and could also search for jobs.

KUWAIT

Political Desk

Kuwait emir to allow parliament to run its term: speaker

Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah assured a group of Kuwaiti lawmakers on Wednesday that he will not dissolve parliament as a result of its showdown with the government.

"We heard from the emir that he was keen for democracy and the national assembly and that it should complete its (four-year) term," speaker Jassem al-Khorafi told reporters after the meeting. "The National Assembly will continue with its business as usual," added Khorafi, who earlier in the day led a group of 20 MPs to a meeting with the emir, a day after a new political crisis erupted in this Gulf state.

Kuwait's ruler puts cabinet resignation on hold

Kuwait's ruler decided to put on hold the resignation of the OPEC country's cabinet on Tuesday, leaving his options open for intervention to end a crippling crisis between the government and parliament.

The cabinet tendered its resignation as parliament was about to look into a request by three legislators to question the prime minister, a member of the royal family, over the visit of an Iranian Shi'ite cleric accused of offending Sunni Muslims.

Kuwait Speaker hails HH Amir; says no dissolution of parliament

Kuwait National Assembly (parliament) Speaker Jassim Al-Kharafi on Tuesday extolled His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's wisdom and keenness on democracy and stability in the country.

He made it certain that there would be neither constitutional nor unconstitutional dissolution of the National Assembly. The speaker was speaking to reporters after Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Nasser Sabah said HH the Amir was not going to decide upon the government's resignation for the time being.

Kuwait in new crisis as cabinet quits

Kuwait was plunged into a new crisis on Tuesday after the cabinet in the oil-rich Gulf state resigned over a standoff with parliament, in a move which could lead to early elections.

"The Kuwaiti cabinet submitted its resignation to the emir just a while ago," MP Nasser al-Sane told reporters. Kuwaiti ministers -- led by Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Mohammed al-Ahmad al-Sabah -- had walked out of parliament earlier on Tuesday as the house was due to set a date to question the premier.

Kuwaiti govt to attend quiz debate

After days of political deadlock over the request to grill the prime minister, National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi yesterday saw some light at the end of the tunnel, saying he believes

the government will attend today's Assembly session. It was the only optimistic note in a day full of rumors about an imminent decision to suspend the Assembly and the constitution after news circulated that the government has sent a letter of non-cooperation with the Assembly to HH the Amir.

Kuwait MPs seek to defuse political crisis

Kuwait MPs tried to defuse a political crisis on Monday by moving to delay the questioning of the prime minister for allowing the visit of a Muslim cleric, whom three Islamist lawmakers believe made insulting remarks.

In the past, ministers have resigned to avert such public questioning and Kuwait's ruler, who has the last say in politics, has reshuffled the government or even dissolved parliament to head off such crises in the major oil exporter.

Everything is calm says Kuwait National Assembly speaker

A number of MPs desperate to reach an amicable solution to the political crisis discussed in a meeting with Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi yesterday a number of options to break the deadlock over a request by three Islamist MPs to grill the prime minister. Khorafi declined to comment on the meeting while leaving the National Assembly, only saying "everything is calm so far", refusing to be drawn into saying if MPs have authorized him to carry any specific message to the Amir.

Liberal MP Ali Al-Rashed floated the idea of delaying the grilling for between one and two years and renewed calls for a meeting with HH the Amir in an apparent bid to prevent the Assembly from being dissolved. Rashed however admitted that the three MPs who filed the grilling "have

effectively closed the doors for any negotiated settlement", referring to their press conference on Saturday in which they refused to back down on the interpellation.

Move to grill Kuwaiti PM will hurt political environment: expert

Expression of political perception does not necessarily have to take place in the grilling of the prime minister, even as the grilling, if carried out, will definitely hurt Kuwait's political environment because it lacks reasonable demands and it channels efforts in the wrong direction.

This was disclosed by Dr Khaled Aljenfawi, a well-known columnist and professor at the Kuwait University. Aljenfawi was commenting on the proposed grilling of the prime minister amid speculation that the parliament is likely to be dissolved. “The grilling might lead to dissolution of the parliament and this is something we can ill afford at this stage.

Grilling aimed at enforcing Sharia: Kuwaiti MP

The grilling against HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah is aimed at enforcing the Islamic Sharia, strengthening democracy as well as protecting religion, mind and honor, MP Waleed Al-Tabtabaei said at a press conference in his diwaniya Saturday. Mohammad Hayef Al-Mutairi and Abdullah Al-Barghash, who forwarded the grilling request along with Al-Tabtabaei, were also present at the press conference.

Clarifying the grilling is also aimed at protecting public funds, Al-Tabtabaei enumerated the grilling points, which include the questionable expenditures in the diwan of the prime minister, irregularities in security procedures, and failure of the authorities to control the current situation in the country. He claimed there are violations in 48 government departments in the country,

adding the case of a Shiite cleric accused of insulting the companions of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) is one of the points of the grilling but it is not the focal point.

Kuwait interior minister denies rumors

Interior Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Khaled Al-Sabah denied rumors that Qatar had offered to send its special forces to suppress anti-leadership protests in case the Parliament was unconstitutionally dissolved, reported Al-Rai. "I've never heard about such an offer. Thank God, we are working transparently in 'daylight.' Kuwaitis are completely capable of solving their own problems without seeking assistance from abroad," he said.

IR Desk

Kuwait urges int'l community to act quickly on Gaza blockade

Kuwait urged the international community late Tuesday to act swiftly to lift the blockade on Gaza, renewed its commitment to support the Palestinian people in their struggle to gain all legitimate rights, and called on the parties to continue their negotiations for a peaceful settlement as soon as possible.

Addressing the General Assembly as it examined the situation in the Middle East, Kuwaiti UN Ambassador Abdullah Al-Murad said the suffering of the Palestinian people in Gaza continued as Israel deprived the area of supplies and fuel.

Iraqi officials to brief Kuwait with details of agreement with US

Two Iraqi senior officials are to visit Kuwait on Wednesday to brief the government in the Gulf country there on details of the US-Iraqi Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), it was announced here on Tuesday.

Iraqi Minister of Culture Dr. Maher Al-Hadithi and Advisor of the Prime Minister Yasin Majeed will deliver a letter to Kuwaiti Premier His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah on that regard, an informed government source told KUNA.

Kuwait parliament to join Asian parliament meeting in Jakarta

The Kuwaiti National Assembly (parliament) is set to partake in the 3rd meeting of Asian parliaments due to be held in Jakarta, Indonesia, on November 26-29.

The Kuwaiti parliamentary team will include MP Marzouq Al-Hubaini as head of delegation, and Reja Al-Metairi, Saleh Ashour, and Askar Al-Enezi as members.The four-day conference is expected to discuss plans of action forwarded by specialized committees on cultural diversity, globalization, reduction of poverty, the fight against corruption, an Asian friendship treaty, and a proposed Asian monetary fund. The conferees will also thrash out a set of political issues, mainly cooperation among Asian countries in the fight against international terrorism, the repeated Israeli aggressions on the Palestinian people, and promotion of peace and security on the world, regional, and continental arenas.

Iraq eyes stronger relations with Kuwait - Senior diplomat

Undersecretary of Iraqi Foreign Ministry Labid Abawi said here of Sunday the Iraqi people and government had a strong desire to strengthen relations with the State of Kuwait in all fields.

"We seek to make the bilateral ties with Kuwait a role model for the relations between other Arab countries," Abawi said in a statement to KUNA on the sidelines of a security meeting on

Iraq. "The coming technical talks between Iraq and Kuwait will give a strong momentum to the bilateral ties.

IPU president visits Kuwait early December to explore ways of cooperation

President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Speaker of the Namibian National Assembly Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab is visiting Kuwait early next month at the invitation of National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Kharafi to explore ways of cooperation.

Gurirab, who is attending the 2008 Parliamentary Hearing, organized jointly by the IPU and the UN, told KUNA in an interview that the two speakers "will explore ways in which we can benefit from each other's best practices." The former UN General Assembly President, who was elected last month as IPU president for a three-year term, said, "Kuwait has always been closer to African causes than the other Middle Eastern countries." Gurirab said he will attend the Finance for Development Conference in Doha, Qatar, scheduled for November 29 to December 2, then proceed to Kuwait where he will also pay a courtesy call on H.H. the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Ban Ki-Moon will be in Kuwait to open UN-House: FM

UN secretary general Ban Ki-Moon will be visiting Kuwait shortly at a time when the country will be marking the national day to open a UN-House in the suburb of Mishrif, said foreign minister Sheikh Muhammad al-Sabah on Thursday.

Addressing a ceremony today for the opening of the regional bureau of the UN-Habitat in Kuwait, he said the event highlighted the expansion of this international endeavor since its inception in 1978 and noted that its functions would cover Kuwait and the rest of the GCC states.

Inter-Palestinian dialogue must continue: Kuwaiti official

Inter-Palestinian dialogue must continue in order to tackle existing challenges and secure future entitlements for the Palestinian people, said Director of Kuwait Foreign Ministry's Arab World Department Ambassador Jassem Al-Mubaraki.

Speaking to KUNA following the conclusion of the emergency meeting of Arab foreign ministers here Wednesday night, he called for calm among the Palestinian factions so as not to give Israel any excuse to wage attacks against the people. He also called for directing all Palestinian effort toward ending Israeli occupation and reinstating the legal rights of the people, as well as establishing an independent Palestinian state.

Nuclear Iran could trigger more troubles in M.E.: UN official

Visiting UN Undersecretary Terje Roed-Larsen on Saturday hailed the world unity shown in liberating the State of Kuwait following the invasion of the defunct Iraqi regime.

Larsen, who is also chairman of the International Peace Academy, was delivering a lecture at the Kuwait Diplomatic Institute (KDI) on ongoing conflicts in the Middle East region.He said that although the international community had united to liberate Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, it was now unable to resolve many other issues, including those bearing on Africa.

Economic Desk

The current political deadlock puts at risk a series of economic measures taken by the government to deal more effectively with the global financial crisis creeping into this country, the seventh-largest oil exporter globally, including a plan to establish a markets regulating body.

In recent months, Kuwait's stock market has been tumbling as oil prices have plunged amid the financial contagion sparked by the US mortgage crisis. The Kuwaiti bourse, the second largest in the Arab world, has been shut down for few days by a court order after small investors complained about their continuous losses. The government decided to pump cash into it to weather the crisis.

Mustafa Behbehani, a director of the Gulf Consulting Company, said: "Uncertainty is the worst thing. Markets don't know whether economic reforms will be executed or not...We need to focus on key bills not minor issues.

OMAN

Social Desk

Majlis Addawla to implement Sultan Qaboos directives

Dr Yahya bin Mahfoudh al Mantheri, Chairman of the Majlis Addawla, has affirmed that it is the council's honour to implement His Majesty Sultan Qaboos's and follow up the guidelines stated in the Royal speech before the Council of Oman this year.

Addressing the opening of the 1st regular session of the 2nd annual sitting of the Majlis's 4th term, Al Mantheri said that the session marks the 38th National Day celebrations. Al Mantheri pointed out that, in addition to asserting the Sultanate's firm principles of foreign policy, His Majesty has underlined a number of important issues on the local arena.

Oman gives women equal rights to own land

New Amendments to Oman’s Land Law give women equal rights as men to own residential plots, according to Housing Minister Shaikh Saif bin Mohammed Al Shabibi.

IR Desk

Saudi minister receives Omani Haj official

Dr Fuad bin Abdul Salaam al Farsi, Saudi Haj Minister, received yesterday Shaikh Issa bin Yusuf al Busaidy, head of the Omani Haj mission. They discussed Haj matters. In a statement, Shaikh Issa said the meeting came in the context of ongoing co-ordination with Saudi counterparts to secure accommodation and transport requirements for the pilgrims.

QATAR

Social Desk

Qatar University team begins research on bird flu

A team from Qatar University has commenced studies on bird flu to help international efforts aimed at curbing the outbreak of the disease.

Treat honor killing as homicide: Jurist

Honour killing should be considered as any other homicidal activity, according to an expert. A prominent public figure from Pakistan slammed ‘honour killing’ practised in some parts of the world.

Qatar art museum aims to show Islam's true values

The new Museum of Islamic Arts in the Qatari capital aims to show that Islam is a religion of "tolerance" and not "terrorism", guests were told at the opening ceremony on Saturday.

Built on an artificial island 60 metres (yards) from the Doha Corniche, the museum houses 800 artistic and historical treasures from three continents, illustrating Islamic culture from the seventh to the 19th centuries.

Qatar education council planning to start community colleges

The Supreme Education Council is to launch Qatar's first community college taking the Education for a New Era reform initiative to new heights.

"The objective is to provide opportunities for high school graduates who do not get enough grades to enrol in a university," Steering Committee chairperson Prof Ibrahim Saleh al-Naimi said in an interview.

IR Desk

Qatar has retained its character, says ex-envoy

Despite the remarkable changes that have taken place in Qatar over the past thirty years, ex-British Ambassador Stephen Day believes that the country has managed to maintain the character and tradition that make it such a "peculiarly interesting" state.

Day who was British Ambassador in Qatar from 1981-1984, has returned to Qatar for the opening of the new Museum of Islamic Art. He told Gulf Times that he is often asked about the transformation of the country, and believes that it hasn't changed beyond recognition at all: "Qatar has managed to combine that extraordinary stability of society and tradition with astonishing innovation in finance and technology."

Kuwait interior minister denies rumors

Interior Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Khaled Al-Sabah denied rumors that Qatar had offered to send its special forces to suppress anti-leadership protests in case the Parliament was unconstitutionally dissolved, reported Al-Rai. "I've never heard about such an offer.

Thank God, we are working transparently in 'daylight.' Kuwaitis are completely capable of solving their own problems without seeking assistance from abroad," he said.

Jordanian King, Qatari Amir hold summit talks

Jordanian King Abdullah II and Qatari Amir Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani held summit talks here Monday evening on bilateral ties and regional and international issues of common concern.

Following the talks the two leaders signed a protocol appended to the bilateral agreement regulating the Jordanian expatiate workers in Qatar, Qatar News Agency (QNA) reported.

US lauds Qatar's role in Darfur

The US has lauded Qatar's initiative to help broker peace in Darfur and bring the sufferings of its people to an end. "We are impressed with how Qatar has dealt with the issue," Richard Williamson, the US Special Envoy to Sudan, said here yesterday.

Braille version of UN rights declaration unveiled in Doha

A Braille version of the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights was released in Doha yesterday. Al-Nour Institute for Blind director Hayat Nathar said the Braille copy was the result of a co-operation between the institute and the National Human Rights Committee (NHRC).

Sudan praises Qatar's peace efforts to tackle Darfur conflict

Sudanese parliament speaker Ahmad Al-Taher praised Tuesday efforts of the Qatari leadership to achieving peace and stability in Sudan in general and tackling the conflict in Darfur in specific.

Al-Taher, in a meeting with visiting speaker of the Qatari Shura Council Sheikh Mohammad bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa, said bilateral relations with Qatar were progressing.

French President to meet Sudanese leader during Qatars visit

French President Nicolas Sarkozy will hold talks next Saturday with his Sudanese counterpart Omar Al-Bashir during his visit to Qatar, talks that would also be attended by the Amir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad Al-Thani.

The French President is going to Qatar on a one-day visit and is meeting Al-Bashir within the framework of the Qatari initiative to seek a solution to the conflict in Darfur.

Cooperation between Qatar and Egypt in health sector discussed

Qatar and Egypt are looking at possibilities of having co-operation agreements and expertise exchange in health sector. Dr Hatim Al Gabali, the Egyptian Minister of Health and Population met HE Dr Sheikha Ghalia bint Mohammed bin Hamad Al Thani, the Minister of Public Health at her office yesterday and discussed matters of increasing bilateral relations in health care.

SAUDI ARAB

Piracy Desk

Saudi minister opposes negotiations with pirates

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal said Friday he was opposed to any negotiations with pirates, reiterating his assertion that sea piracy was "like terrorism."

Somali pirates who captured the Sirius Star supertanker and its 100 million dollar load of oil last Saturday off the coast of Kenya have given the Saudi owners of the vessel 10 days to pay a 25 million dollar ransom.

We'll fight back, Somali pirates warn

Somali pirates holding a huge oil-laden Saudi tanker on Saturday vowed to fight back should any assault be attempted to free the ship and urged its owners to pay a 25 million dollars ransom.

As world powers rushed naval forces to Somalia's dangerous waters amid growing concerns of major disruptions to international trade, the pirates consolidated their land base with more men and weapons.

Pirates will infest Gulf if US quits Iraq too soon: minister

Iraq's defence minister warned on Saturday that the Gulf would be infested by pirates and Iraq left at risk of attack by its neighbours if US forces leave the country too soon.

"Coalition forces are currently protecting the Gulf, and our navy will not receive its first ships until April 2009," Abdel Qader Jassem Mohammed al-Obeidi told a press conference in Baghdad.

Saudi supertanker moved to unknown destination: Somalia govt

The hijacked Saudi supertanker Sirius Star has been moved from the port of Haradheere to an unknown destination, an official of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia said Sunday, citing information from tribal leaders and mediators negotiating with the pirates.

However, the claim could not be verified from port authorities at Haradheere where the Sirius Star was sighted after it was hijacked last weekend.

No lowering of ransom: Pirates

The leader of Somali pirates holding a huge Saudi oil tanker denied on Monday that the hijackers had lowered their ransom demand, insisting they still wanted $ 25 million for the ship's release.

"We have not changed the amount of the ransom, it remains at exactly $ 25 million. If we want to change it, it will have to be agreed unanimously with all the people involved," Mohamed Said said.

Pirates move supertanker farther from coast

Pirates have moved Saudi Aramco supertanker, the Sirius Star, loaded with crude oil farther out to sea after Somali Islamist fighters vowed to fight the bandits because they seized a Muslim-owned vessel, witnesses said yesterday.Somali pirates seized the Sirius Star on Nov. 15 in their most audacious hijacking to date off the coast of this lawless country. The vessel is carrying two million barrels of crude oil worth about $ 100 million.

Social Desk

Saudi cabinet discusses economy, piracy

The Council of Ministers on Monday discussed the global economy, piracy, the Haj pilgrimage, Saudi-US relations and tax concessions for investors in various parts of the Kingdom.
The Cabinet session here on Monday, chaired by King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, addressed the stability of the national economy during the global financial crisis and praised the Kingdom’s role at the G20 summit, its balanced oil policy and its management of financial resources. In a statement to the Saudi Press Agency, Iyad Ameen Madani, Minister of Culture and Information, noted the role of the private sector and the media in providing information on the state of the market. The minister went on to reassure the public that measures were being taken to protect their savings and investments.

Saudi health ministry beefs up preventive care program

A health center will be opened at King Abdulaziz International Airport (KAIA) in Jeddah to provide health services to incoming and outgoing pilgrims, said Khaled bin Obaid Zafar, director general of Health Affairs in Makkah province.

Zafar told Arab News that Makkah Gov. Prince Khaled Al-Faisal would inaugurate the center, which would be manned by doctors around the clock. He added that the center would give vaccinations to incoming pilgrims who were not immunized in their home countries.

Saudi health ministry has enough bloodstock

The ministry of health has enough stock of blood in its banks to meet the needs of nearly five million pilgrims, according to Ibrahim Al Omar, director general of the Blood Bank and Laboratories at the ministry.

Saudi forum suggests measures to protect divorced women

More than 100 women, officials and legal experts discussed women's and children's rights in divorce in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday at a Dammam forum and issued more than 70 legal, social and cultural recommendations.

The conference at the Asharqia Chamber for Business Women in Dammam to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women was held under the patronage of Princess Jawahir bint Naif. Its goal was to examine the legal, institutional, societal, familial and emotional difficulties of divorce for women.

IR Desk

Egypt supports Saudi presence in G20 – minister

Egyptian Finance Minister Youssef Boutros-Ghali sought to quell a spat with Saudi Arabia on Wednesday, saying that the kingdom was a voice for the region in meetings of the Group of 20.

Last week Boutros-Ghali, asked whether he was satisfied with Saudi Arabia's presence at the G20 meetings, told a CNN program: "I think representation should be through a country that understands the various issues being faced by a specific group of nations. He went on to say it would be preferable to be represented by "a state that shares the same issues as yours and that shares the ... challenges you are faced with". Boutros-Ghali's comments prompted a Saudi rebuke on Tuesday, with Saudi Finance Minister Ibrahim al-Assaf telling Reuters: "If there's a country that understands better than anyone the issue of developing nations, it's Saudi Arabia."

Saudi plans to build mosque, Islamic Centre in Moscow

Saudi Arabia wants to build a mosque and an Islamic Culture Centre in Moscow, the Saudi Ambassador to Russia Ali Hasan Jafar, told Ravil Gainutdin, Russia's top Muslim official, on Thursday.

Ravil Gainutdin, who heads Russia's Council of Muftis, told the Saudi envoy that such a project would strengthen ties between the two countries, according to information made available on Friday.

Saudi denies offering asylum to Taliban leader

The Saudi government on Saturday denied reports that it has offered political asylum to Afghanistan's fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar.

A foreign ministry spokesman "denies totally the report ... according to which Saudi Arabia has offered political asylum to the Taliban leader," the state news agency SPA reported.

Abdullah meets with Blair in Jeddah

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah held talks here yesterday with Tony Blair, former British prime minister and special envoy of the Quartet to the Middle East.

"King Abdullah and Blair discussed the latest developments in the Palestinian issue and the stalled Middle East peace process," the Saudi Press Agency said.

Arab FMs to hold extraordinary meeting Nov. 26

The League of Arab States at the level of foreign ministers holds next Wednesday an extraordinary meeting at its Cairo headquarters to be chaired by Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal.

Saudi Arabia is the current Chairman of the League Council.The meeting will make a comprehensive assessment of the peace process in the Middle East and discuss ways to prepare a clear Arab position which will be reviewed with the new U.S. administration.

Saudi minister receives Omani Haj official

Dr Fuad bin Abdul Salaam al Farsi, Saudi Haj Minister, received yesterday Shaikh Issa bin Yusuf al Busaidy, head of the Omani Haj mission. They discussed Haj matters. In a statement, Shaikh Issa said the meeting came in the context of ongoing co-ordination with Saudi counterparts to secure accommodation and transport requirements for the pilgrims.

New Zealand decries 'inaccurate' reporting about Saudi's death

The New Zealand Embassy in Riyadh yesterday decried the inaccurate reporting by Saudi media of the death of a Saudi citizen in Hamilton last month.

In a press statement yesterday, the embassy asked the media to direct any question about the case to the New Zealand police and said the cause of the Saudi's death has not yet been officially determined. "The statement addresses the inaccuracies in the reporting of the tragic death of Fahd Ibrahim Alsalamah following an accident involving a police car chase in Hamilton on Oct. 18, 2008," the embassy said.

Shun extremism, Prince Naif tells students

Interior Minister Prince Naif has called for efforts to eradicate extremism and propagate the moderate teachings of Islam that promotes tolerance. He criticized those who give precedence to factional interests over the interests of the entire Ummah.

Addressing staff and students at Islamic University in Madinah, Prince Naif said Muslims, who are blessed with the eternal divine message, have a duty to establish peace, justice and stability on earth. He urged all Saudi universities to play a significant role in fighting terrorism.

Terrorism Desk

Saudi cabinet panel studying law to combat terror

The Experts Committee in the Council of Ministers is currently studying a draft law to punish those involved in terrorism and other criminal activities that undermine the country's security.

An informed source said other government agencies have already completed studies of the law entitled "Punishment for terrorist acts, state-security crimes and organized crimes." The source said the law would be approved soon. The discussion on the draft law comes at a time when a security court in Riyadh is looking into the files of 991 suspects who were involved in terrorist operations across the Kingdom since May 2003.

UAE

Social Desk

UAE education minister opens "My Family Reads Project" in Ajman

H.E. Dr. Hanif Hassan, UAE Minister of Education inaugurated the "My Family Reads Project" that is launched by the Ministry to the primary stage students for the purpose of encouraging them to read and gain more knowledge.

Dr Hanif read parts of the collection books to Sheikha Bint Saeed Primary School for Girls in Ajman that includes 481 students and 41 administration staff in the attendance of Obaid Al Matroushi, Director of Ajman Education Zone, Sheikha Khulood Al Qassimi, Director of Curriculum Department in the Ministry of Education, Muneera Abdulla, Principal of the School, and a number of officials, teachers and family students.

Judge hails support of Fatima on women issues

A UAE national woman judge has lauded the efforts of Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak, chairwoman of the Women General Union and chairperson of the Family Development Foundation, on women issues. Sua'd Khaloud Al Dhahiri, a judge at the Department of Judiciary in Abu Dhabi, said: the "UAE community welcomes participation of women in the judicial work. This community is at the highest degree of awareness over significance of participation of all categories in the comprehensive developmental processes."

'UAE adopts unified national strategy to provide education for all'

UAE Education Minister Dr Hanif Hassan has commended the UAE's policy of unified national strategy to provide education for all.

"The UAE cares much for the education due to its positive impact on citizens, as education is generally basic human right", he added.

The remarks were made at the 48th sessions of International Conference for Education held by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in Geneva. Titled:

"Education for All...Way to Future", the conference aims at encouraging dialogue on the educational policies and practices to reach consensus on the latest concept of education for all.

Regional and Domestic Desk

Instability in Arab World hampering development, says Shaikh Khalifa

The President His Highness Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, has spelt out the various challenges and concerns that confront the UAE as it continues to progress dramatically in line with the dynamic vision of its leaders.

Shaikh Khalifa, in an interview with the leading Egyptian newspaper Al Ahram, also outlined his views on several key issues and initiatives - from finding a just solution to the Palestinian problem to ensuring the full recovery of Iraq; from questions related to the Iranian nuclear programme and regional stability to the GCC defence strategy.

He also commented on the need to resolve the demographic imbalance in the UAE and the current global financial crisis.

Human Trafficking Desk

UAE Police exposes int'l human trafficking gang

Asian nationals Chaudrey M.A and Iftikhar A.A, added Al Sakkaf, were reported to the police by secret sources to have coordinated with some European accomplices to identify Asian persons willing to illegally travel to and reside in Europe.

"On September 22nd, 2 passengers aboard a flight operated by a European airline planned to change seats with 2 other passengers after landing in Abu Dhabi Airport", he said.

Foreign Labor

Sudan praises UAE's role in Arab expatriates welfare

UAE's leadership has been playing central role in the welfare of Arab expatriates, said Dr Karrar Al Tuhami, Secretary General of the Authority for Regulation of Non-Resident Sudanese Affairs.

In a celebration held in Khartoum to mark the 'Arab Expatriate Day', which was attended by UAE Ambassador to Sudan Isa Al Basha Al Nuaimi and other officials, Al Tuhami said during the International Migration Forum, held recently in Manila, the UAE delegation made a great effort to highlight the importance given by the country's leadership to the Arab expatriate as one of the pillars of development in the Arab world.

Pilot scheme another step aimed at protecting foreign workers in UAE

The Ministry of Labour will implement a pilot project next year to streamline the import of workers from India and the Philippines, according to a senior official at the ministry.

Yousef Jaafar, legal adviser at the ministry, told Khaleej Times on Saturday that an agreement was reached between the Minister of Labour, Saqr Ghobash Saeed Ghobash, and his counterparts in India and the Philippines during a meeting held in Manila earlier this month.The project is part of the ministry’s efforts to protect the rights of workers by monitoring the manpower agencies and to ensure a safer work environment in the country.

Nuclear Energy Desk

Power to meet 15 pc of UAE energy needs

Nuclear energy is projected to be one of the main sources of energy in the UAE in the coming years as the entire world searches for alternative, sustainable and environmentally friendly sources of energy.

A strategic and economically viable option for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, nuclear energy is expected to provide 15 per cent of the UAE’s energy needs by 2020, according to Dr Mohammed Anwar Gargash, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs.

Speaking at the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research's (ECSSR) 14th annual energy conference in the capital on Monday, Dr Gargash said the country would need 40 megawatts of electricity to meet its local needs by the year 2020, 25 of which would be met by hydrocarbon sources and other alternative means. "The UAE's peaceful nuclear energy programme aims to meet the remaining 15 per cent of energy needs; the country has been very clear about its programme from the beginning and it will continue to stress its peaceful and transparent nature," he said. Nuclear energy was becoming increasingly essential in the region, as the UAE and GCC regional electricity demand was growing by seven per cent per year, which was already one of the world's highest, according to Dr Adnana Shihab-Eldin, former Acting Secretary-General of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

Beyond this, the GCC countries were very high per-capita emitters of CO2, and ranked within the highest 20 per-capita emitters worldwide. The UAE nuclear programme, which would serve as a model for other GCC nations, would be implemented through agreements signed with France and the United Kingdom, two of the most advanced countries in nuclear energy generation.

IR Desk

Zardari's UAE visit will focus on development, investment

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari begins his two-day official visit to the UAE today.

The visit will focus on economic development, attracting investment from the UAE into Pakistan, and supplying manpower from his country to the UAE. This was disclosed by Khursheed Ahmed Junejo, Pakistanís Ambassador to the UAE, while talking to Khaleej Times

Sunday. “Zardari’s visit will further strengthen the already strong relations between the two countries,” he said.

Khalifa, Zardari hold talks

President His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Pakistani President, Asif Ali Zardari held talks today at Al Mushrif Palace in Abu Dhabi.

Sheikh Khalifa welcomed the visiting Pakistani President and his accompanying delegation, and expressed the hope that his visit will contribute in furthering relations between the two countries. The two leaders discussed bilateral ties and ways to enhance them in all field in a way that will open new avenues for mutual cooperation and possible creation of partnership in the different sectors.

Arab-German dialogue opens today

The Arab-German Cultural Dialogue Forum (AGCDF) will open in Dubai today.

More than 200 intellectuals and literary personalities from Germany and across the Arab world will take part in the event organized by Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation. The participants will explore ways to revive cultural exchange and broaden the understanding of contemporary social trends.

UAE-Egypt ties key for joint Arab action: Khalifa

The President, His Highness Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan on Tuesday stressed that relations between the UAE and Egypt are strategic in all their dimensions and further contribute to stronger intra-Arab relations and joint Arab action.

Shaikh Khalifa noted that the late Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, based on his recognition of Egypt’s political, economic, military and cultural weight in the pan-Arab national security

system, was always keen on materialising these relations into joint projects and work programmes.

Abdullah Bin Zayed meets Lebanese President

Lebanese President Michel Sleiman received here today, the UAE Foreign Minister HH Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

Sheikh Abdullah conveyed to the Lebanese Head of State, greetings from President His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

During the meeting, they discussed bilateral relations between the two fraternal countries, and reviewed a number of issues of mutual concern including the Arab Foreign Ministers conference which concluded on Wednesday in Cairo. The regional issues, the Lebanon's current situation as well as the global economic scenario also featured the talks.

YEMEN

Social Desk

Treat honour killing as homicide: Jurist

Honour killing should be considered as any other homicidal activity, according to an expert. A prominent public figure from Pakistan slammed ‘honour killing’ practised in some parts of the world.

More than 5,000 women and girls are killed every year by family members in so-called ‘honour killings’, according to the United Nations Population Fund. These crimes occur where cultures believe that a woman’s unsanctioned sexual behaviour brings shame on the family. Hence any female accused or suspected must be murdered. Reasons for these murders can be as trivial as talking to a man, or as suffering rape.

Yemenis seek return of loved ones missing in war

Several hundred Yemenis on Saturday demanded the government release relatives detained during its four-year war with rebels in the country's north.

More than 200 people - some with tears in their eyes and holding pictures of missing fathers, husbands and sons - demonstrated outside Yemen's parliament, in a scene that has become familiar after repeated sit-ins. Protesters included human rights activists and relatives of people swept up by government forces - presumably because of suspected rebel links - but never brought to trial or heard from since. The government of Yemen, a poor tribal country at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula and a declared U.S. supporter in fighting terrorism, struggled to put down an insurgency by followers of rebel leader Abdel-Malek al-Hawthi who rose up in 2004 in the north. The rebels accuse the government of corruption and of being too closely allied with the West. Thousands were killed before President Ali Abdullah Saleh declared an end to the fighting in July and ordered some prisoners released.

Somali pirates hijack Yemeni cargo ship

Somali pirates have hijacked a Yemeni cargo ship in the Gulf of Aden, a maritime official told AFP Tuesday.

Andrew Mwangura, head of the East African Seafarers Assistance Programme, identified the vessel as the MV Amani but provided no further details. Another maritime official speaking on condition of anonymity said the ship had been seized last week. World powers have vowed tough action against rampant piracy off Somalia's coastline, which has disrupted commercial traffic in the Gulf of Aden, a major world maritime trade route.

Yemen parliament postpones local elections

Yemen's parliament postponed local elections, which were due in spring 2009, for another four years, Yemen's official news agency SABA said on Monday. The vote followed a government request to amend an existing law to extend the councils' tenure. The decision sparked angry protests from opposition MPs, who walked out of the session and called on voters to boycott the elections.

Yemen police clash with protesters at election boycott rally

Seven people, including two policemen, were injured in clashes on Thursday between security forces and pro-opposition supporters protesting parliamentary polls next year, police and the opposition said.

Police fired warning shots and beat up protesters, injuring five demonstrators and arresting 18, sources from the opposition told AFP.

Terrorism Desk

Bin Laden's former driver to leave Guantanamo for Yemen: report

Salim Hamdan, Osama bin Laden's former driver currently being held at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, will be transferred to Yemen, CNN reported, citing unnamed US sources.

A jury of six US military officers at a Guantanamo terrorism trial in August sentenced Hamdan to five years and six months in prison for supporting terrorism -- which taking into account time served, amounted to only an additional five months. The Pentagon refused to confirm the report. "In general we don't talk about transfers until they are completed," Pentagon spokesman Mark Ballesteros told AFP.

Alleged Qaeda members go on trial in Yemen

Eight alleged members of Al-Qaeda cells have been brought before a special terrorism court in Sanaa accused of plotting to attack tourists and government facilities, a judicial source said on Tuesday. Four suspected members of one cell made their first appearance before the court on Monday while the trial of the second group, also comprising four members, began on Tuesday, the source said. Members of the first cell are accused of "forming an armed group with the intention of attacking tourists and hotels as well as government installations," the charge sheet stated.

- Indonesia

Social Front

- Indonesia sends more troops to Lebanon
- Timor troops coming home

US Corner

- Obama's Indonesia Test

Strategic Front

- Indonesia: Foreign buyers eye country's weaponry

Economic Front
Social Front

- ANTI-PORN BILL COULD THREATEN INDONESIAN WOMEN(POLITICAL)

- Indonesia condemns attacks in India
- Indonesia's top Islamic body says it will consider banning Muslims from practicing yoga.

Environmental Front

- Malaysia

Political front:

- Tough for Filipino militants to slip into Sabah, say police
- Old and new' formula for Malacca MCA to regain seats
- Ka Chuan still a Cabinet minister, says Abdullah
- Council has taken right stand

- Malaysia to pull out peacekeeping mission in Philippines(social)

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- Malaysia to continue negotiations on FTA with US

Economic Front

- Kuwait firm wins Malaysia Islamic bank licence
- Palm oil farmers hit by global financial crisis.
- Malaysia's Iskandar project shifts a gear

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Environmental Front

- Thailand

Political front:

- What's in store for Thailand affected by political turmoil
- Thousands of anti-government protesters rallied in central Bangkok
- Thai PM authorizes police to clear protesters from Bangkok airports
- Thai authorities warned of flight chaos for thousands of passengers
- Thai protesters shut main airport in Bangkok

Anti-government protesters stormed Bangkok's main international airport and gunfire broke out on the streets of the Thai capital overnight as a campaign to oust Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat turned violent.

- Protesters swarm Bangkok airport as violence escalates

US Corner

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Social Front

- Three small blasts in Bangkok
- Thai racing disaster kills nine

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- Philippine

Political front:

- Mangroves stripped of bark for southern Philippines
- Philippine leader's plane makes emergency landing
- Religious leaders want peace talks to resume

- Malaysia To Suspend Mission In Southern Philippines -Minister
- Malaysia to suspend mission in southern Philippines
- Impeachment Bid against Philippine Leader Likely To Fail
- Penalties for disrespecting the Filipino flag

Presence of US troops In Philippine

US Corner

Economic Front

- Economic growth slows down in third quarter

Social Front

- Catholic Church Expects Defeat Of Philippines Family Planning Bill, Drafts Alternate Measure
- US Ambassador announces $2.5-M aid to families displaced by armed conflict in Mindanao
- Manila mounts rescue effort in flood-hit areas
- Two killed, thousands displaced in Philippine flooding: officials
- Human rights abuses continuing in Philippines: rights group

Environmental Front

- Singapore

Political front:

- Singapore, Sweden sign MOU on regulation of health

products(political,social)

- Singapore, China signs MOU on aviation security cooperation(pol,geo.)

US Corner

Economic Front

- PM Lee says downturn will be protracted, but no reason to panic

Social Front

- Six new biscuit products contaminated with melamine
- PM Lee says protectionist measures will only worsen global slowdown
- Mega projects expected to continue, but at slower pace

- APEC leaders say credit crisis can be overcome by mid-2010
- PM Lee assures S'poreans they are not alone in coping with downturn
- Singapore ready to assist India in resolving hostage crisis

Environmental Front

- Vietnam

Political front:

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Economic Front

- Vietnam-Malaysia rice deal to gauze price trend
- Recession and 'strategic' realities in East
- US Finds Lack Of Evidence To Open A Dumping Probe Of Vietnam
- China, Philippines, Malaysia, & Vietnam: Cruise deal
- Vietnam, India expand scope of strategic partnership
- India can help Vietnam in infrastructure"
- India firm on signing FTA with ASEAN
- Myanmar PM wants to strengthen links with Vietnam.
- -Vietnam annual inflation drops to 24 pct in Nov
- Investors uneasy in volatile Vietnam

Social Front

Environmental Front

- Laos

Political front:

- Laos, Cambodia to boost investment cooperation
- Vietnam provides help to support judicial sector of Laos
- Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia further co-operation on development triangle

US Corner

Economic Front

- ADB grants 1.3 mln USD to road upgrade study in Vietnam, Laos
- Laos' economy to remain stable growth for next few years
- Electricity law needs to be amended to comply with economic growth
- Economic growth to remain stable in next few years

Social Front

- ADB Eyes Road Improvement Projects in Lao PDR, Vietnam Provinces

Environmental Front

- Laos and Sweden better environment manage

- Cambodia

Political front:

- Under-developed countries meet in Cambodia
- Increases to military budget worry NGOs, political opposition
- Thai political turmoil seen as stalling border row talks
- Thai claims of land mine use on border ignored: Cambodia
- Cambodia not to raise Preah Vihear issue at ASEAN Summit
- Cambodian army appoints first female general

US Corner

Economic Front

- First American-owned bank opens doors in Phnom Penh
- Cambodia braces for land mine complaints

Summary

As we all know that regions are always made/differentiated on basics of the characteristics and geography of Countries present in a certain area. This region of south East Asia is also a region having countries with similarity in many things. This week there was also a continuity of many situations in the whole region.

At political front Thailand is again facing a political crisis, because PAD is again in action blaming PM for implementations of policies of previous PM. There are a lot of disturbance in this regard in the whole country. Protesters have seized the airport that is creating problem not only for passengers but also increase in deaths in conflict with police.PM has also declared state of emergency to overcome the situation. This political situation is also harming border talks with Cambodia and this worse political scenario and condition of insecurity is also harming economy.

While at social Front, people are facing many problems because level of deaths is increasing not only in conflicts but only in floods through out the country. Philippine is another country that is

facing a civil war like situation because of fighting between Muslim fighters and governmental troops. The people of Mindanao are facing acute problems of hunger and residence because of this war like situation that was started after the court decision. There are also reports of human rights violation in Mindanao by many human rights organizations.

At economic front countries of this region are also trying to overcome the shocks of financial crisis and taking many steps to come out of this situation. Vietnam in this regard is very active in attracting the investors not only from the region but also from all over the world. Malaysia is also showing a lot of activity in this regard because its palm oil production is also effected by financial crisis.

An important thing to quote is that India is taking much interest in doing trade with these countries especially with Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

The summary of news item is as follows:

Indonesia

Political Front

- **Indonesia sends more troops to Lebanon**

The Indonesian military will send 1,136 soldiers from its headquarters in Cilangkap, Jakarta, to join the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), according to local media. Indonesian military commander in chief General Djoko Santoso said the United Nations (UN) had entrusted Indonesia to help in the mission The first installment comprising around 270 people, is scheduled to depart on November 18.Indonesia already sent 105 military personnel to Lebanon last month.

- **Timor troops coming home**

A six&45;month stretch in East Timor has finished in time for Christmas for 104 New Zealand Defense Force personnel, who arrive home today at Christchurch International Airport.

US Corner

- **Obama's Indonesia Test**

With all eyes searching for clues to President-elect Barack Obama's foreign policy, here's an issue to watch: ties between the Pentagon and Indonesia's military. It sounds low-profile, but it's important to American security interests.

Strategic Front

- **Indonesia: Foreign buyers eye country's weaponry**

Foreign delegations attending the Indo Defense and Aerospace (IDA) Expo and Forum have declared interest in buying Indonesian-made weaponry as well as forging cooperation's with state strategic enterprises to produce arms.

Economic Front

Social Front

- **ANTI-PORN BILL COULD THREATEN INDONESIAN WOMEN(POLITICAL)**

Two weeks ago, Indonesia's parliament passed an "anti-porn" bill, which bans anyone from wearing clothes or promoting material that could incite "sexual desire".

- **Indonesia condemns attacks in India**

The Indonesian government Thursday condemned terrorist attacks in India's financial capital of Mumbai that killed over 100 people including foreigners.

- **Indonesia's top Islamic body says it will consider banning Muslims from practicing yoga.**

Cleric Ma'ruf Amin said Thursday the Ulema Council was trying to determine if the ancient Indian exercise could corrupt the faith of believers. If the answer is yes, a nonbinding edict prohibiting the practice could be passed next month.

Environmental Front

• Malaysia

Political front:

- **Tough for Filipino militants to slip into Sabah, say police**

The chances of militant groups in southern Philippines slipping into Sabah as a result of a military crackdown in Mindanao are slim, said Sabah Police Commissioner Deputy Comm Datuk Noor Rashid Ibrahim.

- **Old and new' formula for Malacca MCA to regain seats**

Young blood in the newly formed Malacca state MCA liaison committee coupled with experienced leadership will be MCA's formula to recapture its seats lost in the March 8 general election.

- **Ka Chuan still a Cabinet minister, says Abdullah**

Datuk Seri Ong Ka Chuan is still a serving Cabinet minister, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

- **Council has taken right stand**

IN Islam, faith or iman comes first. Thus, the National Fatwa Council has taken the right stand on banning the practice of yoga that contains chanting, mantra and "being one with God" as it is clearly forbidden and *haram* in Islam.

- **Malaysia to pull out peacekeeping mission in Philippines(social)**

Malaysia has said it is suspending its participation in international peacekeeping operation in the southern Philippines.

US Corner

- **Malaysia to continue negotiations on FTA with US**

Malaysia will continue negotiations on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States, local media reported. Although eight rounds of negotiations have been held on the FTA, an agreement when concluded, will lead to improved two-way trade between both countries, Malaysia's Bernama news agency quoted Deputy Minister of International Trade and Industry Jacob Dungau Sagan as saying on November 18.

Economic Front

- **Kuwait firm wins Malaysia Islamic bank licence**

Malaysia's central bank has awarded two foreign currency Islamic banking licences to companies in Kuwait and Indonesia.

- **Palm oil farmers hit by global financial crisis**

The global economic slowdown has sent palm oil prices crashing, spelling misery for many Indonesian and Malaysian farmers.

- **Malaysia's Iskandar project shifts a gear**

As the master plan for the Iskandar Financial District is submitted to the Malaysian government, developer Richard Polkinghorne talks about the status of the project.

Social Front

Environmental Front

• Thailand

Political front:

- **What's in store for Thailand affected by political turmoil**

Thousands of anti-government protesters rallied in central Bangkok yesterday, the start of what they call the “final battle” in a five-month street campaign to oust the administration. The crowd led by the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) planned to march to parliament early today, where police have erected barricades and stationed trucks with water cannons.

- **Thousands of anti-government protesters rallied in central Bangkok**

Thousands of anti-government protesters rallied in central Bangkok yesterday, the start of what they call the “final battle” in a five-month street campaign to oust the administration.

- **Thai PM authorizes police to clear protesters from Bangkok airports**

Thailand - Thailand's government prepared to crack down Thursday on protesters occupying the capital's two airports, but called on the public not to panic as rumours of a coup swept the city.

- **Thai authorities warned of flight chaos for thousands of passengers**

Thai authorities warned of flight chaos for thousands of passengers and damage to the tourism industry after anti-government protesters stormed the main terminal at Bangkok's international airport, closing it down.

- **Thai protesters shut main airport in Bangkok**

Anti-government protesters stormed Bangkok's main international airport and gunfire broke out on the streets of the Thai capital overnight as a campaign to oust Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat turned violent.

Authorities canceled all flights out of Suvarnabhumi Airport, hub for Thailand's lucrative tourist industry, stranding thousands of travellers. Meanwhile, Australians travelling to Thailand have been warned that terrorists may be planning attacks against tourists and other places frequented by foreigners.

- **Protesters swarm Bangkok airport as violence escalates**

Anti-government demonstrators swarmed Bangkok's international airport late today, halting departing flights, as opponents and supporters of Thailand's government fought in the streets of the city.

US Corner

Economic Front

Social Front

- **Three small blasts in Bangkok**

THREE small blasts went off near the offices of a key Thai anti-government protest leader early on Monday, police said, but no one was injured in the latest in a string of small-scale explosions in Bangkok.

- **Thai racing disaster kills nine**

An accident at a racetrack in the Thai capital Bangkok has left nine people dead and eight injured. The driver lost control of his racing car and hit a concrete barrier surrounding the track. The car then catapulted over the barrier and landed on the fans. The driver survived the crash. Police say it is Thailand's worst racing accident in years.

Environmental Front

• Philippine

Political front:

- **Mangroves stripped of bark for southern Philippines**

The mangrove swamps here are being raided for its bark to make liquor, soft drinks and shellac in the southern Philippines.

Police stumbled upon the activities of a group a few months ago when they caught eight people taking out two tonnes of mangrove bark on a barge that was headed towards the southern Philippines. Disclosing this yesterday,

- **Philippine leader's plane makes emergency landing**

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's plane made an emergency landing in Japan on Friday after her husband fell ill on board; officials said.Arroyo was on her way from Manila to attend the 21-nation Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Lima, Peru.

- **Religious leaders want peace talks to resume**

RELIGIOUS leaders have called on the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) for the immediate resumption of the stalled Mindanao peace talks. In a statement, the 75 members of the Bishops-Ulama Conference appealed to the both parties to pursue whatever possible means, the steps that would result in lasting peace for Mindanao.

- **Malaysia To Suspend Mission In Southern Philippines -Minister**

Malaysia said Thursday it will suspend a military monitoring mission in the southern Philippines at the end of this month following the collapse of a peace deal between Manila and Muslim rebels.

- **Malaysia to suspend mission in southern Philippines**

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- **Impeachment Bid against Philippine Leader Likely To Fail**

Opposition congressmen walked out of an impeachment hearing against Philippine President Gloria Arroyo on Tuesday after her allies moved as expected to kill the case, witnesses said. House of Representatives minority leader Ronaldo Zamora and his allies left the justice committee hearing as a group after pro-Arroyo lawmakers accused them of "falsification of public documents" in their impeachment complaint.

- **Penalties for disrespecting the Filipino flag**

I do believe that patriotism is what our country should learn today. The flag symbolizes our democracy. However, I had a friend, who is in the business of printing clothes and one of the line of products that they are producing is a shirt with the Philippine flag printed on it.

Presence of US troops In Philippine

US Corner

Economic Front

- **Economic growth slows down in third quarter**

The Philippines' economic growth slowed down in the third quarter of 2008, expanding by only 4.6% from 7.1% a year ago, the government said yesterday.

Social Front

- **Catholic Church Expects Defeat Of Philippines Family Planning Bill, Drafts Alternate Measure**

Officials with the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines said they expect to defeat a proposed reproductive health bill that would promote contraceptive use and sex education.

- **US Ambassador announces $2.5-M aid to families displaced by armed conflict in Mindanao**

During a visit today to a camp for internally displaced persons in Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao Province, US Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney announced that the U.S. Government is providing $2.5 million in assistance to individuals and families displaced by the tragic outbreak of violent conflict in Mindanao.

- **Manila mounts rescue effort in flood-hit areas**

The government has mobilized resources for some 22,000 flood-hit families in the northeastern province of Cagayan and Isabela.

- **Two killed, thousands displaced in Philippine flooding: officials**

Two people have died and more than 32,000 families have been displaced by flash floods in the northern Philippines, disaster relief officials said Sunday.

- **Human rights abuses continuing in Philippines: rights group**

Human rights abuses are continuing in the Philippines with 21 extrajudicial killings taking place in the third quarter of the year, a local rights monitor said Thursday.

Environmental Front

• Singapore

Political front:

- **Singapore, Sweden sign MOU on regulation of health**

products (political, social)

Singapore's Health Sciences Authority (HSA) and its Swedish regulatory counterpart, the Medical Products Agency (MPA), have signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the regulation of health products.

- **Singapore, China signs MOU on aviation security cooperation (pol,geo.)**

Singapore and China have inked an agreement on aviation security cooperation. The memorandum of understanding, signed in Singapore on Friday, formalizes bilateral cooperation in areas such as aviation security policy, procedures, technology, operations and training.

US Corner

Economic Front

- **PM Lee says downturn will be protracted, but no reason to panic**

SANTIAGO, Chile: Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said on Friday that the current downturn Singapore is facing is nothing quite like what the country has experienced before.

Social Front

- **Six new biscuit products contaminated with melamine**

Six more biscuit products have been found to be contaminated with melamine after the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority (AVA) completed its testing of all China milk products sold in Singapore.

- **PM Lee says protectionist measures will only worsen global slowdown**

Leaders from the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economies have pledged not to raise new barriers to trade and investment and refrain from imposing new export restrictions over the next 12 months.

- **Mega projects expected to continue, but at slower pace**

Mega projects in Singapore's energy and biomedical sector are seen to be on track. Despite the current slowdown, industry players say they expect the projects to continue, although some may proceed at a slow pace. Construction at Glaxo Smith Kline's (GSK) vaccine plant is well underway.

- **APEC leaders say credit crisis can be overcome by mid-2010**

Leaders from the 21-member nations of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are convinced they can overcome the global financial crisis in 18 months. That note of confidence came at the end of a two-day APEC Leaders' Meeting in Lima, Peru.

- **PM Lee assures S'poreans they are not alone in coping with downturn**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the country cannot simply stimulate demand during this time of crisis by raising government spending.

- **Singapore ready to assist India in resolving hostage crisis**

Singapore stands ready to assist India in any way to secure the safe release of a Singaporean and other hostages in Mumbai, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Environmental Front

• Vietnam

Political front:

US Corner

Economic Front

- **Vietnam-Malaysia rice deal to gauze price trend**

: A major rice deal this week is eliciting great interest in India. Vietnam's one lakh tonne rice export contract with Malaysia, for which the price is yet to be made public, is also being watched with great interest by the global rice trade fraternity.

- **Recession and 'strategic' realities in East**

East Asian states, which planned to prevent a future shock in their own backyards when the current financial crisis first hit other regions several weeks ago, are coming to terms with reality. It is now recognized across East Asia, home to a number of one-time economic tigers, that the gathering 'global crisis' may no longer be warded off in this region.

- **US Finds Lack Of Evidence To Open A Dumping Probe Of Vietnam**

The U.S. government said Friday it found insufficient evidence for a product dumping investigation of Vietnam. Commerce Department officials announced a final review of clothing import data turned up nothing.

- **China, Philippines, Malaysia, & Vietnam: Cruise deal**

Guests are this week being invited to discover the enchanting Far East with a cruise on the majestic Costa Allegra.

- **Vietnam, India expand scope of strategic partnership**

Indian President Pratibha Patil will make a State-level visit to Vietnam from Nov. 24-28 at the invitation of President Nguyen Minh Triet.

- **India can help Vietnam in infrastructure"**

President Pratibha Devisingh Patil on Tuesday identified infrastructure development as a key area in which Indian industry could assist Vietnam. In her keynote address to the Vietnam-India Business Forum here, she made particular mention of the Highway Development Programme in India and said this could "become a model for public-private partnership, which can be usefully replicated in many other developing countries,

- **India firm on signing FTA with ASEAN**

India is committed to the signing of the much-awaited ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in Chiang Mai, Thailand, next month, said a top trade official.

- **Myanmar PM wants to strengthen links with Vietnam**

Myanmar's Prime Minister Gen. Thei Sein reitereted the Myanmar government and people's desire to promote friendship, economic cooperation and trade with Vietnam.

- **-Vietnam annual inflation drops to 24 pct in Nov**

Vietnamese consumer prices fell in November fromOctober but were still 24.2 percent higher than a year ago, the 13th consecutive month of double-digit inflation, the government said on Tuesday. Annual inflation eased from 26.7 percent in October and 27.9 percent in September. November prices fell 0.76 percent from October, the second monthly drop after a fall of 0.2 percent in October, the General Statistics Office said in

- **Investors uneasy in volatile Vietnam**

As a wary group of international investors gathered this month in a hotel in Vietnam to listen to a pitch from a local fund manager, the public address system played the theme tune from the film *Mission: Impossible*.

Social Front

Environmental Front

• Laos

Political front:

- **Laos, Cambodia to boost investment cooperation**

(KPL) Laos and Cambodia have agreed to strengthen their friendship and increase bilateral cooperation between the two, particularly in investment relations in the near future.

- **Vietnam provides help to support judicial sector of Laos**

The Vietnamese government provided recently 18 set of computers, 5 printer machines and 18 USB worth about 102,296,000 kip to support the working of judicial sector of Laos

- **Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia further co-operation on development triangle**

Leaders of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia signed yesterday a Vientiane Declaration on strengthening the development triangle co-operation and approved the joint agreement of the fifth summit.

US Corner

Economic Front

- **ADB grants 1.3 mln USD to road upgrade study in Vietnam, Laos**

The Asian Development Bank has announced its grant of 1.3 million USD for the preparation of a project to upgrade national highways in Vietnam and Laos..

- **Laos' economy to remain stable growth for next few years**

Laos' economic growth is expected to remain stable over the next few years despite the global financial crisis, said Lao Deputy Minister of Planning and Investment Bounthavy Sisouphanthong.

- **Electricity law needs to be amended to comply with economic growth**

The draft law on electricity needs to be amended to support the market-oriented mechanism and the electricity expansion, said Acting Minister of Energy and Mining Somboun Rassombath.

- **Economic growth to remain stable in next few years**

Laos?s economic growth is expected to remain stable over the next few years despite the global financial crisis, said Lao Deputy Minister of Planning and Investment, Bounthavy Sisouphanthong.
The MPI official made this forecast on November 18 while undertaking the mid-term review of the sixth national socio-economic development plan for the period 2006 to 2010.

Social Front

- **ADB Eyes Road Improvement Projects in Lao PDR, Vietnam Provinces**

(KPL) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is funding a feasibility study for a road improvement project in two very poor provinces of Lao People?s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and Vietnam.

Environmental Front

- **Laos and Sweden better environment manage**

The Water Resource and Environment Administration held its annual review meeting on Strengthening Environment Management Project (Phase II) in 2007-2008 in Vientiane yesterday.

• Cambodia

Political front:

- **Under-developed countries meet in Cambodia**

Trade ministers and representatives from 49 least-developed countries (LDC) have gathered in Siem Reap, Cambodia, to discuss the impact of the current global financial crisis on their economies.

- **Increases to military budget worry NGOs, political opposition**

Sam Rainsy Party and NGOs say increases in public spending should go towards social programs and economic infrastructure

- **Thai political turmoil seen as stalling border row talks**

But as Bangkok erupts in civil unrest, Cambodia unlikely to take advantage of its neighbor's upheaval to press its point

- **Thai claims of land mine use on border ignored: Cambodia**

Thailand has accused the Kingdom of violating an international mine ban at a meeting on the Ottawa Convention, Cambodian delegates say

- **Cambodia not to raise Preah Vihear issue at ASEAN Summit**

Cambodia will not list its dispute with Thailand over the ownership of the 900-year-old Preah Vihear Temple on the agenda of the ASEAN Summit next month in Bangkok, according to sources from Phnom Penh.

- **Cambodian army appoints first female general**

Cambodia has appointed Mem Sam An, the current deputy prime minister as its first female army General, local media reported.

US Corner

Economic Front

- **First American-owned bank opens doors in Phnom Penh**

CAMBODIA'S first American-owned bank opened its doors Wednesday bringing the number of foreign-owned banks in Cambodia to 25.

- **Cambodia braces for land mine complaints**

Delegates at Geneva meeting to refute Thai claims that new mines laid CAMBODIAN officials say they are ready to counter Thai accusations that the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces has mined the border with Thailand amid an ongoing dispute over contested territory.

Detailed Monitoring Report

Indonesia

Social Front

- **Indonesia sends more troops to Lebanon**

The Indonesian military will send 1,136 soldiers from its headquarters in Cilangkap, Jakarta, to join the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), according to local media. Indonesian military commander in chief General Djoko Santoso said the United Nations (UN) had entrusted Indonesia to help in the mission."The UN and Lebanese have appreciated the role of the Indonesian military in Lebanon over the past year which is why the UN has requested we

send our soldiers again," Santoso was quoted by Antara news agency as saying.The personnel will leave Indonesia in four installments. The first installment comprising around 270 people, is scheduled to depart on November 18.Indonesia already sent 105 military personnel to Lebanon last month.

- **Timor troops coming home**

A six&45;month stretch in East Timor has finished in time for Christmas for 104 New Zealand Defence Force personnel, who arrive home today at Christchurch International Airport.

US Corner

- **Obama's Indonesia Test**

With all eyes searching for clues to President-elect Barack Obama's foreign policy, here's an issue to watch: ties between the Pentagon and Indonesia's military. It sounds low-profile, but it's important to American security interests.

At issue is liberal Democratic obstruction of military ties with Indonesia. Since the 1960s, the U.S. has worked with Indonesian officers in exchanges ranging from short courses at military colleges to joint training exercises. These programs help Indonesians gain technical expertise as well as learn key values, such as observing human rights and respecting civilian control. In return, the U.S. develops relationships with the officers who lead the military of the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy.

But these programs have fallen victim to liberal interests in Washington, which object to offering military assistance to countries with bad human rights records.

Indonesia's military has certainly had human rights problems. Washington's relationship with Jakarta was first scaled back in the 1990s amid atrocities in East Timor. But since the fall of President Suharto in 1998, the Indonesian military has made progress on the humanitarian front. President Bush recognized this when he normalized military relations in 2005. Australia and Britain also have resumed all military cooperation.

Indonesia is a key ally in the war on terror. Groups linked to al Qaeda such as Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf have targeted Indonesia and used its territory as a staging ground for attacks. Jemaah Islamiyah's October 2002 attack in Bali killed 202, including American tourists. Cutting off ties was shortsighted in the 1990s; after September 11, it's dangerous.

Undeterred, Democratic Senators Patrick Leahy (Vermont) and Russ Feingold (Wisconsin) sent a letter in April to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice "to express opposition" to U.S. training with Indonesian military units. As chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the State Department, Mr. Leahy has used his influence to stymie military cooperation, even threatening to cut off Indonesia-related spending.

Mr. Leahy's primary concern is Indonesia's elite special-forces unit, Kopassus, which his office says was at the forefront of human rights abuses in Timor and has since made little progress in humanitarian reform. Yet since 1998 Jakarta has removed many senior Kopassus leaders, and its current officers have passed vetting by the U.S. embassy in Jakarta.

In February, Defense Secretary Robert Gates visited Indonesia, pledging full military support. The State Department canceled joint military exercises with Kopassus two months later, under pressure from Senator Leahy. In retaliation, Jakarta has stopped cooperating in U.S. counter-narcotics efforts.

Mr. Obama has to decide whether to give in to this pressure and allow a critical U.S. alliance to falter. How his Administration handles this issue will say a lot about the tenor of his foreign policy.

Strategic Front

- **Indonesia: Foreign buyers eye country's weaponry**

Foreign delegations attending the Indo Defense and Aerospace (IDA) Expo and Forum have declared interest in buying Indonesian-made weaponry as well as forging cooperation's with state strategic enterprises to produce arms.

"I just met with Vice Defense Minister of Brunei Darussalam and he was considering buying Sea Rider speed boats," Secretary-General of the Defense Ministry Lt. Gen. Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin said on the sidelines of the IDA event in Jakarta on Thursday, quoted by the Jakarta Post on Friday. Sjamsoeddin said foreign companies like Daewoo of South Korea and Franco-German EADS had spoken of the possibility of production cooperation with ammunition and weapon maker PT Pindad.

Director General for defense facilities Rear Marshal Eris Heryanto said he had received a representative from Eurosatory - the French Biannual Defense Exhibition - who offered Indonesia a special pavilion to show off its strategic industry products in France in June 2010. Indonesian state-owned strategic enterprises, grouped under the acronym BUMNIS, have produced competitive defense products and continuously supplied the Indonesian Military (TNI) with quality armaments.

Aircraft maker PT Dirgantara Indonesia has produced light and medium aircraft for the TNI, including the NBO-105 helicopter and the CN-235 maritime patrol aircraft. Shipyard PT PAL produces patrol boats under a German license and is constructing the country's fourth landing platform dock vessel under South Korean supervision.
Separately, Defense Minister Juwono Sudarsono called on the enterprises to develop the country's defense industry, saying each company needed to develop marketing strategies in order to build up a foreign clientele.

Economic Front
Social Front

- **ANTI-PORN BILL COULD THREATEN INDONESIAN WOMEN(POLITICAL)**

Two weeks ago, Indonesia's parliament passed an "anti-porn" bill, which bans anyone from wearing clothes or promoting material that could incite "sexual desire".

Although regulations regarding pornography are important, there is some concern that there will be other implications, for instance for women's rights, even down to what is permissible to wear in public. In addition, the law also criminalizes homosexual activities which previously were not illegal in Indonesia. The head of the special committee that drafted the bill, Balkan Kaplale, insists that it will protect Indonesians' morality, and guard women and children against sexual exploitation.

In their works, many of them expressed criticism against sexual restrictions placed on women in Indonesia. If the anti-porn bill is ratified, the works of these women may be affected, since the new law could label their books pornographic.

A week after the bill was passed in parliament, a well-known actor, Butet Kartaredjasa, performed the work in Sidang Susila Teater Gandrik in Jakarta to protest the new law. They claim that the bill will limit freedom of expression in art, including film and literature, and that Islam has been inaccurately used by certain groups to justify the ratification of the bill. These groups have created blogs highlighting articles criticising the bill and organised demonstrations and press conferences.

Non-Muslim minority groups, especially in West Papua, Bali, East Nusa Tenggara and North Sumatra, have also fiercely opposed this law because they claim that their local customs and traditions will be threatened by it. In West Papua, for instance, men and women go bare-breasted.

In Bali, nude statues proliferate and the Balinese people are also worried that the new law will negatively affect their tourism industry, as many foreigners may no longer be able to wear bathing suits, sundresses or shorts at the beaches.

- **Indonesia condemns attacks in India**

The Indonesian government Thursday condemned terrorist attacks in India's financial capital of Mumbai that killed over 100 people including foreigners.

"We strongly condemn the attacks, a ruthless attack against the innocent and people who have no relations with the perpetrators," Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesman Teuku Faizasyah said. Indonesia hoped that the Indian government would be able to resolve the situation and arrest those responsible behind the attacks, he added. The spokesman also said all Indonesians residing in Mumbai, registered to be 130, were safely accounted for. Indonesia will not be issuing any

travel advisory warnings; Antara news agency quoted the spokesman as saying. Reports said that teams of gunmen Wednesday night stormed luxury hotels, a popular restaurant, a crowded train station and aJewish center in Mumbai, killing at least 101 people and holding Westerners hostage in coordinated attacks on India's commercial center.

- **Indonesia's top Islamic body says it will consider banning Muslims from practicing yoga.**

Cleric Ma'ruf Amin said Thursday the Ulema Council was trying to determine if the ancient Indian exercise could corrupt the faith of believers. If the answer is yes, a nonbinding edict prohibiting the practice could be passed next month.

The discussions follow a decision by the Islamic body in neighboring Malaysia to issue a ban -- though Muslims there have been told they can perform yoga as long as they refrain from chanting religious mantras.Amin said investigators will interview practitioners across Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, to see if restrictions need to be passed. They will also visit yoga clubs and gyms.

Environmental Front

• Malaysia

Political front:

- **Tough for Filipino militants to slip into Sabah, say police**

The chances of militant groups in southern Philippines slipping into Sabah as a result of a military crackdown in Mindanao are slim, said Sabah Police Commissioner Deputy Comm Datuk Noor Rashid Ibrahim.

Police analysis of the current situation indicated that the armed groups were too far from Sabah while their ethnicity also made it difficult for them to flee to other islands within the Philippines, he said.when asked about worries that militant groups like Abu Sayyaf and factions of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front fleeing into Sabah to escape the crackdown.

However, the police chief said that police are taking precautions by stepping up patrols along the long sea borders to ensure no militant or criminal elements slipping through.

DCP Noor Rashid told reporters after receiving five speedboats worth RM300,000 from Chief Minister Datuk Musa Aman.

DCP Noor Rashid said they identified seven areas where traffic movements from across the borders were high. The areas under watch included Pulau Sebatik, Sandakan, Tungku, Semporna and Sandakan.

- **Old and new' formula for Malacca MCA to regain seats**

Young blood in the newly formed Malacca state MCA liaison committee coupled with experienced leadership will be MCA's formula to recapture its seats lost in the March 8 general election.

Newly appointed state chairman Datuk Dr Wee Ka Siong said it was the objective of the party to win back the seats, especially the Kota Melaka parliamentary seat.

Kota Melaka was wrested from the DAP in 2004 after the opposition party held it for 35 years.In the last general election, besides Kota Melaka, the MCA lost the Ayer Keroh and Kesidang state seats to the DAP.

Dr Wee said Datuk Gan Tian Loo, 37, has been appointed his deputy while Datuk Seet Har Cheow, Datuk Koh Nai Kwong, Lai Meng Chong and Koh Chin Han have been appointed vice-chairmen..He said Gan and Wong represented new blood and signified the party's willingness to allow younger leaders to shoulder greater responsibilities.Bottom of Form

- **Ka Chuan still a Cabinet minister, says Abdullah**

Datuk Seri Ong Ka Chuan is still a serving Cabinet minister, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

Abdullah said he had not received any resignation letter from the Housing and Local Government Minister.It was earlier reported that Ka Chuan, who lost his bid for the party's deputy president's post, had written a letter to inform party president Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat of his decision to resign from his Cabinet post.

When asked if Tee Keat had mentioned anything about Ka Chuan's resignation during yesterday's Cabinet meeting, Abdullah said: "No, he did not. Today is meeting day and we did not talk about other issues."meanwhile in a statement issued earlier yesterday, Ka Chuan said he would leave any decision on his Cabinet post with the party president.

He said he would accept whatever decision made by the party and Government leadership as far as his Cabinet post was concerned.Following the MCA elections, he said he had had the opportunity to discuss the future developments of the party including his Cabinet position with Tee Keat.

Ka Chuan said he believed that when the time came, Tee Keat, with the advice and consultation of the Prime Minister, would make a decision on the various ministerial positions for the MCA in the Cabinet.

- **Council has taken right stand**

IN Islam, faith or iman comes first. Thus, the National Fatwa Council has taken the right stand on banning the practice of yoga that contains chanting, mantra and "being one with God" as it is clearly forbidden and *haram* in Islam.

One who practises yoga with those elements will jeopardise one's faith according to Islam. That is why the learned Islamic scholars or any learned Muslim would support the notion that any element of a practice that erodes a Muslim's faith is *haram.*

The misconceptions and criticisms on the fatwa are due to the fact that there is lack of awareness on Islamic teachings. In Islam, logic alone is not a guidance if it is not in conformity with the Quran and Sunnah.

This is due to the nature that human deeds contain good and bad decisions. That is why some people say Islamic authorities should focus on other social ills like drugs, rape and child sexual abuse as they cannot see the difference between major and minor sins.

Eroding one's faith and these social ills are both *haram* but priorities should be taken into consideration. Who says Muslims are not focusing on these other social ills? We have so many government departments, agencies, NGOs and Muslim individuals who are very concerned on these matters.

- **Malaysia to pull out peacekeeping mission in Philippines(social)**

Malaysia has said it is suspending its participation in international peacekeeping operation in the southern Philippines.

He also said that Malaysia is prepared to consider its future participation in the IMT if there is progress in the peace process and a formal request is made by both the peace panels of the Philippine government and anti-government forces the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

He stressed that Malaysia remains supportive of the peace process and hopes that the two sides opt for dialogue and negotiations in bringing about a peaceful solution in Mindanao.

US Corner

- **Malaysia to continue negotiations on FTA with US**

Malaysia will continue negotiations on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States, local media reported.

Although eight rounds of negotiations have been held on the FTA, an agreement when concluded, will lead to improved two-way trade between both countries, Malaysia's Bernama

news agency quoted Deputy Minister of International Trade and Industry Jacob Dungau Sagan as saying on November 18.

The Malaysian government would ensure that the FTA negotiations yield tangible benefits for Malaysia over the long term while contributing towards developing Malaysia's economic interests, he added.

According to the official, one of the benefits to be attained from the FTA agreement with the US is the access to a bigger market for Malaysian exports such as textiles, wood products, ceramics and rubber.

Economic Front

- **Kuwait firm wins Malaysia Islamic bank licence**

Malaysia's central bank has awarded two foreign currency Islamic banking licences to companies in Kuwait and Indonesia.

The bank is seeking to broaden the country's sharia finance success beyond its domestic market.Kuwait's Al-Aqeelah and Bank Muamalat Indonesia have been granted licences to do Islamic banking business in Malaysia with residents and non-residents in foreign currencies and limited ringgit transactions, central bank deputy governor Mohd Razif Abdul Kadir said.Malaysia is a key player in Islamic finance but some critics say its success has largely been domestic, where active Islamic debt issuance has made it the world's largest sharia bond market.

About $66 billion or 62.6 percent of global outstanding sharia bond issuance as at end-June was from Malaysia.The Southeast Asian country now hopes to replicate its success in Islamic bonds in the international sharia banking and insurance and fund and wealth management businesses.

Foreign currency Islamic banks are given a 10-year tax exemption up to year of assessment 2016 on income earned from foreign currency sharia banking business.

- **Palm oil farmers hit by global financial crisis**

The global economic slowdown has sent palm oil prices crashing, spelling misery for many Indonesian and Malaysian farmers.

Hundreds of thousands of farmers in Indonesia and Malaysia, which produce 85 percent of the world's palm oil, rely on the industry which has gone from boom to bust in just a few months.Palm oil prices have plummeted since March due to the financial crisis and the falling price of crude oil - which reduces demand from the biodiesel industry.The AFP newsagency quotes Malaysia's deputy commodities minister as saying today's prices are pushing many small stakeholders to the brink of bankruptcy.

- **Malaysia’s Iskandar project shifts a gear**

As the master plan for the Iskandar Financial District is submitted to the Malaysian government, developer Richard Polkinghorne talks about the status of the project.

On the southern tip of Malaysia, just across the Johor Strait from Singapore, is a land strip called Iskandar. Today home to the small city of Johor Bahru, Iskandar is slated to become the new heart of Malaysia.

At an initial cost of M$4.3 billion ($1.5 billion), the Iskandar project is currently the largest development project in Malaysia. The aim is to build a new manufacturing, economic and social hub for the country and Malaysia's leaders are deploying their competitive advantages to make it a success. At the centre of that plan is the Iskandar Financial District, which is slated to become an Islamic finance hub, as well as an offshore banking centre and a back office to Singapore.

What are the goals and objectives of the Iskandar Financial District?

The Malaysian government wants to build a better Malaysia, a better home for Malaysians with better job opportunities and more wealth creation; Iskandar is part of its plan to do that. We are involved as developers with long-term commercial objectives that we want to achieve through building a sustainable city – financially, socially and ecologically.

Iskandar will effectively be an offshore banking centre and a back office to financial institutions. What that hinges on is putting a lower cost base operation right next to the fourth biggest financial district in the world. The attraction is you're not putting the back office in India or China or somewhere where your senior executives are several hours away by plane. Companies will be able to put their back and middle office operations in a lower cost-base centre in a place where the senior management is 35 to 40 minutes away.

For example, imagine New Jersey was a greenfield site that happened to have an Islamic government, so New York could have an Islamic banking centre at a lower cost on its doorstep. That's essentially what we're doing.

How is Iskandar Financial District being developed?

The Malaysian government conceived the general structure for the project. It then selected a number of developers from the Middle East to come and participate. Iskandar Investment, which is developing the Iskandar Financial District, is a public-private partnership in the true sense of the term. The project was broken up into zones and the group I work with [Millennium] ended up being part of a large consortium of Arabian developers. In Medini Iskandar Malaysia, where the Iskandar Financial District will be located, there are three big zones – the Iskandar Financial District, a northern precinct and a southern lifestyle and leisure district.

The way the project is organised, the Malaysian government has financial involvement in the deal so it is motivated to make the project succeed – if we don't make money, the government doesn't make money. If the project makes lots of money, it shares in the upside. The consortium of Arabian investors – Aldar and Mubadala from Abu Dhabi and Jumeirah Capital and Saraya from Dubai – are all very heavy hitters in development who take a long-term view and know

how to deliver. If I had to say what's the legacy of Middle Eastern developers over the past five years it would be their ability to deliver on mega-projects like Medini.

What is the current status of the project?

Last week, the fully developed master plan was submitted to the Malaysian government. We expect the plan to be approved during the first quarter of next year and then we will begin issuing individual property titles. Next February, the contract for all of the infrastructure works will be let. The roll-out of the entire infrastructure is planned in two to three years but the financial district infrastructure will probably be done in 12 to 18 months. Medini in total will be finished in two to three years.

Why are you launching the Iskandar Financial District in the midst of a global economic crisis?

We're launching now because it is the right time to put this sort of product into the market. I would hate to be selling apartments or villas or leasing completed office buildings right now, but if I look at the current cycle, it may take six months, nine months or 18 months before economies start to accelerate again. And if you look at our development cycle, it will take one to two years before the retail product will enter what will then be a rising market. So I think we fortuitously struck the market at exactly the right time and there seem to be quite a few investors out there who agree.

Social Front

Environmental Front

• Thailand

Political front:

- **What's in store for Thailand affected by political turmoil**

Thousands of anti-government protesters rallied in central Bangkok yesterday, the start of what they call the "final battle" in a five-month street campaign to oust the administration. The crowd led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) planned to march to parliament early today, where police have erected barricades and stationed trucks with water cannons.

A similar protest in October left two people dead and hundreds wounded, including scores of police, when police fired tear gas to break up the rally aimed at disrupting parliament. The following scenarios examine what might happen next: Unless one side backs down – and there are few signs they will – today could be messy. The PAD's stated intention is to trigger a coup and anarchy is its main weapon.

Police will be mindful of last month's high number of casualties, especially the protesters who lost limbs from exploding tear gas grenades, and are likely to be more cautious.

However, hardline PAD elements are armed, and shot at police lines last month. If any officers are shot dead, it is not hard to see their colleagues responding in kind.

Whatever happens today, accusations will fly from both sides, ensuring the crisis rumbles on amid a poisonous political atmosphere. There is bound to be a small lull around the king's birthday on December 5, but tensions will rise ahead of December 13 when the exiled Thaksin holds a "phone-in" to a sports stadium rally. A similar gathering of 40,000 people on November 1 ended without incident but the venue then was on the outskirts of the city. The December 13 rally is going to be just 1.5 km from the PAD protest site, increasing the chances of confrontation.

The Election Commission has already found the ruling People Power Party (PPP) guilty of vote buying and the Supreme Court is expected to endorse the decision in December or January, leading to the party's immediate dissolution. Emotions will run high as the court ruling nears. Before this week's grenade, polls showed waning support for the PAD, which has been snarling up Bangkok traffic for six months, and its numbers at Government House have dwindled.

However, it is inconceivable it will simply wither and die, especially as it has the explicit backing of the highly influential Queen Sirikit. Protesters also made clear on Thursday they were undeterred by the threat of more grenades. It is never wise to rule out a coup in a country that has had, on average, one successful or attempted putsch every four years since the overthrow of absolute monarchy 76 years ago.

Army chief Anupong Paochinda has put public pressure on Somchai to quit, but has also said the army will not seize control as it is powerless to heal the basic political rift. Protesters in 'final battle' against Thai government

- **Thousands of anti-government protesters rallied in central Bangkok**

Thousands of anti-government protesters rallied in central Bangkok yesterday, the start of what they call the "final battle" in a five-month street campaign to oust the administration.

"I fear nothing. We will not bow our heads to the dark power destroying our country," said Cat, a 48-year-old businesswoman, among the thousands of protesters waving placards and shouting "fight, fight" inside the Government House compound they have occupied since late August. The crowd led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) planned to march to parliament early today, where police have erected barricades and stationed trucks with water cannons.

Major bloodshed would raise the chances of a military coup only two years after the army's removal of Thaksin, who now lives in exile after skipping bail on corruption charges. The PAD is calling the march "its final battle" to oust the government, which it blames for a grenade attack last week that killed one person and wounded 23.

Another grenade blast wounded seven PAD security guards on Saturday. An eighth guard died of his wounds yesterday. Somchai has denied the government or its supporters are behind the blasts. Police have made no arrests so far.

Jatuporn Prompan, a leader of the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), said they would not march on parliament yesterday to confront the PAD.

Raising the pressure on Somchai, public sector unions have called a nationwide strike for tomorrow unless he stands aside, a threat that, if carried out, would deepen the economic impact of a political crisis now in its fourth year.

Government decision-making has ground to a halt, intensifying fears about the export-driven economy's ability to withstand a global recession. Some foreign firms are already cutting back.

- **Thai PM authorizes police to clear protesters from Bangkok airports**

Thailand - Thailand's government prepared to crack down Thursday on protesters occupying the capital's two airports, but called on the public not to panic as rumours of a coup swept the city.

Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat declared a state of emergency around the capital's two main airports, which would allow security forces to oust thousands of anti-government protesters from the terminals.

Somchai accused the protesters of "holding the country hostage and the public hostage." However, the imposition of the measures raised the possibility that violent clashes could break out as authorities moved on Suvarnabhumi International Airport and the city's older, smaller Don Muang Airport.

The declaration, which applies only to the two terminals, empowers the government to suspend some civil liberties, including restricting the movement of people and prohibiting mass assembly in certain locations.

The People's Alliance for Democracy, which has been demanding the resignation of Somchai and his government, seized control of Suvarnabhumi airport on Tuesday, forcing the cancellation of all flights in and out of the capital and forcing thousands of tourists to hole up in Bangkok hotels.

The standoff, which began three months ago when the group occupied the prime minister's office compound, has paralyzed the government, battered the stock market, spooked foreign investors and dealt a serious blow to the tourism industry.

Some Thai economists have estimated that tourism losses alone in the remainder of this year could run to US$4.2 billion, equal to 1.5 per cent of gross domestic product.

In September 2006, the military staged a bloodless coup to oust former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra after months of protests staged by the same group that is demanding the resignation of the current government. The protest alliance says the prime minister, who is Thaksin's brother-in-law, is merely the former leader's puppet.

They accuse Thaksin and his allies of corruption and abuse of power. Thaksin is in exile, a fugitive from a conviction for violating a conflict of interest law.

- **Thai racing disaster kills nine**

An accident at a racetrack in the Thai capital Bangkok has left nine people dead and eight injured. The driver lost control of his racing car and hit a concrete barrier surrounding the track. The car then catapulted over the barrier and landed on the fans. The driver survived the crash. Police say it is Thailand's worst racing accident in years.

Thailand Cancels Flights as Protesters Storm Airport (Update1)

- **Thai authorities warned of flight chaos for thousands of passengers**

Thai authorities warned of flight chaos for thousands of passengers and damage to the tourism industry after anti-government protesters stormed the main terminal at Bangkok's international airport, closing it down.

The demonstrators, who want Somchai to take responsibility for deadly clashes with police last month, may force him to declare a state of emergency to prevent escalating violence. The prime minister, set to return today from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Peru, has rejected the resignation calls and police have avoided using force since the Oct. 7 clash in which two people died and 470 were injured.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry said it was monitoring the situation and may issue a travel warning. Countries including Singapore and South Korea in September warned travelers about visiting Thailand after protesters forced the closure of its second-busiest airport in the resort of Phuket.

Three-Month Occupation

Thousands of PAD activists, who have occupied Somchai's official Government House compound in central Bangkok for three months, yesterday stormed his temporary office after forcing parliament to abandon its sessions a day earlier. That postponement may affect Thailand's ability to sign international trade agreements at a summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations it is hosting Dec. 15-18.

The Bangkok-based PAD, which includes many middle-class Thais and receives support from the country's royalist elite, accuses Somchai's ruling party of buying votes to win elections and of trying to protect Thaksin Shinawatra, a former prime minister ousted in a 2006 coup who fled the country to escape corruption charges.

Shots Fired Yesterday

At least five people have died since August as a result of the protests. Two people were hurt yesterday when shots were fired during a clash between protesters and pro-government supporters on a Bangkok highway, Agence France-Presse reported, citing police.

- **Thai protesters shut main airport in Bangkok**

Anti-government protesters stormed Bangkok's main international airport and gunfire broke out on the streets of the Thai capital overnight as a campaign to oust Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat turned violent.

Authorities canceled all flights out of Suvarnabhumi Airport, hub for Thailand's lucrative tourist industry, stranding thousands of travellers. Meanwhile, Australians travelling to Thailand have been warned that terrorists may be planning attacks against tourists and other places frequented by foreigners.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Tradehas advised tourists not to travel to the southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Songkhla or overland to and from the Malaysian border. The PAD movement is demanding that Somchai resign, accusing him of being a puppet of ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, his brother-in-law.

Prolonged unrest could seriously damage Thailand's tourist industry. The airport is the main gateway for the 14.5 million visitors to Thailand each year lured by attractions from its beaches to its notorious sex industry. The airport handles 76 flights an hour and 125,000 passengers a day.

The airport mayhem capped a day that also saw PAD gunmen fire shots at pro-government supporters on a busy road. TPBS showed two PAD security guards shooting from handguns. The PAD said they were attacked first with planks and stones.

- **Protesters swarm Bangkok airport as violence escalates**

Anti-government demonstrators swarmed Bangkok's international airport late today, halting departing flights, as opponents and supporters of Thailand's government fought in the streets of the city.

Political tensions simmering for two years have boiled over in recent months, but today's violent confrontations in Bangkok – which saw protesters using slingshots, knives and gunfire on a busy street and tourists caught up in the airport chaos – marked a dramatic escalation.

The airport manager said authorities tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with the protesters, who accuse Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat of being a puppet of his disgraced predecessor and have occupied his offices since August, demanding his resignation.

The siege of the airport appeared aimed at Somchai, who is scheduled to return late tomorrow from an Asia-Pacific summit in Peru. Protest group spokesperson Suriyasai Katasila said the airport will be shut down "until Somchai quits."

Travellers on the ground seemed bewildered at the turn of events. Using trucks and cars, demonstrators blocked highway access to the airport, the transportation hub for millions of tourists who visit the country each year.The airport siege followed a clash earlier in the evening between opponents and supporters of Thailand's government.The rivals in the latest tensions are fairly easy to distinguish – the protest alliance favors yellow shirts and their rivals red ones.

Political tensions have been simmering since 2006, when a similar protest campaign against then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra – accused of corruption and abuse of power – led to a military coup that deposed him. Further efforts to cripple Thaksin's political machine failed, and his allies won in the 2007 vote.

The protesters accuse the current prime minister of acting as a proxy for Thaksin, his brother-in-law.Protesters seeking Somchai's resignation have occupied his Bangkok offices, known as Government House, since Aug. 26, forcing him to relocate to a makeshift office in the VIP area of the former international airport at Don Muang.

Thailand's economy, already struggling amid the global downturn, has been hit hard by the political turmoil. The state planning agency said Monday it grew at its slowest pace in more than three years this past quarter.

The country's $16 billion a year tourism industry – already suffering from months of political unrest – faced a potentially serious blow. Suvarnabhumi airport is the world's 18th largest in terms of passenger traffic, handling over 40 million passengers in 2007.

Deputy Prime Minister Chauwarat Chanweerakul said the government will refrain from using force to end the impasse.

US Corner

Economic Front
Social Front

- **Three small blasts in Bangkok**

THREE small blasts went off near the offices of a key Thai anti-government protest leader early on Monday, police said, but no one was injured in the latest in a string of small-scale explosions in Bangkok.

All three blasts hit Bangkok's Banglampoo area, near the offices of ASTV, which is headed by Mr Sondhi Limthongkul, a co-founder of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which is

trying to topple the government. An officer at the Metropolitan Police who did not wish to be named said they still did not know what had caused the explosions.

Thousands of PAD supporters were early on Monday preparing to leave the Government House compound they have occupied since late August and descend on various state locations throughout the capital. PAD leaders called for the fresh rallies after one of their supporters was killed and 29 injured in a grenade attack at Government House last week, which was followed Saturday by a similar blast which hurt eight people. Protesters blamed the government for the casualties, but Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat has denied any involvement and vowed to investigate.

Environmental Front

• Philippine

Political front:

- **Mangroves stripped of bark for southern Philippines**

The mangrove swamps here are being raided for its bark to make liquor, soft drinks and shellac in the southern Philippines.

Police stumbled upon the activities of a group a few months ago when they caught eight people taking out two tonnes of mangrove bark on a barge that was headed towards the southern Philippines.Disclosing this yesterday, Sabah Police Commissioner Datuk Noor Rashid Ibrahim said that the thieves had stripped a large acreage of mangrove swamps in the riverside areas in Beluran and were taking them across the border.

“It is one case we detected but we do not discount other incidents that have gone undetected,” he told reporters after receiving five speed boats worth RM300,000 from Chief Minister Datuk Musa Aman on behalf of the state government.

It is understood that mangrove bark is extracted for the making of liquor, a type of cola drink and shellac.He said the boats would help police in patrolling riverine areas as currently their patrol boats were too big to go into such areas.

- **Philippine leader's plane makes emergency landing**

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's plane made an emergency landing in Japan on Friday after her husband fell ill on board, officials said.

Arroyo was on her way from Manila to attend the 21-nation Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Lima, Peru.

The plane landed at Kansai International Airport in western Japan, an airport police official said on condition of anonymity, citing department policy.

Arroyo's husband, Jose Miguel "Mike" Arroyo, was rushed to a nearby hospital for emergency treatment for an illness related to a chronic health problem, the police official said. Arroyo's husband underwent heart surgery in 2007.

Japan's Foreign Ministry and the hospital refused to comment on his condition.

Kyodo News agency reported that Arroyo had accompanied her husband to the hospital. Police declined to comment on the president's whereabouts.Arroyo's husband, an attorney from a prominent family, has no official powers but is regarded as an influential back-room operator and is a vocal backer of his wife against political rivals.In April last year, doctors performed a triple bypass on him to prevent his main heart artery from rupturing and clogging.

- **Religious leaders want peace talks to resume**

RELIGIOUS leaders have called on the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) for the immediate resumption of the stalled Mindanao peace talks. In a statement, the 75 members of the Bishops-Ulama Conference appealed to the both parties to pursue whatever possible means, the steps that would result in lasting peace for Mindanao. The joint statement was signed by Monsignor Fernando Capalla, archbishop of Davao; Hilario Gomez Jr., bishop emeritus of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines; and Dr. Hamid Barra of the Ulama League of the Philippines. Ulamas are Muslim clerics. Fighting erupted anew between government forces and rogue Moro rebels in North Cotabato, Lanao del Norte and Sarangani on August 18, after the scheduled signing of the controversial memorandum of agreement on ancestral domain (MOA-AD) was aborted following the issuance of a temporary restraining order by the Supreme Court.

Peace with compliance of the law Commenting on the recent violence committed by some rogue Moro groups in some parts of Mindanao, the group said: “let the force of the law be applied with justice that leads to peace.” As religious leaders, the group vowed to take an active role in promoting community dialogue to achieve peace in the region. “We are tapping the resources of our social, religious and academic institutions to help in assessing people’s perception of our situation, in drawing out a common vision of peace, in enriching peace education, and in generating new ideas on the broader peace process in our beloved Mindanao,” they said. “We shall do this with utmost fairness and transparency.” The group said that while it would

continue its interfaith activities, it would also pursue authentic intra-faith dialogues among their communities, hoping that they could find ways to pursue lasting peace in Mindanao.

- **Malaysia To Suspend Mission In Southern Philippines -Minister**

Malaysia said Thursday it will suspend a military monitoring mission in the southern Philippines at the end of this month following the collapse of a peace deal between Manila and Muslim rebels.

Malaysian forces have made up the bulk of the international team overseeing a 2003 ceasefire between the Manila government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, or MILF.The country's armed forces began pulling out their 40 troops stationed in four cities on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao in May because of a lack of progress towards a peace deal. That decision was reversed in August after a breakthrough. However, the process hit another hitch when the Philippine Supreme Court barred the government from signing the deal - which would give the MILF control of large swathes of land in an autonomous region - following massive street protests.

The delay triggered weeks of intense fighting that left 150 people dead and more than 280,000 people displaced. However, Rais said Malaysia will consider participating in the peace mission if there was progress in the talks." Malaysia is prepared to consider its future participation in the IMT, when there is progress in the peace process and a formal request is made by both the Philippines and the MILF," he said.

The 12,000-strong MILF has been fighting for a separate Islamic state in the Philippines since 1978.

- **Malaysia to suspend mission in southern Philippines**

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"Malaysia is suspending its participation in the (mission) upon expiry of its mandate," foreign minister Rais Yatim said in a statement. "Malaysia's participation in the International Monitoring Team (IMT) will cease as scheduled on November 30, 2008," he added. Malaysian forces have made up the bulk of the international team overseeing a 2003 ceasefire between the Manila government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The country's armed forces began pulling out their 40 troops stationed in four cities on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao in May because of a lack of progress towards a peace deal. That decision was reversed in August after a breakthrough.

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- **Impeachment Bid against Philippine Leader Likely To Fail**

Opposition congressmen walked out of an impeachment hearing against Philippine President Gloria Arroyo on Tuesday after her allies moved as expected to kill the case, witnesses said.House of Representatives minority leader Ronaldo Zamora and his allies left the justice committee hearing as a group after pro-Arroyo lawmakers accused them of "falsification of public documents" in their impeachment complaint.

Arroyo, who won a fresh six-year term in the 2004 election after replacing the disgraced incumbent Joseph Estrada in a bloodless, military-backed popular revolt in 2001, has survived two previous impeachment attempts by the opposition.

The congressmen were taking up an impeachment complaint accusing Arroyo of corruption, vote-buying and human rights abuses.

Among those who filed the latest complaint was former Arroyo ally Jose de Venecia who was earlier ousted from his post as speaker of the House of Representatives. But Arroyo spokesmen and administration legislators challenged his accounts and said he had presented no evidence. Opposition House lawmakers have tried to impeach Arroyo every year since a recording of a phone call emerged between a woman sounding like the president and an elections officer who appeared to be conspiring to rig the 2004 polls.

However as Arroyo allies dominate the House, all the impeachment complaints against her have been quashed. Under Philippine law, only one impeachment complaint can be filed against the president each year and the absence of the opposition lawmakers will make it easier for the administration congressmen to dismiss this latest complaint.

- **Penalties for disrespecting the Filipino flag**

I do believe that patriotism is what our country should learn today. The flag symbolizes our democracy. However, I had a friend, who is in the business of printing clothes and one of the line of products that they are producing is a shirt with the Philippine flag printed on it. I am concerned about this, since I watched a news report about a magazine which edited the Philippine flag and had it worn by a female model in a sexy pictorial. Although my friend and the company just wanted to show their patriotism through the Philippine flags printed on their shirts, is there any law violated by my friend?

Presence of US troops In Philippine

US Corner

Economic Front

- **Economic growth slows down in third quarter**

The Philippines' economic growth slowed down in the third quarter of 2008, expanding by only 4.6% from 7.1% a year ago, the government said yesterday.

The third quarter performance brought the average gross domestic product (GDP) growth in the first nine months to 4.6%, according to the National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB). Gross national product, which includes income from abroad, including remittances of overseas Filipinos, expanded only 6.5% in the July-September period from 9.1% a year ago. "The decent growth in GDP drew on the strong performances of manufacturing, construction and trade," he added.

Earlier in the month, government economic managers cut the growth forecast for this year and 2009 amid grim prospects of recession in some of the world's largest economies. GDP in 2008 was forecast to grow only between 4.1% and 4.8%, down from the government's earlier target of 5.5% to 6.4%. For next year, GDP growth was expected to average between 3.7% and 4.7%, from the previous forecast of 6.1% to 7.1%.

Social Front

- **Catholic Church Expects Defeat Of Philippines Family Planning Bill, Drafts Alternate Measure**

Officials with the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines said they expect to defeat a proposed reproductive health bill that would promote contraceptive use and sex education. Maria Fenny Tatad, executive director of the Catholic lobby Bishops-Legislators Caucus of the Philippines, said the bishops are "confident they have the numbers" to defeat the bill because only 99 members of the 238-member House have openly voiced support for the measure. The remaining members are expected to side with the church in opposing the bill, she said. According to *AFP/Yahoo! News*, "Population control is a highly politicized issue in the Philippines," where more than 80% of the population is Catholic and the church "wields considerable public influence." The church has been leading a high-profile campaign to defeat the bill (*AFP/Yahoo! News*, 11/20). In addition, some bishops have said they will refuse Holy Communion and other sacraments to politicians who support the bill.

- **US Ambassador announces $2.5-M aid to families displaced by armed conflict in Mindanao**

During a visit today to a camp for internally displaced persons in Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao Province, US Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney announced that the U.S.

Government is providing $2.5 million in assistance to individuals and families displaced by the tragic outbreak of violent conflict in Mindanao.

The assistance includes 1,480 metric tons of U.S. rice, valued at approximately $2 million, for free distribution by the United Nations World Food Programme, as well as water, health, and sanitation support by NGO partners.

Soon after the conflict began, the United States Government responded by supplying essential relief goods to families in need in the provinces of North Cotabato, Lanao del Norte, Sarangani, and Maguindanao, through Save the Children.

During her visit to Datu Odin Sinsuat and Cotabato Friday (Nov. 21), the Ambassador recognized the work of the National Disaster Coordinating Council, the Regional Disaster Coordinating Council, the Department of Social Welfare and Development, and the Departments of Health of the national government and in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to improve the health and sanitation situation to people who were forced to flee their homes due to the violence.

"My thoughts are with those who have been displaced by fighting, people whose lives have been lost and disrupted," said Ambassador Kenney. "Working together, we can help Mindanao move toward peace and prosperity, so the citizens of Mindanao – especially the children – may have the future they deserve," she added

- **Manila mounts rescue effort in flood-hit areas**

The government has mobilised resources for some 22,000 flood-hit families in the northeastern province of Cagayan and Isabela.
According to deputy presidential spokesman Dr Anthony Golez Jr, President Gloria Arroyo has directed the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), the social welfare department and other agencies concerned to assist flash flood victims in the two provinces.Arroyo issued the order to provide assistance to the two provinces after being appraised of the situation over phone. Arroyo is attending the 16th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Lima, Peru.Golez, who is also deputy director of the NDCC, said two persons, both from Cagayan province, was reported to have died in the flash floods. "The numbers of families affected by flash flood resulting from heavy rains have already reached 22,575 in 18 municipalities," he said.

Monsoon rains since Friday have rendered large areas of what is considered as the Philippines' rice granary, the Cagayan Valley region, under several feet of water, disaster management officials said.

- **Two killed, thousands displaced in Philippine flooding: officials**

Two people have died and more than 32,000 families have been displaced by flash floods in the northern Philippines, disaster relief officials said Sunday.

Heavy rains over the past several days have led to flooding in 18 towns and over 200 vilalges in the provinces of Isabela and Cagayan in northern Luzon island, said Anthony Golez, head of Manila's civil defence office. "There were two incidents of drowning," he said, adding that damage to agriculture was also expected to be in the millions.

Social workers as well as emergency teams from the national police and the army have been working with local officials to respond to the situation, Golez said. He said President Gloria Arroyo, who is attending the APEC summit in Peru, had ordered the distribution of rice and other relief items

- **Human rights abuses continuing in Philippines: rights group**

Human rights abuses are continuing in the Philippines with 21 extrajudicial killings taking place in the third quarter of the year, a local rights monitor said Thursday.

Of the killings 19 took place on the restive southern island of Mindanao where the government is fighting Muslim and communist secessionist groups, according to a report by Karapatan, an umbrella organisation of human rights groups in the Philippines.

It said among the most recent killings was a labour activist, Maximo Baranda, who was gunned down in July by three unidentified armed men in Compostela Valley on Mindanao while in August another activist, Roel Doratot, was also shot dead in the same area. The rest of the deaths were civilians caught in the crossfire between the army and the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) -- including four children and a pregnant woman who were killed in a military aerial bombardment of a civilian community where retreating rebels were said to have fled.

The government has suspended talks with the MILF and launched a massive assault after the rebels carried out coordinated attacks across several Mindanao provinces in August. At the height of the fighting in late August, government said over 600,000 people were displaced from their homes. London-based rights group Amnesty International last month said that of that total, more than half remained in evacuation camps, where water and food are dwindling and sanitation is a major problem.

In 2007, the UN's special rapporteur on extra-judicial killings Philip Alston, as well as a Philippine fact finding mission, blamed the military for many of the killings, a claim that they hotly contested. More than 930 people, including rights workers and political activisits cricial of government, have been killed since Arroyo assumed power in 2001, Karapatan said.

Environmental Front

• Singapore

Political front:

- **Singapore, Sweden sign MOU on regulation of health**

products(political,social)

Singapore's Health Sciences Authority (HSA) and its Swedish regulatory counterpart, the Medical Products Agency (MPA), have signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the regulation of health products.

The HSA said this will pave the way for a stronger and closer professional collaboration and partnership between the two organizations. The MOU encompasses mutual exchanges and scientific collaborations in areas such as the evaluation of the safety and quality of health products, investigations on compliance and enforcement activities on the health products or their establishments, among others.

- **Singapore, China signs MOU on aviation security cooperation(pol,geo.)**

Singapore and China have inked an agreement on aviation security cooperation.

The memorandum of understanding, signed in Singapore on Friday, formalizes bilateral cooperation in areas such as aviation security policy, procedures, technology, operations and training. According to a statement from Singapore's Transport Ministry, such cooperation could include training opportunities and testing of new aviation security equipment to improve security screening measures while upholding passenger facilitation and efficiency. Regular dialogues, joint seminars, forums and conferences could also be organized to increase exchange of information and sharing of best practices in civil aviation security.

US Corner

Economic Front

- **PM Lee says downturn will be protracted, but no reason to panic**

SANTIAGO, Chile: Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said on Friday that the current downturn Singapore is facing is nothing quite like what the country has experienced before.

Speaking to the Singapore media at the end of his visit to Latin America, Mr Lee said that while there is still bitter medicine to be taken, the Singapore government has put a bit more sugar coating on the pill. It was all about cost-cutting then, and there were no goodies announced. It included lowering the employer's CPF contribution rate, which is the country's national pension scheme.

Mr Lee said CPF cuts are not the government's first preference in the immediate term. He said that the overriding priority is to secure jobs for Singaporeans, reduce business costs and ensure Singapore's competitiveness. These will be the focus for the upcoming budget. Mr Lee noted that low and middle income Singaporeans have also not been left out, citing the Growth

Dividends and income tax rebates that have been extended to these groups. Still, he pointed out there is a need for Singaporeans to manage their expectations because the recovery this time round will not depend on the immediate measures Singapore takes.

Singapore is already in recession and Mr Lee said the country will experience many more years of slow growth. That is because countries will need some time to collectively figure out how to deal with the financial crisis - never seen before since the Great Depression - and work out a new international financial regime. But if there is a silver lining, it is in the resilience of Asian economies, which Mr Lee said are dynamic and still offers opportunities. Mr Lee heads back to Singapore on Friday.

Social Front

- **Six new biscuit products contaminated with melamine**

Six more biscuit products have been found to be contaminated with melamine after the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority (AVA) completed its testing of all China milk products sold in Singapore.

The six products are Baby Looney Tunes Cream Filled Biscuits Assorted Family Pack, C & OK Vigour 888 Egg & Milk, Khong Guan Mini Burger Biscuit Bulk Pack, Liluo Fruit P.D. Almond Flavour, Potter Potato Chips Pizza and Tom & Jerry Cheese Balls. This brings the total number of affected China milk products to 22.

China has implemented new control measures for milk production and AVA will be sending three officers to China in early December to ensure the measures are implemented on the ground.

Importers will be required to produce a certification of product safety from the Chinese and Malaysian authorities before milk products from these countries are allowed into Singapore.

Even certified products from Malaysia and China will continue to be subjected to a mix of random testing as well as batch testing in the months ahead to ensure that they are safe for consumption. AVA added that the ban on Julie's and Khong Guan biscuits from Malaysia could be lifted next week.

- **PM Lee says protectionist measures will only worsen global slowdown**

Leaders from the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economies have pledged not to raise new barriers to trade and investment and refrain from imposing new export restrictions over the next 12 months.

APEC leaders also supported the broad policy response that recently came out from the Group of 20 Summit in Washington.

The APEC meeting in Lima is being held in extraordinary times. The financial crisis, said to be the worst since the Great Depression in the 1930s, saw APEC leaders issuing a firm statement on the state of the global economy.

The message was one of unity and a strong commitment to open markets and integration. Leaders agreed to work together to address the crisis and rejected attempts at protectionism. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted that countries must resist the temptation to restrict access to their markets in a misguided attempt to protect jobs. "Tit-for-tat measures will only worsen the global slowdown," he said.

Among the points APEC leaders agreed on are the need to strengthen the international financial system and a commitment to conclude the Doha trade talks.
One concern of business leaders is that APEC economies do not over-regulate their financial systems in a bid to address the market meltdown. Mr Teng said: "Because of the current challenges that we are facing now and the regulatory bodies start to come in to introduce various policies, it may become so restrictive, before even knowing the real cause of the crisis.

- **Mega projects expected to continue, but at slower pace**

Mega projects in Singapore's energy and biomedical sector are seen to be on track. Despite the current slowdown, industry players say they expect the projects to continue, although some may proceed at a slow pace. Construction at Glaxo Smith Kline's (GSK) vaccine plant is well underway.

The plant - due to be completed in 2010 - is expected to boost the biomedical and pharmaceutical industry here in Singapore. Other big projects include NesteOil's biodiesel plant, said to be the world's largest. Oerlikon Solars is also building its Asian hub in Singapore, and it is investing more than S$38 million in this project. Analysts say it is important for these investments to stay on track. Kai-Alexander Schlevogt, an associate professor of Management Practice at NUS Business School, said: "The fundamentals of Asia are very strong. What is happening now is due to the US...
Given the current global climate; Singapore's Economic Development Board said investors might want to take on a more cautious approach. But it added that no major investment projects in Singapore have been affected as yet.

- **APEC leaders say credit crisis can be overcome by mid-2010**

Leaders from the 21-member nations of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are convinced they can overcome the global financial crisis in 18 months.
That note of confidence came at the end of a two-day APEC Leaders' Meeting in Lima, Peru. Speaking to the Singapore media later, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the optimism stems from the cooperation which APEC members have forged over the years.
In a separate declaration, the leaders also pledged to act quickly and decisively to address the economic slowdown by advancing regional economic integration. The leaders outlined several measures aimed at promoting greater convergence among economies, specifically in the areas of customs administration, trade facilitation and cross border services.

For example, the free trade agreement between Singapore, New Zealand, Brunei and Chile looks set to grow, with the United States, Australia and Peru keen to join the grouping. Mr Lee added the APEC meeting was a good chance for leaders to compare notes on the financial crisis and the sense is that member states are not in "panic mode". APEC leaders also emphasized the importance of strengthening financial markets in the wake of the liquidity crunch and market slump.

To facilitate business links, the leaders reiterated the importance of tackling domestic barriers to trade and investment in the creation of well-performing, resilient and robust economies. More work is also expected in efforts to forge the long-term goal of an Asia Pacific Free Trade Area.

Ministers and officials have been tasked to look into the likely impact of the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP) and advise on possible capacity building requirements. The ministers are expected to report their findings to the leaders next year.

Trade issues aside, leaders have also voiced strong concern over food security - in particular, the impact of rising global food prices and food shortages in some developing countries.

On protecting regional trade and combating terrorism, leaders have welcomed Singapore′s lead to undertake a pilot Trade Recovery Programme (TRP) exercise in 2009.

Singapore will host the next APEC Summit in November next year. Picking up from the Peru summit, Singapore is expected to make a strong push next year towards continued regional integration.

The 21 APEC member economies are Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, United States and Vietnam. The APEC region stands out as one of the most rapidly growing, economically dynamic, and business friendly regions in the world. Together, the 21 APEC members account for nearly 60 per cent of global GDP and roughly 50 per cent of international trade. In APEC tradition, the leaders wrapped up their meeting in Lima with a group photograph, wearing the host nation's national costume. This time, it was the Chall, a brown poncho originating from the Andes region. From Lima, Prime Minister Lee has gone on to Sao Paulo, Brazil for an official visit. He is expected to give a speech at a luncheon organized by the Sao Paulo Federation of Industries on Tuesday.

- **PM Lee assures S'poreans they are not alone in coping with downturn**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the country cannot simply stimulate demand during this time of crisis by raising government spending.

While that may be what other countries are doing to stem the downturn, Mr Lee said it cannot work for Singapore because of its small economy. Mr Lee made the point during a dialogue session with business leaders in Sao Paulo, Brazil on Monday.

PM Lee said Singapore is watching what other governments are doing around the world to deal with the financial crisis. And he noted that each government is adapting and improvising as they go along because the current economic slump is unprecedented.

When asked what strategies Singapore has to deal with the problem, the prime minister outlined several measures in place, including helping the low income and ramping up training to help Singaporeans secure jobs. PM Lee also explained the thinking behind the government's recent move to support an additional S$2.3 billion in loans to help local firms gain access to credit.

He said: "In a downturn, in an uncertain period, all banks become more cautious because they have to be. And when they become more cautious, the small companies, the SMEs have the greatest difficulties.Mr Lee hinted at more help for businesses in areas such as rental and wage costs, to be announced at the upcoming Budget which has been brought forward to January. However, the key message behind the initiatives is to show Singaporeans they are not alone in coping with the downturn.

Mr Lee's bilateral visit to Brazil is also an attempt at further diversifying Singapore's economic linkages. Although Brazil is Singapore's second largest trading partner in Latin America, both sides said there is more room for growth. Mr Lee is now in Brasilia, where he will meet Brazil President Luiz Inacio Lula Da Silva. Both sides are expected to sign separate agreements on Wednesday in the areas of air services, science and technology, as well as trade and investment.

- **Singapore ready to assist India in resolving hostage crisis**

Singapore stands ready to assist India in any way to secure the safe release of a Singaporean and other hostages in Mumbai, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

In a letter to Indian Premier Manmohan Singh, Mr Lee said he is confident that the Indian people will rally around the government as it deals with the terrorist attacks and brings the perpetrators to justice.

Mr Lee said the Mumbai attacks are a reminder that terrorism continues to be a common threat to everyone, and Singapore strongly supports the Indian government's efforts in fighting the scourge of terrorism. Speaking to the Singapore media on the sidelines of his bilateral visit to Chile on Thursday, Mr Lee also noted that it would take some time for confidence to return to Mumbai, which is the financial centre of India. As for the security landscape in Singapore, Mr Lee said the country has made progress in not only stepping up on physical security, but also working with its neighbors to pursue terror groups in the region as well as develop immunity within the society.

The community engagement programme, for example, ensures that Singapore's social fabric will remain intact in the event of a terror attack. The prime minister added that this is not the first time there has been a terrorist attack in India, but none of the previous incidents are as bold and as disastrous as the one on Wednesday. Mr Lee also offered his condolences to India and the families of the victims.

Environmental Front

• Vietnam

Political front:

US Corner

Economic Front

- **Vietnam-Malaysia rice deal to gauze price trend**

: A major rice deal this week is eliciting great interest in India. Vietnam's one lakh tonne rice export contract with Malaysia, for which t

he price is yet to be made public, is also being watched with great interest by the global rice trade fraternity.

The contract with Malaysia is part of an unusually large volume of 1.5 MT up for sale by Vietnamese exporters, part of an effort to boost domestic prices as farmers start producing their winter-spring crop, the largest of the season.

Global rice prices have fallen by about 20% since prices peaked in June this year and analysts are viewing the significant Malaysia-Vietnam deal as a potential turning point in the prolonged trend of thin demand and low prices that has been dominating world rice trade and plunging prices in a marked manner in the recent past, although at a much more calibrated pace than with other farm commodities, such as wheat and soyabean.

Demand picking up is expected to ring in higher prices for commodities. While high demand and low output and supply (fuelled in good part by export bans) boosted rice prices in the first half of this year, policy makers here would have to be carefully monitoring the progress of the demand and price line in world rice trade this time round in order to time the removal of export ban of rice.

India's interest would be special; despite the government allowing, earlier this week, a very limited quantity of non Basmati rice to be exported to Ghana etc, there is little likelihood of the ban on rice exports being removed anytime in the near future.

That decision, besides export ban and related decisions by other key rice exporters, contributed major to pushing up global rice prices phenomenally since mid 2008. But in consonance with the

financial markets crash, global agri commodity prices started tumbling headlong since October, with no apparent speed breakers.

In Asia, prices of rice fell less than half of peak prices in June. Thai rice, which ruled at $700 per tonne mid this year, is expected to fall below $500-$450/tonne by the year end, thanks to the continued downward momentum in rice prices mainly due to slim global demand. India, one the world's biggest producers of rice, harvested a record crop this year after rains spurred sowing, a development that is expected policymakers decide if and when to scrap the six-month old restriction on exports of the grain.

A bigger harvest may prompt India to lift the export ban, pressuring already low global prices that have slumped 2% from a record in April.

- **Recession and 'strategic' realities in East**

East Asian states, which planned to prevent a future shock in their own backyards when the current financial crisis first hit other regions several weeks ago, are coming to terms with reality. It is now recognized across East Asia, home to a number of one-time economic tigers, that the gathering 'global crisis' may no longer be warded off in this region.

Japan, still the world's second largest economy, has now formally declared recession. And, Singapore, the main financial centre in the Southeast Asian sub-region, is also not fighting shy of acknowledging a similar economic slowdown in the city-state. In some contrast, Malaysia, another key economy, has so far managed to stay above the recession mark by shaping a stimulus package. More importantly, the big East Asian picture is dominated by political-level expectations that China's huge economic stimulus may work wonders. These expectations have not so far been neutralized by China's new assessments that the worsening global conditions had now begun to "weigh on [its own] job market."

Anecdotal evidence in this situation is indicative of job losses in not just the financial sector, more especially banks. Here, too, no discernible pattern across this vast region is being talked about at the moment. As informally identified by interlocutors, some key sectors, where recession has already set in or is taking hold in the region as a whole are shipping and aviation. Tourism, construction industry, and information technology are also being mentioned among those already affected in different measure in different states.

Although the practice of employing foreign workers is prevalent in many countries globally, Southeast Asian states like Malaysia and Singapore are in the top bracket in this category. Indian professionals are present across the high-end spectrum in this region, while skilled and unskilled workers from South Asia, including India, are very conspicuous, too. Instances of a sudden increase in the home-bound remittances by Indian workers have come to light, especially in Singapore, indicative of a possible winding-down of their work. Nonetheless, the available anecdotal evidence in this regard is insufficient to draw any definitive conclusion one way or another about actual or potential job losses in the unskilled sector. Of greater certainty, as of

now, is that East Asia is free of gory stories such as acute-distress deaths among native and foreign workers and professionals. The impact of job cuts by multinational companies, especially banks, is of course being felt among foreign professionals, including Indians, in East Asia, too.

Yet, braving the predictions of a 'global economic crisis' beyond the financial domain, India and Malaysia are engaged in what can be seen as exemplary South-South cooperation. An India-Malaysia Capital Markets Forum, a thematic anti-thesis to the current fears of a global financial meltdown, was launched on November 20. And, the coincidental awarding of a Mumbai monorail contract to a consortium of corporate players from India and Malaysia could not have been better timed to buck the doomsday prophecies. Malaysia sees India as a major partner for economic engagement, and New Delhi is reciprocating such sentiments and deep interest, says Indian High Commissioner Ashok Kantha.

On a different plane, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which includes Malaysia, can tap the resources of key dialogue partners – China, Japan, and South Korea. Besides Malaysia, the 10-member ASEAN has in its fold key sub-regional economies like Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. In 2000, these eight countries helped evolve the Chiang Mai Initiative for inter-state cooperation of the kind relevant at this stage to prevent or bust economic crises in East Asia.

A dominant view, outside the ambience of official diplomacy, is that China, despite its stunning growth in recent years, wants to be counted only as a developing economy in the G-20 equations. After Barrack Obama's election, a Chinese official said China, the largest developing country, and the United States, the largest developed economy, must engage each other more meaningfully.

- **US Finds Lack Of Evidence To Open A Dumping Probe Of Vietnam**

The U.S. government said Friday it found insufficient evidence for a product dumping investigation of Vietnam. Commerce Department officials announced a final review of clothing import data turned up nothing.

A monitoring program began upon Vietnam's entry into the World Trade Organization in January 2007.Commerce examined import data for five different apparel product groups from Vietnam - trousers, shirts, underwear, swim wear, and sweaters - during the third six-month period, February through July 2008.Dumping occurs when a foreign producer sells a product in the U.S. at a price that is less than fair value, which is often the producer's sales price in the country of origin or its cost of production.

- **China, Philippines, Malaysia, & Vietnam: Cruise deal**

Guests are this week being invited to discover the enchanting Far East with a cruise on the majestic Costa Allegra.

Visitors will board the ship in Hong Kong and sail to the lively city of Manila, before coasting off to Kotakinabulu and Borneo to immerse themselves in rich Malaysian culture. This is

followed before a departure to the more modern city - Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei. Next, guests can shop 'til they drop in Singapore and witness the traditions and lifestyles of Ho Chi Min City and Da-Nang in Vietnam. This is followed by a cruise onwards to Sanya and back to Hong Kong; both modern cities intertwined with long-established culture and customs.

The journey departs Hong Kong, December 7th 2008, with prices staring from £759 per person (saving £380); based on two adults sharing an inside cabin, cruise-only for 14 nights, including all meals.

- **Vietnam, India expand scope of strategic partnership**

Indian President Pratibha Patil will make a State-level visit to Vietnam from Nov. 24-28 at the invitation of President Nguyen Minh Triet.

This will be the first visit to Vietnam by Pratibha Patil and the second by an Indian President since the two countries established diplomatic ties in 1972.

Vietnam-India relations have experienced several important steps in their development, particularly since the two countries established strategic partnership relations in July 2007. The two countries' prime ministers met on the sidelines of the 7 th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM7) in Beijing , China , in October 2008.Economic cooperation over the years has experienced a number of significant developments. In 1982, the two countries established a Joint Commission on Economic, Cultural, Scientific and Technical Cooperation, an important mechanism for the two sides to boost cooperation in numerous fields.

Trade turnover between Vietnam and India has increased markedly; from 72 million USD in 1995 to over 1 billion USD in 2006 and 1.53 billion USD in 2007. During the first seven months of 2008 this figure has reached 1.7 billion USD. Vietnam exports to India coal, pepper, electronic components, rubber, cinnamon, machinery, steel, fiber, footwear; and imports from the latter animal feed, mobile phones, medicines, plastics, steel and other metals, raw materials for pharmaceutical production and garment and textile industry, pesticides and chemical products to India. s of October 2008, India has 30 valid investment projects in Vietnam , with total implemented capital of 578 million USD, ranking 27th out of 76 investors in the country.. he two countries also cooperated closely at various regional and international forums. India supported Vietnam in its bid to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2008-09 term. Vietnam has always supported India in its efforts to increase cooperation with ASEAN members, in its participation in East Asia cooperative matters and in its bid to become a permanent member of the expanded UN security consil.

- **India can help Vietnam in infrastructure"**

President Pratibha Devisingh Patil on Tuesday identified infrastructure development as a key area in which Indian industry could assist Vietnam. In her keynote address to the Vietnam-India Business Forum here, she made particular mention of the Highway Development Programme in India and said this could "become a model for public-private partnership, which can be usefully replicated in many other developing countries, including Vietnam."

The meeting, organised by the Indian Chamber of Commerce (INCHAM) and the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) and held in a city that has been the engine of Vietnam's economic growth with a GDP growth rate of 12.6 per cent in 2007 as against 8.5 per cent for Vietnam as a whole, was attended by representatives from a large number of Vietnamese and Indian companies that included Tata Steel, the Essar group and Ishan International Pvt. Ltd.

A 16-member business delegation from the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry was in Ho Chi Minh City to attend the Business Forum Meeting. A memorandum of understanding was signed between INCHAM and VCCI.

Viernam's Vice-Minister of Trade and Industry Le Duong Quang said that in the wake of the adverse impact of the global recession in 2008 there was an "aggressive effort by the Vietnam government to promote foreign investments and we are seeing increasing foreign direct investment owing to our stable and favourable investment climate. We are a reliable partner in the world arena."To a question how Vietnam was managing the impact of the global crisis, Madame Nguyen Thi Hong, Vice-Chairperson of the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, said the administration of the city and the central government had put in place a group of policies "with a focus on stabilising the economy for development with attention to social welfare." Despite the crisis, Ho Chi Minh City had seen a GDP growth rate of 10.9 per cent in the first nine months of 2008, she said.

- **India firm on signing FTA with ASEAN**

India is committed to the signing of the much-awaited ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in Chiang Mai, Thailand, next month, said a top trade official.

"We are ready to sign even though other countries delay it. Only the Philippines is yet to provide their offered list and Thailand may have some problems, they may not gain cabinet approval by that time. But it is okay, they can sign later," India's Commerce and Industry Ministry Joint Secretary P.K. Dass was quoted by Malaysia's news agency (Bernama) as saying.

With political pressure mounting in Thailand, there is a growing concern over whether the Thais could gain the parliament's approval in time while the Philippines also need to obtain the endorsement of their legislature. ASEAN members and India are scheduled to sign the FTA on December 17 during the ASEAN-India Summit in the northern city of Chiang Mai.

The FTA is expected to come into effect on January 1, 2009, after which duties levied on at least 80 percent of traded goods would be zero-rated

- **Myanmar PM wants to strengthen links with Vietnam**

Myanmar's Prime Minister Gen. Thei Sein reitereted the Myanmar government and people's desire to promote friendship, economic cooperation and trade with Vietnam.

The PM thanked the Vietnamese leaders, government and people for their support to Myanmar at international and regional forums, particularly during periods of difficulty.

He said that, following the devastation wreaked by Cyclone Nargis, Vietnam shared its valuable experiences in the prevention of natural disasters and overcoming the aftermath, and provided assistance for his country through a national campaign to help the people of Myanmar .

He asked Ambassador Tung to convey his best regards to PM Nguyen Tan Dung and expressed his thanks to the Vietnamese government for its warm welcome during his visit to Vietnam for the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACEMECS) summit and the Cambodia, Laos , Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) summit, which took place in Hanoi from Nov. 5-7.-Enditem

- **-Vietnam annual inflation drops to 24 pct in Nov**

Vietnamese consumer prices fell in November fromOctober but were still 24.2 percent higher than a year ago, the 13th consecutive month of double-digit inflation, the government said on Tuesday. Annual inflation eased from 26.7 percent in October and 27.9 percent in September. November prices fell 0.76 percent from October, the second monthly drop after a fall of 0.2 percent in October, the General Statistics Office said in

its monthly report. Food prices were 51 percent higher in November than a year before. Three main components of Vietnam's price basket, from food to housing andConstruction costs to transportation and communication all showed price

Pressures abated, HSBC economist Prakriti Sofat said. Food and foodstuff inflation eased for the fifth consecutive month to 37.6 percent year on year, in line "with lower food commodity prices around the globe over the last few months," she said. Housing and construction inflation dropped to 14.7 percent versus 22.8 percent last month while transportation and communication also slowed to 19.3 percent from a peak of 26 percent in September and 24.8 percent in October. Vietnam should keep lowering interest rates next year and manage the exchange rate flexibly in the face of a worsening global economy, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung told parliament earlier this month.

- **Investors uneasy in volatile Vietnam**

As a wary group of international investors gathered this month in a hotel in Vietnam to listen to a pitch from a local fund manager, the public address system played the theme tune from the film *Mission: Impossible*.

Almost all emerging markets have suffered from the fallout, but Vietnam has been particularly hard-hit because the international crisis has coincided with the bursting of a domestic asset bubble.

Inflation, although starting to cool slightly, is still above 26 per cent and observers expect exports to the country's leading markets in the US and Europe to slow. Over the past few years, the country has established itself as a highly competitive low-cost producer. Vietnam-based analysts even argue that the current turmoil could present opportunities – as hard-pressed consumers in the West move down-market to save money, this is going to increase demand for the cheap garments, footwear and electronics that the country produces.

Agricultural exports – Vietnam is the world's second-largest rice exporter and a leading player in the coffee and seafood markets – will also provide some protection. But the country's manufacturers are walking a fine line. They are overwhelmingly high-volume, low-margin producers and it will not take a big demand slowdown to push them into the red.

The country's advocates among fund managers argue Vietnam's headline economic figures give an unduly pessimistic picture. But that has done little to reassure the markets. Worries about the country's economic fundamentals have been amplified by the flight to safety – net sales by foreigners in the last two months alone are put at about $370m, equivalent to more than 30 per cent of foreign investments not locked in closed-end funds.

Almost all the investment funds in Vietnam are trading at substantial discounts to their net asset value. Vietnam's government is doing its best to cushion the country from the crisis. It has cut this year's growth target to 6.5 per cent from 8.5 per cent last year – it has already started to reduce interest rates and it has widened the trading band for the dong, allowing it to move lower.But Vietnam is a relative newcomer to the complexities of fiscal and monetary policy and government intervention, such as the liquidity squeeze it initiated this year to tackle inflation, can be effective but heavy-handed.

• Laos

Political front:

- **Laos, Cambodia to boost investment cooperation**

(KPL) Laos and Cambodia have agreed to strengthen their friendship and increase bilateral cooperation between the two, particularly in investment relations in the near future. The Investment Protection Agreement governing this consensus was signed by Lao Deputy Prime Minister-cum-Minister of Foreign Affairs Thongloun Sisoulith and his Cambodian counterpart, Ho Nam Hong on 24 November.

The agreement was signed during the two-day official visit to Laos by Cambodian Prime Miniter Hun Sen, who is to attend the 5th summit of the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam (CLV) Development Triangle, taking place in the Lao capital of Vientiane from 26-27 November.

On the first day of his stay in Laos, the Cambodian Prime Minister held talks with Lao Prime Minister Buasone Boupphavanh. The two leaders expressed their pleasure at the two countries? Traditional relationship and spoke highly of their mutual assistance in socio-economic matters for the sake of the people of the two countries. On 25 November Prime Minister Hun Sen met with Lao President Choummaly Xayasone.

- **Vietnam provides help to support judicial sector of Laos**

The Vietnamese government provided recently 18 set of computers, 5 printer machines and 18 USB worth about 102,296,000 kip to support the working of judicial sector of Laos. The said assistance will be delivered to the Vientiane Capital, Bolikhamsay people courts and Southern Appeal Court.The presentation of the said assistance was held in Vientiane on 19 November in the presence of Mr. Khammy Sayavong, President of the People Supreme Court and a number of senior officials concern from Laos and Vietnam.

- **Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia further co-operation on development triangle**

Leaders of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia signed yesterday a Vientiane Declaration on strengthening the development triangle co-operation and approved the joint agreement of the fifth summit. These were a part of mechanisms to further their co-operation on development triangle area discussed at fifth summit of the Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh of Laos, his Vietnamese and Cambodian counterparts Nguyen Tan Dung and Samdech Hun Sen in Vientiane on 26 November.

At the summit, the joint co-ordination committee has also signed the MoU to build the policy for attracting and provision of facilities to promote trade, investment and tourism in which the mechanism has been asked to determine in order to realise the said MoU.

Mr. Bouasone Bouphavanh, Prime Minister of Laos has said that the signed agreements are very importance and significance because it would be a fundamental principle as well as the key reference for the member country to develop the development triangle area with sustainable, richness and prosperity manner. He added that in order to reach the goal of development triangle, the member country has to double work, particularly to increase the fund to develop the infrastructure and human resources.

During the event, the three sides has agreed to build the forum for business sector and propose to organise the meeting for leaders of three countries with business sector at the next summit. Laos and Vietnam has expressed thanks to Vietnamese government for its great assistance on human resource development. They also agreed to encourage the exchange visit of youth leaders from three countries and considered to organise the meeting for the youth leader of the three countries during the next summit.

On this occasion, the leader of the countries has unanimously agreed that the 5th CLV summit held in Vientiane on 26 November has reached with highest successful and met the target goals. In addition, the three PMs agreed to propose the ASEAN Secretary - General to ask the Thai government to confirm the hosting of 14th ASEAN Summit.

US Corner

Economic Front

- **ADB grants 1.3 mln USD to road upgrade study in Vietnam, Laos**

The Asian Development Bank has announced its grant of 1.3 million USD for the preparation of a project to upgrade national highways in Vietnam and Laos.

In the November 20 press release, the Manila-based bank said the money will go for feasibility for a project to upgrade 200 kilometres of national highway in central Thanh Hoa province in Vietnam and 140 kilometres of national highways in Houaphanh province in Laos. The study will provide detailed cost estimates and consider the environmental and social impacts of the Second Northern Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Transport Network Improvement Project. "By improving the efficiency of transport in the GMS northeastern corridor, the project will increase economic growth and reduce poverty in two of the poorer provinces of Laos and Vietnam," said Jeffrey Miller, Principal Transport Specialist with ADB's Southeast Asia Department.

The project will also help promote sub-regional economic cooperation, one of the pillars of ADB Strategy 2020 development agenda. Laos and Vietnam will provide the 150,000 USD each to help finance the feasibility study, which was estimated at 1.6 million USD.

- **Laos' economy to remain stable growth for next few years**

Laos' economic growth is expected to remain stable over the next few years despite the global financial crisis, said Lao Deputy Minister of Planning and Investment Bounthavy Sisouphanthong.

The MPI official made this forecast on November 18 while undertaking the mid-term review of the sixth national socio-economic development plan for the period 2006 to 2010.The forecast was based on the robust growth of Laos' hydropower and mining sectors, the Deputy Minister said.

According to the MPI's report, Laos registered an average annual growth rate of 6.5 percent during 1990 and 2005. In 2006 and 2007, the growth rate reached 7.9 and 8 percent, respectively.Deputy Minister Bounthavy said he believed that economic growth would remain strong at the end of the sixth five-year plan.

- **Electricity law needs to be amended to comply with economic growth**

The draft law on electricity needs to be amended to support the market-oriented mechanism and the electricity expansion, said Acting Minister of Energy and Mining Somboun Rassombath.

This was an explanation of Mr Somboun when he attended the fourth day of National Assembly Session of sixth legislative on 27 November. The old version of the law on electricity, enforced in 1997, consisted of 12 chapters, 56 articles, considering as an important tool for public administration, electricity business development in Laos and was attractable investments from local and foreign investors. This law was a great contribution to the poverty reduction.

Presently, the socio-economic development has developed and market-oriented mechanism has also moved forward, particularly the electricity production activities. ?In order to support the development and expansion of infrastructure as well as economy in the new era, it needs to amend the electricity law to comply to realistic conditions with the national economic growth and international law in the region, he added.
Mr Somboun proposed the amended draft of law and arrangement regarding to charter, articles and content, and other term to be appropriated or not?.
In 1995, the number of the nationwide total household access to electricity amounted to only 30 percent (200 megawatts) now the number increases to 60 percent.

- **Economic growth to remain stable in next few years**

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Social Front

- **ADB Eyes Road Improvement Projects in Lao PDR, Vietnam Provinces**

(KPL) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is funding a feasibility study for a road improvement project in two very poor provinces of Lao People?s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and Vietnam.

According to the source from ADB in Manila, ADB, through the Japan Special Fund, will extend a $1.3 million grant to help prepare a project to upgrade 200 kilometers (km) of national highway in Thanh Hoa province in Viet Nam and 140 kilometers of national highways in Houaphanh province in Lao PDR.

The project will also upgrade about 100 km of rural access roads in each country.
The study will provide detailed cost estimates and consider the environmental and social impacts of the Second Northern Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Transport Network Improvement Project.?By improving the efficiency of transport in the GMS northeastern corridor, the project will increase economic growth and reduce poverty in two of the poorer provinces of Lao PDR and Viet Nam,? said Jeffrey Miller, Principal Transport Specialist with ADB?s Southeast Asia Department.

The planned project will support other ADB transport sector investments in the northern GMS corridor which are aimed at creating an efficient and comprehensive cross-border transport

system, boosting trade and investment. The project will also help strengthen sub-regional economic cooperation, one of the pillars of ADB?s Strategy 2020 development agenda.Lao PDR and Viet Nam will provide the equivalent of $150,000 each to help finance the feasibility study estimated at $1.6 million.

Environmental Front

- **Laos and Sweden better environment manage**

The Water Resource and Environment Administration held its annual review meeting on Strengthening Environment Management Project (Phase II) in 2007-2008 in Vientiane yesterday. The meeting was officiated by the Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister?s Office and Head of the Water Resource and Environment Administration, Mr. Noulin Sinbandit, and other officials were also present.

The project is being supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). It began its assistance to Laos in environment management in February 2001 by providing funds to the Strengthening Environment Management Project for a five-year period. The second period commenced from October 2005-2010. According to the plan it covers six areas: law, policy and strategic plan on environment, assessment on environmental effects and environmental inspection, development of the Water Resource and Environment Administration body, education and awareness on environment, report and data dissemination on environment and assisting the provinces to better manage theirs finance. Mr. Noulin said: ?We have made many achievements during the last three years as the provinces are able to actively participate in environment protection activities, the co-operation on environment-related activities between relevant organizations and authorities have been enhanced.?

• Cambodia

Political front:

- **Under-developed countries meet in Cambodia**

Trade ministers and representatives from 49 least-developed countries (LDC) have gathered in Siem Reap, Cambodia, to discuss the impact of the current global financial crisis on their economies.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen opened the LDC ministerial conference on November 19, calling on developed countries to continue their assistance to and maintain their investment flow into the LDC in order to help them amidst the global crisis. It aims to help LDCs integrate their economies into the global trading system.

The two-day conference is jointly organised by Cambodia, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO).

One of the main topics on the agenda is "Aid for Trade" (AfT), a package of incentives designed to help overcome the structural and resource constraints of the least-developed countries in exchange for more speedy trade reforms.

- **Increases to military budget worry NGOs, political opposition**

Sam Rainsy Party and NGOs say increases in public spending should go towards social programs and economic infrastructure

GOVERNMENT proposals to sharply increase funds to the military and the prime minister's discretionary spending budget have raised concerns by the opposition party and local NGOs who say the money is being funnelled into corruption-prone sectors and should instead be used to bolster the country's social and economic development.

When it meets in early December, the National Assembly is expected to approve a fiscal budget for 2009 that increases military spending from US$224 million to $300 million, and unallocated funds for the prime minister to use on an ad-hoc basis from $196 million to $224 million.

The SRP was considering voting against the new budget allocations because they were not included in the spending debate, he added. But he doubted the proposals would be rejected, given the strength of the ruling party's numbers in parliament.

SRP lawmaker and spokesman Son Chhay questioned the ability of the government to increase its budget as the country's biggest-earning industries - garments and tourism - brace themselves for a downturn due to the global economic crisis. He said unscrupulous spending by government officials was draining the public coffers and urged the government to close loopholes in tax collection. Companies and the wealthy were withholding large sums of money owed to the state, he said. Son Chhay also warned of a repeat of the military's last influx of new funds, which was plagued by graft.

In 2002, the World Bank plunged $42 million into a demobilization program that went awry. Fabricating tens of thousands of ghost soldiers, government officials pocketed huge sums of money, while many of the real soldiers meant to benefit from the program remained without benefits. The debacle has heightened suspicions over the military's ability to handle funds responsibly.

- **Thai political turmoil seen as stalling border row talks**

But as Bangkok erupts in civil unrest, Cambodia unlikely to take advantage of its neighbor’s upheaval to press its point

A soldier unrolls cartridges of ammunition in Preah Vihear in this file photo. Civil unrest in Thailand makes a speedy resolution to the months-old border standoff unlikely.

AFTER ratcheting up its rhetoric last month, the government has since resisted taking jabs at Thailand over their disputed territory, even as escalating political upheaval in Bangkok has made

progress in border negotiations impossible. The government remains tight-lipped on its ability - or inability - to engage with the besieged regime.

But as rioting in Bangkok boils over into full-blown civil unrest, forcing the Cabinet to go into hiding and putting the government's foreign affairs on the backburner, Cambodia faces the possibility of losing another chance to advance negotiations over its shared border.

Some Asean member states have asked Thailand to postpone a regional summit it is supposed to host in Chiang Mai next month, and the scheduled bilateral talks in Siem Reap in January could also fall by the wayside.

Changing its tune

The government has been advancing a patient line on Thailand's internal turmoil. But this hasn't always been the case during the five-month-old standoff.

Hun Sen on October 13 delivered an ultimatum to Thailand that it must withdraw its forces from Cambodian territory, warning of a "full-scale conflict" if Bangkok did not comply. But, after a border clash a couple of days later that claimed the lives of three Cambodians, Hun Sen downplayed the threat of war.Telling reporters that "Cambodia is poor and will not show its muscles", Hun Sen assumed a decidedly humbler tone, which he has largely maintained since. This approach has frustrated Yim Sovann, a lawmaker from the opposition Sam Rainsy Party, who said Thailand's reliability as a negotiator should be raised during the Asean summit in December.

She also said that Hun Sen, while a seasoned veteran in persevering through domestic conflicts, had limited experience in formal international diplomacy, and therefore may still be finding his range in speaking on a dispute that's in the global limelight.

If Cambodia were to petition for third-party involvement, the international community would sympathies with the domestic difficulties in Thailand that left the hands of its government tied, he said.

Saving face is paramount in Asian diplomatic etiquette, he added, and pressing an already beleaguered regime could be seen as stepping outside the accepted rules of engagement.

"The Thai government is falling, so to step on it by pressing it for a resolution would be viewed as adding insult to injury."

- **Thai claims of land mine use on border ignored: Cambodia**

Thailand has accused the Kingdom of violating an international mine ban at a meeting on the Ottawa Convention, Cambodian delegates say

INTERNATIONAL delegates to an annual conference in Geneva on the global land mine ban have ignored Thai accusations that the Cambodian military has planted fresh mines during recent tensions along the countries' disputed border, Cambodian officials said Thursday. According to the Cambodian delegation in Geneva, Phay Siphan said, the Thai complaints were ignored by the other meeting participants.

'A grave threat'

At least one Thai soldier has been killed and two others seriously wounded in a spate of land mine incidents that have occurred during the five-month military standoff on the border.Following a blast that wounded two Thai troops on October 6, Thai Foreign Ministry officials accused Cambodia of laying new anti-personnel mines on Thai territory, calling it "a grave threat for the international community" and a violation of the 1997 mine ban treaty.But Cambodian officials insist that the Thais stepped on mines left over from Cambodia's civil war in the 1980s and 1990s.

Furthermore, Phay Siphan said that since unexploded mines were only on the Cambodian side of the border, the blasts proved that the Thais had crossed into Cambodian territory.

- **Cambodia not to raise Preah Vihear issue at ASEAN Summit**

Cambodia will not list its dispute with Thailand over the ownership of the 900-year-old Preah Vihear Temple on the agenda of the ASEAN Summit next month in Bangkok, according to sources from Phnom Penh.

The ongoing global financial crisis will top the agenda at the summit, and Cambodia will not raise the Preah Vihear issue there, said Cambodian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Hor Namhong. Cambodia is right not to bring the matter to the ASEAN summit, as all ASEAN member countries, as well as other nations friendly to Cambodia have said that they expect Cambodia and Thailand to solve their dispute through bilateral negotiations, he said.

According to the outcome of the recent meeting between the foreign ministers of the two Southeast Asian nations, the two sides will begin measuring the border line and locating existing border posts in December, and the Joint Border Committee and both foreign ministers are to convene new meetings in January, said the Cambodian Foreign Minister.

- **Cambodian army appoints first female general**

Cambodia has appointed Mem Sam An, the current deputy prime minister as its first female army General, local media reported.

The title was conferred by King Norodom Sihamoni at the request of Prime Minister Hun Sen.. She was formerly the minister of the National Assembly-Senate Relations and Inspection. Prior to the promotion, she held the rank of senior lieutenant general.

US Corner

Economic Front

- **First American-owned bank opens doors in Phnom Penh**

CAMBODIA'S first American-owned bank opened its doors Wednesday bringing the number of foreign-owned banks in Cambodia to 25.

Chea Chanto, governor of the National Bank of Cambodia, said that the launch would strengthen US-Cambodian ties and that the increase in foreign-owned banks demonstrates confidence in the local banking sector.

"The bank will focus on loans, especially for small and medium enterprises, which need capital to expand their businesses."John Kevin Baldwin, chairman of Angkor Capital Bank, said Wednesday that Angkor Capital Bank's investment capital is US$13 million.

Baldwin said that although he is familiar with the tough challenges of the world economy, he is grateful for the prudent regulatory framework implemented by the National Bank of Cambodia.

The primary company is named Bridge Capital and is based in Saipan. Soon the bank will launch a debit and credit card, accompanied by full service online banking plugging Cambodia into the world, he said.

- **Cambodia braces for land mine complaints**

Delegates at Geneva meeting to refute Thai claims that new mines laid

CAMBODIAN officials say they are ready to counter Thai accusations that the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces has mined the border with Thailand amid an ongoing dispute over contested territory.The allegations were made Monday in Geneva as signatories to the Ottawa Treaty gathered for a five-day meeting, Cambodian media reports said.The meeting follows a spate of mine-related incidents involving Thai border troops, which have claimed at least one soldier's life and severely wounded two others.

Khem Sophoan, director general of the Cambodian Mine Action Centre, said that Cambodian delegates were preparing to defend the country against any allegations that the border was being mined. Cambodian officials maintain that the land mines were likely left over from the civil war of the 1980s and 1990s, and that the Thai military is well aware of the dangers of patrolling along the border.

Rupert Leighton, country program director of the Mines Advisory Group, agreed that tensions were delaying mine removal.

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

South Asia

Ghashia Kayani

Weekly Report: from 22 November to 28 November 2008

Presentation: 3rd November 2008

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- Country heading for severe power crisis
- Revenue collection falls short of target in Q1
- 4,000 Bangladeshis go to India on educational pursuit every year

GEO-STRATEGIC:

- BD needs to focus on economic priorities: US Ambassador
- UN panel visits BD to assess preparation for general elections

AL to present election manifesto on December 12

Awami League Presidium Member Amir Hossain Amu on Wednesday said no conspiracy to foil holding of the national parliamentary election would be tolerated."After complete withdrawal of state of emergency, government will have to hold the national parliament election on December 29. We are reiterating our demand for canceling article 91 (E) and shifting the date of Upazila election by one month. The Election Commission has created confusion and uncertainty among the people over holding of general elections by frequent changing of schedules," after a meeting of Awami League-led grand alliance held at Dhanmodi party office, Amir Hossain Amu told reporters.Replying to query about seat sharing, he said after meeting with Awami League Presidium Members and its President Sheikh Hasina, the seat sharing among the grand alliance will be finalised.

Next govt may face shrinking economy: World Bank

The World Bank predicts tough times for the incoming elected government as Bangladesh's economy may shrink in the wake of the ongoing global crisis, though the finance adviser has rejected any forecast of a slowdown in GDP growth. "The negative impact of the global financial crisis will affect Bangladesh's economy in the near future," said World Bank-Dhaka bureau chief economist Vinaya Swaroop at a workshop at the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar office on Wednesday. Export earnings and remittances are likely to shrink by 0.2 percent and 1.1 percent which in turn will mean a decline in GDP growth from 5.4 percent to 4.8 percent, he said. The GDP growth rate has been targeted at 6.5 percent for the current fiscal year. In 2007-08 it was 6.2 percent. Last year, the export sector contributed 14.1 percent to GDP while this year it was estimated at 16.4 percent, Swaroop said. But if the crisis turned severe this would come down to 15.7 percent and if the crisis was medium it would be 16 percent, he said. The current fiscal year estimated the contribution from remittances to GDP at 10 percent, falling to 8.9 percent in case of an acute crisis or in a medium crisis it would come down to 9.2 percent. The WB official said that it was estimated that 1 million people would go abroad for work this year, but only 2 lakh people had found overseas work in the first three months (July-September) of the current FY.

Country heading for severe power crisis

The country's power sector is heading for a severe crisis for failure to implement power projects in public and private sector.The power shortage is now about 2,000MW. With fast increasing demand the situation is likely to be intolerable, affecting production in factories and field. Officials said generation of about 6336MW electricity was planned to add to the national grid by 2010, of which half was to come

by December 2009. But the achievement so far is less than 10 percent. Experts in the sector blamed the Power Division's too much interest in setting up rental power plants which are highly inefficient, costly in operation and high gas consuming. The power tariff of the rental plant is the highest, to the extent of Tk 15 per unit, as against normal power tariff of about Tk 2 per unit.For rental power plant, PDB is to incur huge loss, estimated at Tk 42 crore per month.The PDB's overall loss is about Tk 1200 crore in purchasing electricity from costly and inefficient plant. This year, the loss may cross Tk 1500 crore. Despite this huge loss, the Power Division has engaged its full efforts to implement the rental power plant projects. A few projects came into operation as per agreement while most others failed to come up.A total of 600MW rental power plant projects were undertaken in two phases in last two years, of which 300MW signed agreements for a 15-year term and another 300MW for a 3-year term. Of them, barely 160MW (20 MW Bogra+160 MW 3-year plants) has come into generation.

BNP to participate if polls shifted to 28 December

BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia on Thursday said BNP-led four-party alliance would participate in the ensuing parliamentary election if it is held on December 28."The BNP led four party alliance will take part in the general election on December 28, but in that case the government must lift the emergency completely from the last date of withdrawal of candidatures. Besides, section 91(E) of the amended RPO will have to be repealed and the polling date of upazila polls must be deferred by one month," said Begum Zia at crowded press briefing at her Gulshan party office last night.She claimed that as part of destroying BNP and family members of late President Ziaur Rahman, the government hatched a deep rooted conspiracy, but it failed to implements its blue-print."Earlier, as we wanted to contest the polls, we placed our seven point demands and the government assured us of implementing six demands out of those seven. But the government did not implement even a single demand. Later, when the BNP led alliance placed a short list of four points, the government after meeting with me termed the talks fruitful and said that the discussion would continue. But on Wednesday, the government without further consultation with us announced unilaterally its decision not to defer the election dates. Before taking decision though, the government contacted over phone with some of our leaders asking whether the alliance would contest JS poll if it is held on December 28, and the government also said that it would consider the other three demands if BNP did take part in the polls on December 28. Some influential quarters held several meeting at Chief Adviser's office and later the government suddenly gave the irresponsible announcement that elections will be held as per previous schedules," Begum Zia said.

3G licences by March

Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC) has decided to issue Third Generation (3G) licences for the Mobile Phone Operators by March next year and at the same time WiMax is set to launch its activities."The 3G licences will be issued within the first quarter of the next year, according to our deadline and definitely, those would be awarded through an open auction," Major General

Manzurul Alam (Retd) Chairman of BTRC said.Ericsson Bangladesh Limited, a telecoms vendor, introduced 3G network technology for the first time in Bangladesh on a trial basis in August. Ericssion, a Sweden-based company, got permission from the BTRC for successfully conducting 3G network technology demonstration.Experts said licensing the 2100 MHz spectrum for 3G services would enable Bangladeshi operators to launch mobile broadband services, through which customers can get fast and easy access to the internet and other online services.When asked, which technology, 3G or WiMax, will truly be relevant to Bangladeshi market. "Let the customers and the market decide which technology is suitable for Bangladesh," the BTRC chief said adding that 3G will spread much faster than any other form of technology.The GSM (Global System of Mobile Communication) signal covers about 95 percent of Bangladesh's area, but the mobile broadband marker remains untapped. If mobile broadband can be provided at affordable prices, the number of subscribers of 47 million will reach 70 million by 2011. Bangladesh has the world's lowest internet usage rate, having less than 1 percent internet penetration. The whole broadband market is dominated by local ISPs (internet service providers). Operators, however, are anxious about how much the auction price will be, when BTRC arranges for the auction for 3G. The WiMax operators recently hiked Tk 215 crore for each licence. The operators will have to launch WiMax by March next year. Among the three WiMax licence holders, only one could pay the licence fee within the deadline. The WiMax technology is expected to improve and enhance the current internet infrastructure in BangladeshAbout the rational pricing model for 3G, a high official of BTRC said, operators should try to find a balance between capital expenditure, auction price and tariffs.

Journalists blast political parties for double standards

Journalists on Thursday blasted the political parties for their double standard in speaking about autonomy of state owned television and radio as they alleged that political parties often speak in favour of providing autonomy to BTV and Bangladesh Betar while they are not in government, but they do not take any step to ensure autonomy of these media and often use it for their own interest while in power."The political parties often speak in favour autonomy of state owned TV and radio, but it is a matter of regret that these political parties do not keep their promise while in power. Even this caretaker government has passed about two years, but it is yet to take any fruitful steps to ensure autonomy of this media. Only this government formed a review committee," they said at a discussion meeting on 'Develop-ment of Television Industry in Bangladesh: Prosperity and Challenges' organised by Bangladesh Center for Develop-ment, Journalism and Communi-cation (BCDJC) held at the National Press Club yesterday.It may be mentioned here that 21 November 'World Television Day' is being observed world wide since 1996 under the auspices of UNESCO. For the first time, Bangladesh has observed the day under the joint auspices of BCDJC and KARUJ.They said as the BTV is being run by government, so it has lost its popularity and credibility due to failure of providing right information to the people.They also urged the government to ensure autonomy of BTV and Bangladesh Betar (radio) immediately to provide neutral information and to compete with the private channels.Speaking on the occasion, Journalist Joglul Ahmed Chowdhury said most of channels of our country have been failing to present investigative reporting and ensure quality of news and entertainments like neighboring India.The government should enact a specific law for monitoring the activities of private satellite

channels and to do that the existing National MassMedia Institute can play a vital role, said media personality Mohammad Jahangir.The speakers said in the age of globalisation, the TV media can play an important role in facing the challenges of 21st century.

Bangladesh 5th among 10 countries of neonatal deaths

Bangladesh is fifth among 10 countries with the highest number of neonatal deaths, a child congress was told here on Friday, urging the government to take further steps to cut it down to 50 per 1000 live births from the existing 65."Despite remarkable success in child survival, Bangladesh is still the fifth with the highest number of child deaths after India, China, Pakistan and Nigeria," Prof Mohammad Shaidullah, Secretary General of Bangladesh Perinatal Society (BPS), said as the keynote speaker at the congress at Bangladesh China Friendship Conference Center (BCFCC).BPS organised the three-day International Perinatal Congress, where Health Adviser Dr AMM Shawkat Ali spoke as the chief guest and BPS President Prof TA Chowdhury chaired it.Health Secretary AMM Nasir Uddin, National Professor MR Khan, Vice Chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) Prof Nazrul Islam, country representative of UN Children Fund (UNICEF) Carel De Rooy and Country Director of the Save the Children USA Kelland Stevenson also spoke on the occasion.Shawkat Ali said Bangladesh has substantially cut deaths of the neonats, children up to 28 days of age, to 65 per 1000 live births in 2007 from 116 in 1996-97. Public-private partnership is two potential areas to be focused on for further development.

4,000 Bangladeshis go to India on educational pursuit every year

Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty has said some 4,000 Bangladeshi students go to India on educational pursuits every year at different levels. "We value our traditionally warm and shared heritage with Bangladesh. Bangladeshi students who studied in India are very important links in the bonds of friendship between our two countries," he said as the High Commission hosted a reception to mark the ICCR Alumni Day, International Students Day and Education Day on Thursday evening. Pinak Chakravarty said India offers 100 scholarships to Bangladeshi students and scholars every year while the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) facilitates admission to students from Bangladesh under self financing schemes.

UN panel visits BD to assess preparation for general elections

A three-member high-level team from the United Nations would visit Bangladesh on Sunday to scrutinize the staging of parliamentary elections next month, the UN has said. "The panel is tasked with assessing the preparations and conduct of the elections through visits to Bangladesh before and during the elections," said UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's spokesperson in a statement in New York on Friday.

The panel begins its first visit to Bangladesh on Sunday and returns for about a week around the time of the election, before reporting back to Ban Ki-moon with its key findings and recommendations. The

caretaker government had asked UN secretary general Ban Ki-Moon to send a high-level panel in an effort to ensure that the elections are free and fair. Parliamentary polls are scheduled to take place on December 18, an election the government has pledged to be the fairest in the country's history. Francesc Vendrell, the secretary-general's former personal representative for Afghanistan and European Union envoy to the same country, will head the UN panel. The other members are Bhojraj Pokharel, Nepal's chief election commissioner, and Aracelly Santana, the former deputy director of the UN Electoral Assistance Division. While visiting Bangladesh earlier this month, Ban Ki-moon described the upcoming polls as an "historic opportunity" for the country. "It is in the world's-and your-best interest to see Bangladesh achieve its full potential for democratic development through free and credible elections," he told reporters at his pre-departure press conference."Now is the moment to stand against polarization and violence that have characterized past elections," the secretary-general had said.

Call to expand market for natural gas-based vehicles

To expand the market for natural gas-based vehicles and accessories through creating awareness about the technology and safety issues, a four-day 1st International CNG (Compressed Natural Gas) Exhibition-2008 began in Dhaka on Saturday.Organisers said the exhibition, the first of its kind in Bangladesh, will bring together about 40 local and foreign companies that are engaged in manufacturing and trading of various CNG products, such as cylinders, kits, accessories, compressors and dispersers."We are very pleased that CNG sector companies from 16 countries are participating in the event," Md Kamaluzzaman, Chief Executive of Global Event Management Services," said adding "The exhibition, amid growing concerns among commuters in the wake of explosions of the cylinders of CNG-run, has brought safety issues to the fore." The fair will also help increase the number of CNG users and provide necessary information to the CNG businessmen and vehicle owners, he said. The number of CNG conversion workshops stood at 130 and CNG filling stations at 296 in October, providing refueling services to 1,46,235 CNG vehicles, according to official figures of the Rupantarita Prakritik Gas Company Ltd (RPGCL).An increase in CNG driven vehicles also fuelled a rise in natural gas consumption. CNG consumption rose by 78 per cent, from 6.71 billion cubic feet to 11.99 billion cubit feet in the fiscal year 2006-07. Demand for CNG has been estimated to be 20.4 billion cubic feet for fiscal 2007-08, according to official data.

BD needs to focus on economic priorities: US Ambassador

US Ambassador to Bangladesh James F Moriarty on Sunday said the current financial crisis reinforced the need for Bangladesh to focus on economic priorities. "These priorities include investment in infrastructure, diversification of exports and manufacturing, enhancing food security and the development of human capital," in a written statement he told reporters at a function on "World Economic Crisis and Impact on Bangladesh" organised by International Business Forum of Bangladesh at a city hotel yesterday. Moriarty said the United States will continue to be a committed partner as Bangladesh pursues these endeavors."The efforts and resources expended on this financial crisis have

led some to question the commitment of developed countries to helping poor nations around the globe. Let there be no question that the United States will continue to stand by its friends, including Bang-ladesh and also it is working with partners to unleash the greatest engine of prosperity the world has ever known, free trade," the US Amba-ssador said. He said the world currently faces serious economic challenges and the crisis in financial markets is affecting the real economy in almost every corner of the world."For developing nations, the value of trade is nearly 40 times the value of foreign aid on the other hand according to the World Bank, complete elimination of barriers to trade in goods would boost annual income in developing countries by more than $140 billion," Moriarty added. He said open economies and well-functioning markets are essentials to economic growth, employment and prosperity. "This current crisis can only be resolved through a commitment to the rule of law, respect for private property, open trade and investment, competitive markets and efficient, well-regulated capital markets," he said.

Second Amendment to Constitution challenged

The High Court on Monday issued a rule on the government asking it to show cause as to why proclamation of emergency by the President invoking his power vested on him under Article 141C of the Constitution shall not be declared violation of and inconsistent with the basic feature and fundamental structure of the Constitution for suspending fundamental rights and frustrating independence of judiciary.A Division Bench comprising Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain and Justice Kamrul Islam Siddiqui passed the order following a public interest litigation (PIL) writ challenging the President's power to promulgate state of emergency.The Court issued another rule on the government asking it to show cause as to why insertion of Article 26(3), Article 141 B, Article 141C and Article 142 (2) in the Constitution by way of amendments shall not be declared ultra-vires of the basic feature of the Constitution.M Asafuddowlah, Nurul Kabir, Amir Khasru and Rahnuma Ahmed filed the writ.The rules have been issued on the government represented by the secretary to the Ministry of Law, secretary to the office of the President and secretary to Home Ministry and they have been directed to reply to the rules within 4 weeks.

Experts for use of biotechnology in agro sector

A country like Bangladesh where 65 per cent labour force is engaged in agriculture, application of biotechnology in this sector will result in an innovative improvement.This was stated by speakers at a discussion on "Development of Biotec-hnology: World Perspec-tive and Ban-gladesh" held at the National Press Club on Tuesday. Former VC of Dhaka University AK Azad Chow-dhury, Agriculturist Shaikh Siraz, economists Mahbubul Hossain and CPD researcher Uttam Dev took part in the discussion. They focused on necessity of biotechnology in this populous country and boosting of food production

and improvement of agriculture, medicine and environment by using biotechnology.They said this technology provides us with the means to make rice more nutritious and already biotech products such as soybean, oil, corn powder and powered milk are penetrating into the country's market from overseas markets. They further said at least 52 countries have granted regulatory approvals for importing biotech crops and millions of people have been eating genetically modified foods for decade without any obvious ill effects. On the other hand, biotechnology can contribute to our energy sector and lessen dependency on imports of fuels from abroad. Besides, by the using of this technology drought and salt tolerant crops can be produced and it helps development of crops to combat fungal and other plant pathogen. They said, "The developed countries are using biofertilisers and hence have minimised the practice of chemical fertilizers. They have not only increased the productivity of land but also have controlled land pollution by applying biofertilizer on their cultivable field. It is really very unfortunate that the benefits of biotechnology have not been utilized in Bangladesh whereas using this technology we can develop ourselves and save the environment and biodiversity for the next generation."

Revenue collection falls short of target in Q1

Revenue collection by the three wings of the National Board of Revenue (NBR) fell short of targets in the first quarter of fiscal 2008-09.The major revenue collecting wings -- Customs Department lagged behind the target by Tk 4.03 billion due to sharp decline in prices of major import items.The department, however, recorded a 28 per cent growth in revenue collection. The revenue collection was worth Tk 52.31 billion, which was Tk 11.33 billion more compared with that of the same period in previous fiscal.For the current fiscal, the government projected 41 per cent growth in revenue for the customs department to help achieve the total revenue collection target of Tk 545 billion.Collection from Value Added Tax (VAT) and income tax also fell short of target by Tk 7.64 billion and Tk 11.05 billion respectively in the first quarter, although the revenue board has achieved growth of around 18 per cent and 10 percent respectively in VAT and Income tax collection in the July-September period over the corresponding period of the last fiscal.In a quarterly analysis for 2007-08 to 2008-09, it is found that the NBR has achieved a 20.36 per cent growth in first quarter than that of the same period in last fiscal. The government has set a higher revenue collection target following the upward trend of commodity prices in the international market in June, but the situation has dramatically changed now, said a senior customs official.The government had set tariff structure on the basis of product prices, he said adding that the declining prices of MS rod and fuel oil will mostly affect the revenue earning of customs department.When asked whether the NBR has any plan to bring change in tariff structure, the official said, "We will adopt a wait-and-see policy and observe the situation. Any tariff change will directly affect the local market and businesses."The NBR, however, collected Tk 19.14 billion more in July-September period in the current fiscal compared to that of the previous fiscal. Officials said the revenue collection usually remain slow in the first quarter every fiscal. They expressed their hope that it would gain momentum from January next.

SRILANKA:

POLITICAL:

- Sri Lankans to demonstrate in Paris against LTTE terrorism
- Prime Minister to Lead Sri Lanka Delegation to Doha Summit
- Eliminating LTTE Terrorism from Sri Lanka- Let the Armed Forces Handle It
- A total of 22,390 Tamil Tigers have died in the illusive search for a separate state in Sri Lanka
- Tamil Nadu state second all party meet reprimanded Sri Lanka for rejecting ceasefire
- Invitation to the LTTE by the President is a positive change

SOCIAL:

ECONOMIC:

- Global taxpayers have spent around $ 8 trillion to shore up the world's banks
- Coconut growers attempt to maintain sustainable nut prices

GEO-STRATEGIC:

- France renews its cooperation agreement with SLRC
- President of Sri Lanka condemns terrorist attacks in India

President of Sri Lanka condemns terrorist attacks in India

Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapakse in his strongly worded statement condemned the brutal acts of terrorism that killed more than 100 persons and injured many more in the attacks carried out in the Indian city of Mumbai last night. "My Government and I hasten to condemn most vehemently the brutal acts of terrorism that killed more than 100 persons and injured many more in the attacks carried out in the Indian city of Mumbai last night", President Mahinda Rajapakse said. In his statement Sri Lanka President reiterated that these unfortunate attacks bring into focus the urgent need for concerted action by all countries to eradicate the menace of terrorism, wherever it is, and whoever the leaders and manipulators of such violence may be.

Invitation to the LTTE by the President is a positive change

President Mahinda Rajapakse has stated several times that there should be political solutions to the political problems and that there cannot be military solutions. Also Sri Lanka President has invited LTTE Leader V.Prabakaran for talks. The invitation by the LTTE is seen as positive change says Prayathna People's Movement.

France renews its cooperation agreement with SLRC

The National Television Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) and the French governmental

organization Canal France International (CFI) have renewed their Partnership Agreement on the audiovisual field. Since February 2000, CFI offered to SLRC, many sorts of French and European television programs: news, entertainment, education, and sport etc. After the positive evaluation of the partnership with SLRC, CFI, "supplier of programs" for SLRC, has proposed to widen the agreement to a mission of "cooperation

Tamil Nadu state second all party meet reprimanded Sri Lanka for rejecting ceasefire

Tamils in Tamil Nadu and Tamils worldwide wants ceasefire but Sri Lanka government adamantly rejects it. In the unanimous resolution adopted, it has been further pointed out that apart from Sri Lanka government being adamant that the war cannot be stopped - even though one of the parties have accepted our request and announced that 'they are ready for a ceasefire' - carry out indiscriminate and aggressive attacks with a intent to annihilate all the Sri Lankan Tamils. The second Tamil Nadu All Party meet was convened by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.Karunanidhi yesterday morning at the Chief Secretariat in Chennai.

A total of 22,390 Tamil Tigers have died in the illusive search for a separate state in Sri Lanka

Tamil Tigers' UK sources have claimed in anticipation of the coming Heroes' Day celebrations planned in London on November 27 that 373 young men and women have died so far as suicide bombers in a so far unsuccessful attempt to create a separate state carved out of Sri Lanka. Quoting Kilinochchi sources, the LTTE local media said from November 27, 1982 to November 20, 2008 a total of 274 male suicide bombers and 104 female suicide bombers have died while trying to carve out a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka.

Coconut growers attempt to maintain sustainable nut prices

The coconut growers in Sri Lanka has been agitating for some time about the government's lukewarm attitude towards the development of the coconut industry in Sri Lanka. The latest enemy of the coconut industry in Sri Lanka has now been identified as the haphazard importation of palm oil and the way the government acts appears to be really aiding and abating the down fall of coconut industry. As a result there is the intermittent wars between the coconut growers and the government as this haphazard importation of Palm Oil has become a vigorous detriment to the improvement of the coconut industry in Sri Lanka.

Eliminating LTTE Terrorism from Sri Lanka- Let the Armed Forces Handle It

Let no one who is not militarily trained to combat terrorist warfare stand in the way of our Combined Armed Forces and Civil Defense operations which are performing an excellent task right now in entering the once strongholds of LTTE un-cleared territory. With extreme dedication and focus, our valiant forces are moving steadily forward and regaining lost ground so that all citizens who live in the North can return to peace and harmony and begin to live in the true sense of "human rights" without terrorist

dictators in the likes of Velupillai Prabhakaran and Pottu Amman kidnapping & brutally murdering family members of the civilians.

Right lessons for Sri Lanka from Obama

Since the day Barack Obama won the U.S. Presidential Elections, we have seen how Sri Lanka's 'multiculturalists' went into raptures. Without a moment's hesitation they began lecturing and pontificating on the urgent need for this country to learn from America and give a member of an ethnic minority the opportunity to become Head of State. The attempt of these pundits to draw similarities between the two societies on this issue however is absurd to say the least. When American Civil Rights Leader Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I have a dream," and "We shall overcome" he meant his dream of overcoming discrimination and segregation based on skin colour. And Barack Obama's victory marks the realization of that cherished dream.The United States allows people from all over the world to come there and create a corner for them. It permits children of immigrants to run for office in that nation. This no doubt should be recognized as the greatest practice of democracy and humanism. The U.S. has encouraged hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans to apply for the green card lottery every year and try their luck in becoming permanent residents in the land of opportunity.

Prime Minister to Lead Sri Lanka Delegation to Doha Summit

Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake will lead the Sri Lanka delegation to a major UN Conference on Financing for Development scheduled to take place in the Qatari capital of Doha November 29-December 2. The Prime Minister is due to address the plenary, along with dozens of other world leaders, on the global financial crisis and its impact on developing nations such as Sri Lanka. The delegation will include several government officials, including Sri Lanka's former Permanent Representative to the UN, Prasad Kariyawasam, who is currently an Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Sri Lankans to demonstrate in Paris against LTTE terrorism

Hundreds of Sri Lankans are expected to gather at Trocadero, under the shade of the most popular tourist attraction of the world, the Eiffel Tower on November 23 to protest against the dreaded terrorist outfit, the Tamil Tigers. The demonstration, organized jointly by all the Sri Lankan associations and societies in France is scheduled to begin at 3.00 p.m. on Sunday. The organizers have appealed to 'all patriotic Sri Lankans in France to participate at the demonstration jointly organized by the United Sri Lankans (USL.

Global taxpayers have spent around $ 8 trillion to shore up the world's banks

Sri Lankan Auditor General, S Swarnajothi, lodged a serious indictment against the Chief Executive Officers (CEO) of companies for the present global financial crisis and said that a similar blame accrues to the external auditors who review the accounts and issue opinion on the financial reports. Mr Swarnajothi made these comments while making the keynote address at the launch of the Baker Tilly Lanka (Pvt) Ltd Business Consultants, the consulting arm of Baker Tilly Merali's Chartered Accountants, at Galadari Hotel, last week.

NEPAL:

POLITICAL:

- **President Yadav urges unity for timely drafting of constitution**
- **No army integration if Maoists don't correct themselves: Koirala**
- **Parties fail to reach consensus on CA vice chair**
- **Four parties field candidates for CA vice chair**
- **Maoist cadres' conference adopts 'new strategy'**
- **By-elections in March**
- **Maoist policy helping rightists, says Khanal**
- **Elected PM cannot speak against parliamentary democracy**

SOCIAL:

- **Protests disrupt traffic in Kathmandu**

ECONOMIC:

- **Top stock regulator makes damning charges against govt; steps down from his position**
- **NRB to discourage investment on real estate**
- **USAID supports investment in hydropower**
- **Global recession could hit Nepal's remittance income: IMF**

GEO-STRATEGIC:

- **Britain's top military brass to visit Nepal**
- **'India ready to revise existing bilateral treaties'**

Elected PM cannot speak against parliamentary democracy:

GP Koirala Nepali Congress president Girija Prasad Koirala has criticised the statement by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal that Maoists would not accept parliamentary form of democracy in Nepal.Inaugurating a seminar on Thursday in Kathmandu organised by Nepal Democratic Lawyers Association, Koirala said Dahal cannot by ethics speak against parliamentary democracy since he was elected through popular votes.He sought assistance from lawyers in strengthening the democratic institutions in the country and chalking out sketches for the kind of federalism that Nepal should adopt.Koirala stressed on the need to divide the nation into states based on geography with Nepali peculiarities but said his party needs suggestions and recommendations from law experts on the subject.The former PM underlined the importance of unity among the political actors in the country for

continued assistance and support from the international community and writing a new constitution for Nepal within the time frame.

Protests disrupt traffic in Kathmandu

Transport services in Kathmandu valley have been disrupted from early morning Thursday as student groups and relatives of the two slain youths staged protests in several places.Traffic in Kalanki, Kalimati, Balkhu, Pradarshanimarg and other places have halted with the situation turning tense due to the protests.The protestors alleged police authorities of not paying attention though the parents of Ritesh Rauniyar and Ashish Manandhar reported their disappearance on November 16.The protestors also demanded guarantee of security for citizens and compensation to the deceased families.The two teenagers from Tahachal were reported disappeared since November 15. Their dead bodies were discovered in Thankot .

Maoist policy helping rightists, says Khanal

The Maoist policy of pursuing People's Republic is only helping the right wingers, according to general secretary of ruling coalition partner Unified Marxist Leninist (UML), Jhal Nath Khanal.He accused the Maoists of diverting the attention from constitution-making by raising issues of people's republic."The Maoists are advocating people's republic by forgetting the achievements made by people's revolution. It will only help rightists," he said, speaking in Pokhara, ."We are trying to consolidate democratic republic while the Maoists are rooting for people's republic," he said.Khanal added that the Maoists were committing grave mistake by terming Nepali Congress (NC) as their enemy following the abolition of monarchy.He said NC, too, is a friendly transformational force.His comments have come even as the Maoists have decided to adopt "People's Federal Democratic National Republic" as their main policy.

By-elections in March

The Election Commission (EC) is preparing to hold by-elections in six vacated constituencies in the third week of March, 2009, according to a commissioner.Ayodhi Prasad Yadav, an election commissioner, told journalists in Biratnagar, Wednesday that the EC was in talks with the government over holding the by-elections.The by-elections have to be held in six constituencies after some candidates who won from two constituencies in the April Constituent Assembly election, resigned from one of those.

Maoist cadres' conference adopts 'new strategy'

The six-day long national cadres' conference of the CPN (Maoist) held at Kharipati of Bhaktapur ended Wednesday evening, adopting new strategy which, according to party leaders, is a 'synthesis' of separate policy documents presented by party chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal and organisation department chief Mohan Baidya.Talking to reporters after the conclusion of the national conference, party spokesperson Krishna Bahadur Mahara said the conference has adopted a slogan 'people's federal democratic national republic', which pretty much sums up the immediate strategy of the party.The national conference adopted the strategy after intense brainstorming over the documents of Dahal and Baidya, Mahara informed claiming that the decisions taken at the conference "have brought party unity to a new height".Leaders said the new strategy seeks to institutionalise democratic republican order while keeping the option of "gradual advancement towards people's republic" open.During the group-wise debate, the cadres gave a clear thumps-up to Dahal's document, but suggested that leadership

come up with a single document by merging the two. Owing to their pressure and to avert looming leadership crisis the party stalwarts had agreed to merge the two proposals.1200 senior party workers including People's Liberation Army commanders had participated in the national conference.

'India ready to revise existing bilateral treaties'

Visiting External Affairs Minister of India, Pranab Mukherjee, has reiterated that the Indian government is ready to replace the old treaties between the two neighbours with new ones.Mukherjee said this during a brief encounter with journalists in Sunsari district where he inspected the reconstruction works at the damaged Koshi embankment, on Wednesday.He also said the Indian government is serious towards finding a proper solution to difficulties caused by damaged embankment of Koshi River, adding that India would extend all possible assistance to divert the river to its original path.Mukherjee visited some of the flood-affected areas in Sunsari. Foreign Minister Upendra Yadav was present during the inspection visit.During Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's visit to India in September, the two governments had reached an agreement to complete the reconstruction of Koshi dam by April next year.Stating that India has suffered more from the inundation than Nepal, Mukherjee stressed the need for implementation of the past agreements.According to Koshi agreement, construction, maintenance and reconstruction of the Koshi barrage and the dam is a liability of the Indian government.

Four parties field candidates for CA vice chair

As the deadline to file nominations for vice chairperson of the constituent assembly nears end, four parties have fielded their candidates for the post.According to the schedule published by the CA secretariat, nominations have to be filed by 4 p.m. Wednesday.So far, Pratibha Rana of Rastriya Prajatantra Party, Khobhari Raya of Sadbhawana Party, Leela Nyaichyai of Nepal Majdoor Kishan Party and Purna Subedi of CPN (Maoist) have filed their nominations.Nepali Congress and Terai Madhes Loktantrik Party that had been laying claims for the post are yet to make their decisions. Other smaller parties including CPN (ML) also said they would file their candidates while CPN (UML) said it won't file nomination.Bilateral and multilateral discussion among the parties failed to pick up a common candidate on Tuesday but agreed to elect a female candidate to the post.

Top stock regulator makes damning charges against govt; steps down from his position

Accusing the government of ignoring the deteriorating situation in securities market, chairman of Securities Board of Nepal (SEBON), Dr Chiranjibi Nepal, has resigned from his post.He accused the government of indifference towards introducing necessary laws to bail out the plunging capital market.“From its value worth 60 percent of GDP, the capital market has already come down to 40 percent of GDP. But there is no seriousness on the part of the government,” he said, addressing a press meet, Wednesday.“In India, the Finance Minister holds daily briefing with securities market chief,” he said, adding that nothing like that happens here. He also criticised the government decision to impose capital gain tax and sundry other taxes discouraging share investors. “Even a minister goes around saying that securities market is just like gambling,” he accused.Nepal in his resignation letter said the government did not cooperate with the Board in better managing the financial market and it showed sheer indifference at a time when it is required to come up with necessary measures. He said the actions of the government have discouraged the investors.

Parties fail to reach consensus on CA vice chair

As the parties have failed to reach consensus to field a common candidate for the Constituent Assembly (CA) vice chair, it is likely that they will fight it out.The parties needed to reach consensus on the issue by Tuesday. However, Nepali Congress (NC), Terai Madhes Loktantrik Party (TMLP) and other smaller parties have staked claim to the position.In fact, the 13 smaller parties have already projected RPP member Pratibha Rana as their common candidate for the position.The process of filing candidacy and the election of vice chair will begin from Wednesday.As per the approved statute calendar, a vice chair has to be elected within November.

No army integration if Maoists don't correct themselves: Koirala

In what may be an indication of further worsening of relations between the Maoists and the opposition party, Nepali Congress (NC), president of the NC and former Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala has warned of not allowing army integration to take place "if the Maoists don't correct their behavior." Addressing a mass meeting at Ramleela Maidan in Nepalgunj on Saturday, Koirala said there would not be any integration of former Maoist fighters if the Maoist party continued to go against the commitments it made in the past. The NC, according to him, will not allow politicisation of the national army.He further said the unruly activities of the Young Communist League (YCL) will bring down the Maoists in no time.He also accused the Maoists of "saying one thing and doing the opposite". "But Nepali Congress does what it says." The NC president also claimed that the NC has won the confidence of the international community because it sticks to its principles.Koirala added that he came to Nepalgunj to tell the general public about the importance of drafting new constitution on time.Thousands of NC cadres from mid-western districts like Banke, Bardiaya, Dang and Surkhet participated in the mass meeting. More than 200 buses brought the participants for the mass meeting held amid tight security.

Global recession could hit Nepal's remittance income: IMF

The ongoing global economic crisis could hit the remittance earnings for Nepal, according to officials of International Monetary Fund (IMF).The remittance earning is the mainstay of foreign exchange earning for Nepal. Last year, Nepal earned nearly Rs 100 billion from remittances. And in recent years, the remittance earning have grown by thirty percent, on average.Addressing a press conference in Kathmandu, Sunday, Brian J. Aitken, deputy division chief, Asia and Pacific department of IMF, said, "Remittances remain the primary source of foreign exchange and they have been growing very rapidly. What we expect is there will be slowdown of that growth rate. And if it occurs it will take place over several years."But he pointed that economic situation of India will have far more bearing on Nepal than the global recession.Nepal is fairly isolated from the global economic situation. But the main shadow is probably the slower growth in India," he said.Aitken, however, downplayed concerns that donor assistance for Nepal could also be decreased due to slowdown in economies of western countries."I don't see any slowdown in donor pledges. And I certainly do not expect any over the next year or two. Governments may reassess their pledges but they certainly haven't done so in case of Nepal," he said.Aitken had led an IMF delegation, which had come to Kathmandu, to evaluate the budget prepared by the new government.

President Yadav urges unity for timely drafting of constitution

President Dr Ram Baran Yadav has said a democratic constitution can be written within stipulated time only when there is broad political unity.Speaking during a face-to-face with children at his Shital Niwas residence Monday morning, President Yadav also said the new constitution should institutionalise democratic practice.He noted that there has not been significant progress in establishing democratic practice, which is causing anarchy in the country.Receiving a 15-point appeal on child rights, prepared by Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre (CWIN), an NGO, Dr Yadav emphasised that the government must give high priority to protection of child rights and added that he was ready to extend any help for that.Saying that the decade-long conflict took its toll mainly on women and children, President Yadav added that all sides should join hands to end the conflict once and for all.

USAID supports investment in hydropower

The USAID has launched the "Nepal Small Hydro Fund," to support the investment in the hydropower sector.The fund is an initiative of the U.S. Agency for International Development's South Asia Regional Initiative for Energy (SARI/Energy)."A Rs. 300 million hydropower deposit fund has been created to develop hydropower projects in Nepal, unlocking the potential of the hydro survey licenses that have been issued by the government," says a press release issued by US Embassy.The fund was launched at a programme where potential investors, developers, and high level representatives from the Government of Nepal, USAID/Nepal and SARI/Energy were present at the event organized by the Clean Energy Development Bank.USAID's SARI/Energy is providing technical assistance to the Clean Energy Development Bank (CEDB) to develop the fund. SARI/Energy supports private sector financial institutions to enable investment in small and medium-sized hydropower projects.Reiterating the need for investment in hydropower for sustainable economic development, Beth S. Paige, Mission Director of USAID/Nepal, said "Encouraging private sector financial institutions to invest in hydropower is an important first step to accelerate Nepal's efforts in developing its indigenous hydro-resources to fulfill its own and regional energy needs. Nepal with its vast hydropower potential can be a regional electricity supplier which will foster closer regional cooperation on a broad range of other issues."USAID's SARI/Energy promotes clean energy access in South Asia through three main areas: cross border energy trade, energy market formation, and regional clean energy development. Through these activities, SARI/Energy facilitates efficient regional energy resource utilization, works toward transparent and profitable energy practices, mitigates the environmental impacts of energy production, and increases regional access to energy. The countries participating in the initiative are Nepal, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

NRB to discourage investment on real estate

The Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) plans to tighten monetary policy discouraging financial institutions to make further investment in real estate without investigating risks, The Kathmandu Post reported.he initiatives come after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) commented that loose monetary policy of Nepal has some contribution to boost real estate prices, adding the decline in their prices would invite negative impact on the investors.The daily quoted Acting Governor Krishna Bahadur Manandhar as saying that NRB had increased 'risk weight' provisioning to 150 percent in the real estate sector against 100 percent in other sectors.He further said increased cash reserve ratio (CRR) to 5.5 percent from 5 percent was

meant to discourage banks and financial

Britain's top military brass to visit Nepal

The British Army's Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt is scheduled to visit Nepal from Friday 28th November to 1st December 2008.General Dannatt is here to see British Gurkhas Nepal's recruit selection process and to be briefed on its supporting activities, the British Embassy in Kathmandu said in a statement Thursday.This will be General Dannatt's first visit to Nepal during his tenure as the professional head of the British Army.According to the statement, the British army chief will be paying courtesy calls to the President, the Prime Minister and the Defence Minister.He will also meet with his Nepalese counterpart, Chief of Army Staff General Rookmangud Katawal, at the Nepal Army Headquarters.

MALDIVES:

POLITICAL:

- President says revenge obstructs good governance
- Diplomats to be recalled: Foreign Service to be restructured
- Seeking foreign aid main task
- VP of World Bank South Asia Region calls on President Nasheed
- President to refer decentralization issue to Majlis
- President Nasheed meets STELCO Board Directors

SOCIAL:

- 20,000 Maldivian women abuse
- Maldives freedom hero Nasir dies

ECONOMIC:

- Jet fuel prices reduced
- 2008 budget to face a shortfall of 1.5 billion
- 2009 budget to cover health insurance for 100,000 people
- Govt submits Rf 13.6 Billion budget for 2009

President says revenge obstructs good governance

President Mohamed Nasheed has said revenge obstructs good governance, and it is important to shed away feelings of revenge if we are aiming to achieve good governance. The new President who assumed office on 7th of this month after defeating former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in the first multi-party presidential elections was speaking this afternoon at the President's Office while expressing his grief and condolences on the sad occasion of the demise of former President Ibrahim Nasir on Saturday after living 30 years in exile in Singapore. Mr Nasir passed away at the age of 82 years after a prolonged illness. Nasir went into exile following allegations of abuse of state funds immediately after President Gayoom took over from Nasir in 1978. Nasir was later tried in absentia and sentenced for misappropriation of state funds. Nasheed paid a glowing tribute to late President Ibrahim Nasir for his

outstanding services to the country. The President also said late President Nasir was confronted with great difficulties and problems during his 30 years of stay away from the Maldives. This has resulted in disintegration of the family of the late President and this has cast a dark shadow in the life of this nation, President Nasheed said. Late President Nasir's body was flown from Singapore and was accorded state honors. The body is lying in state in the Presidential Palace where thousands of people are visiting to pay their last respects to a leader who had given them selfless service. Most of these people had never seen late President and they have not heard much about his yeoman services and outstanding personality. Critics blame former government for shunning information about President Nasir and the invaluable services he rendered to the country.

Maldives freedom hero Nasir dies

Former President Ibrahim Nasir has passed away last night at 2115 at Mt Elizabeth Hospital in Singapore after suffering from prolonged illness. According to media reports, President Nasir's family was with him when he passed away. President Nasir, 82, is survived by 5 children and has been living in Singapore since he resigned office in 1978. He departed for Singapore on 7 December 1978 and was residing there since then. President Mohamed Nasheed and former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom have offered their condolences to the members of the bereaved family. President Nasir's body is to be flown back from Singapore to Male' to be buried with full honors. However it is unclear when the body will be flown in. National flag has been lowered to half mast to symbolize the national loss and 23 November Sunday is declared a national holiday following the death of Ibrahim Nasir. Speaking with the media last night, Vice President Dr. Waheed said that the Government was making arrangements to bring Former President Nasir's body to the country to grant him a State funeral. On behalf of President Nasheed, Special Envoy of the President, Ibrahim Hussain Zaki is already in Singapore to facilitate necessary arrangements. The funeral ceremony will be arranged by a committee consisting of senior officials from the President's Office, Ministry of Islamic Affairs, MNDF, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Home affairs. Following the funeral ceremony, a book of condolence will be kept open at the President's Office, Government Ministries, Atoll Offices, and Island Offices and at Government Missions abroad. Ibrahim Nasir Rannabandeyri Kilegefan, KCMG, NGIV, born 1926, is a Maldivian statesman who served as his country's Prime Minister under Sultan Muhammad Fareed Didi and succeeded him to become the first President of the Second Republic from 1968 to 1978. President Nasir belongs to the royal family of previous Maldivian sultans and his lineage can be traced back Dhiyamigili dynasty. President Nasir is widely credited with modernizing the long-isolated and nearly unknown Maldives and opening them up to the rest of the world. His foremost work include that of bringing Maldives to the UN even with the opposition of some nations that felt awkward at including a nation of such a small size. He laid the foundations of the nation by modernizing the fisheries industry with mechanized vessels and starting the tourism industry. Even today the nation is dependent on these two industries as a primary source of income for the nation He is also credited with many other improvements some of which include: introducing an English medium of education, introducing TV and Radio and establishing Television Maldives and Radio Maldives, abolishing Vaaru, a tax levied on islanders and developing the country's first international airport. The most important achievement credited to President Nasir is re establishing

the country's sovereignty, from being a British protectorate to an independent state.

Diplomats to be recalled: Foreign Service to be restructured

High Commissioners and ambassadors designated to various foreign countries are to be recalled and Foreign Service to be restructured in an effort to minimize government expenditure, reliable sources informs Miadhu Daily.According to information received expenses of some embassies are very high and beyond reach. In this regard, in the past some embassies spend US $ 60,000 towards the education of children of ambassadors and US $ 30,000 annually towards furniture. Such high expenses are not fair by the people, reliable source said. When questioned on the matter, foreign ministry Ahmed Shaheed replied that he has already asked 3 ambassadors to return back and that approximately 60% of the current expenses incurred on embassies will be cut down. "We will have shut down some embassies, we will be looking at ways to reduces expenses like reducing staff, approximately 60% of the expenses will be reduced" Shaheed replied.

Jet fuel prices reduced

The Maldives Airports Company (MAC) has reduced the price of jet fuel sold by the company to various aircrafts refueling at Male' International Airport on Thursday. The company on Thursday informed that effective from Thursday the prices of Jet A-1 sold by the company has been reduced to Rf8.85 per liter to international operations. The company also informed that price of Jet A-1 domestic operations were reduced to Rf9.48 per liter. MAC earlier sold jet fuel for international operations at the rate of Rf11.71 per liter, and Rf12.58 for domestic operations. The company also said that the jet fuel prices had now been brought down to the level it was during July last year. Maldives Airports Company also sells jet fuel to the Island Aviation, Maldivian Air Taxi and Trans Maldivian Airways as well as various international carriers. The company had last reduced the price for jet fuel on the 5th of this month.

2008 budget to face a shortfall of 1.5 billion

President Mohamed Nasheed (Anni) has expressed that 2008 state budget will face a shortfall of 1.5 billion rufiyaa as most of the envisaged government revenue was not forthcoming as well as due to high government expenditure. Briefing the media on the current economic situation and the estimated 2009 budget President Nasheed expressed that previous government has signed contracts with various contractors without any consideration to the government revenue. He also noted the many promises made by the previous government to the people. President Nasheed said that despite the circumstances, his government will honor the previous government's pledges and decisions as it involved the people. President expressed that expenditure without parliament approval was unconstitutional and that his government is now faced with this burden. However Nasheed expressed that he assumed the presidency with full confidence that he can take on such heavy burdens. President Nasheed also gave assurance that necessary funds to bridge the gap will be generated.

2009 budget to cover health insurance for 100,000 people

The proposed state budget for year 2009 will include health insurance for 100,000 people, President Mohamed Nasheed (Anni) has said. President Mohamed Nasheed, providing a general overview of the proposed 2009 state budget to the media on Monday at a press conference held at President's office, expressed hopes that this will relieve many of the difficulties faced by the public in obtaining medical care. President informed exact details of figures proposed in the budget for health insurance for 100,000 will be given after the estimated budget is submitted to the Parliament for approval. Establish a proper health insurance scheme to bring an end to the present custom of 'begging for medical care' is one of the main electoral pledges of President Mohamed Nasheed. During his days of presidential campaign Nasheed has pledged to establish a health insurance scheme for the welfare of the people. President Nasheed yesterday noted that a parliament majority was essential for his government and his party to fully realize his electoral pledges. He expressed that the people will afford him that opportunity in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. Speaking on the main components of the estimated budget President Nasheed highlighted that funds to fulfill another of his electoral pledge, the pledge to provide an amount not less than Rf 2000 to every Maldivian citizen above 65 years of age, has been included in the budget

Govt submits Rf 13.6 Billion budget for 2009

The newly appointed government of President Mohamed Nasheed (Anni) has submitted an Rf 13.6 Billion state budget for year 2009 to the People's Majlis. The budget was presented to the 17 th sitting of the third session held on Tuesday by Minister of Finance and Treasury Ali Hasim. The total amount of the proposed budget for year 2009 by the government is Rf 13,648,951,740. Finance minister Ali Hashim in presenting the proposed budget for 2009 expressed that the budget will face a shortfall of Rf 5.793 Million and that it can be balanced with the anticipated revenue of Rf 1.217 Million to be received from revenue generated by extending lease period of resorts; anticipated revenue of Rf 225 million from corporate tax and Rf 4.351 million anticipated as foreign aid. The minister noted that extending the lease period of the resorts depends of legislation yet to be endorsed by the Majlis. Minister said 73.4percent of the budget is on administrative expenses and that the budget also takes in to account funds given as pensions and retirees. The amount allocated for environmental protection has been increased Rf 291 Million. The 2008 state budget allocated Rf 157 Million. Defense expenses were reduced to 4.2 percent of the budget from this year's figure of 5.2 percent. The amount allocated for education was increased from Rf 1.538 million in this year's budget to Rf 2.432 Million in the proposed budget for 2009. Rf 3.628 Million has been allocated as capital expenses which is 3.4 percent higher than the amount allocated in this year's budget. In contrast to 2008 budget, Rf 430.2 Million from government earnings as import duty has been omitted. The 430.2 Million includes Rf 105 million which the government will loose by waiving import duty on essential food items for a healthy living; Rf 10.5 million by waiving duty on medicines and Rf 314 million by waiving duty on diesel. Finance Minister Ali Hashim expressed that national GDP will increase by 4.5 percent as the fishing has improved and more tourists are expected to arrive. The 2009 state budget allocates Rf 2797.2 Million for general services and 47.9 percent of the budget has been allocated for social services. Finance ministry also revealed that despite the budget proposal, the budget will be revised in March next year.

20,000 Maldivian women abused

More than 20,000 Maldivian women are subject to abuse of sorts according to a survey conducted by Ministry of Health and Family. Director at Ministry of Health and Family Fathimath Yumna speaking to Miadhu Daily revealed that due to increasing number of cases of abuses and injustices being reported to the ministry, a survey was undertaken in 2006 and that the results indicated more than 20,000 Maldivian women were subject to abuses of various sorts. Yumna revealed that according to survey, one out of every three women between ages 15 to 49 are a victim of physical or sexual abuse. According to Yumna, Maldivian women are subject to various forms of abuse from the moment of birth till death. Even elderly women and children are also subject to various forms of abuse and injustices by family members and others. Yumna noted that most of the abuses come within the family and that the 2006 survey conducted globally showed the sexual abuse of young women was especially high. She noted that although the number of women under abuse in 2006 remained at 20,000, the number has increased considerably since then and that number of complaints being reported is increasing with increased awareness in atolls. In this regard five cases were reported to concerned authorities between January and August this year, Yumna said. She said most cases reported are of sexual and physical abuse.Yesterday, 25 November is the International Day for Elimination of Violence against Women which is being marked globally. Various programs are held across the country to mark the day. This year's theme is Human Rights for Women; Human Rights for all.

Seeking foreign aid main task

The foreign minister of the new government Dr. Ahmed Shaheed has said the most important work of the ministry presently in is to source the much required foreign aid needed for the country's development. At a press conference held at press room Fansavees/ Dharubaaruge to brief the media on the Government's new foreign policy priorities, Dr. Shaheed said, that this year's budget is expected to face severe shortfalls and that it is likely 2009 budget may suffer the same fate. "As such if urgent steps are not taken to seek foreign aid the country may suffer disastrous consequences, so we have to give priority to seek foreign aid and assistance" foreign minister said." Minister said the most important work of his ministry in the first 100 days will be sourcing foreign aid and exploring all avenues and doors for such aid. Minister emphasized that work has already been initiated and is well underway, and that arrangements have already been made to visit some friendly countries. Minister Shaheed highlighted the importance of reducing government expenditure. In this regard, he stated that the Foreign Service would be restructured to streamline cost efficiency, requiring the reorganization of the Ministry as well as its missions abroad. He noted some embassies established by the previous government will be closed down but will discuss the matter with concerned foreign government before any closure. He pointed out embassies in Washington and Singapore as likely offices for closure. Continuing, the Minister stressed for urgent need to mobilize foreign assistance and commercial opportunities to mitigate the worst effects of the current economic crisis. Minister Shaheed also spoke about possible effects Maldives may face due to graduation from the list Least Developed Countries (LDC) in 2011. "It is incumbent on UN countries to provide assistance and aid to countries included in the list, when providing aid , foreign countries will consider which country is the most deserving, so they look to the LDC list, even in trade, important privileges are given to LDC countries" Shaheed expressed. He expressed the need to be prepared to face the challenges of the graduation from the list. State Minister for Foreign Affairs Ahmed

Naseem, and Mohamed Naseer, Permanent Secretary, also participated in the media briefing.

VP of World Bank South Asia Region calls on President Nasheed

President Mohamed Nasheed (Anni) has met with Vice President of World Bank's South Asia Region, Isabel Guerrero, according to President Office. The meeting was held on Wednesday afternoon at the President's Office. President Nasheed during the meeting emphasized on the contributions of the World Bank for the development of the Maldives and thanked the World Bank for the assistance it has provided to the country. Further, President Nasheed highlighted the economic constraints of the country, and said that Maldives would need the support and assistance from the World Bank, to improve the current economic situation. Ms. Guerrero gave assurance that the World Bank would continue its assistance to the Maldives.

President to refer decentralization issue to Majlis

President Mohamed Nasheed (Anni) has expressed that the government would refer the issue of decentralization of administration in the Atolls, to the People's Majlis. President Nasheed made this statement while speaking to the media at a press conference held at the President's Office on Wednesday. Noting that no specific law yet existed in the Maldives on the decentralization of administration of Atolls, the President said that therefore, the right way to implement this undertaking would be to seek the approval of the People's Majlis. President Nasheed was joined at the press conference by the Vice President Dr. Mohamed Waheed and Special Envoy of the President Ibrahim Hussain Zaki. The newly appointed Cabinet of President Nasheed at a meeting held on Sunday 16 November discussed the decentralization of the administrative structure of Atolls. The Cabinet recommended to the President to decentralize the administrative divisions in the Northern and Southern Atolls. President Nasheed briefing the media, after the cabinet session had expressed, that North Thiladhunmathi Atoll, South Thiladhunmathi Atoll and North Miladhunmadulu Atoll were grouped as Northern Region while, Addu Atoll and Fuwamulaku Atoll were grouped as Southern Region. President also revealed plans to assign two State Ministers to administer the two regions. A Council consisting of elected members from the Island Development Committees were also be set up to assist the State Ministers. President also said that 4 departments would be established to assist the State Ministers. President's Office on Saturday on 22 November informed that members of the technical committee on decentralizing the administration of atolls have officially commenced their work and members discussed the regionalization and decentralization structure of Atolls. They also discussed on mobilization of staff from Male' Government Offices to Regional Offices and on transferring functions from Male' to Regions.

President Nasheed meets STELCO Board Directors

President Mohamed Nasheed on Wednesday met with the Board of Directors of State Electric Company (STELCO). Speaking at the meeting President Nasheed stressed on the importance of improving services and the efficiency of the company, and expressed that the government was seeking an overseas joint

venture partner. President Nasheed also called on the Members of the Board of Directors to actively participate in the management of the Company. President Nasheed appointed the Board of STELCO on Thursday 20 November. Hassan Zahir of M. Ranfas was appointed as the Chairman of the Board of Directors of STELCO. Other members appointed to the Board were; Zaid Mohamed, Managing Director of STELCO; Ali Azwar, Assistant Director of STELCO; Abdulla Waheed Assistant Executive Director of the Maldives Energy Authority; Mohamed Rasheed of G. Dhuvarusaa; Mohamed Rasheed of M Maadu; Mohamed Rasheed of H Flat no: 2308 and Khadeeja Abu Bakuru of H Blue Corner.

MYANMAR:

POLITICAL:

- Bilin monks boycott government officials
- Burma and a task unfinished, considering the options
- Trials and prison transfers continue in Rangoon
- Betancourt urges more action to free Aung San Suu Kyi
- High security along state borders to ensure smooth Mizo polls
- Junta hands down ridiculouds prison sentence in latest crackdown of free expresions

SOCIAL:

- Urgent Lack Of HIV/AIDS Treatment Threatens Thousands
- Mine casualties in Burma nearly double
- The failure of ART scale-up in Myanmar

ECONOMIC:

- Gold market fluctuates sharply
- Myanmar timber export market declines

GEO-STRATEGIC:

- **Indian puppet show launched in Myanmar former capital**

Junta hands down ridiculouds prison sentence in latest crackdown of free expresions

What do you get for helping survivors of Cyclone Nargis, which tore up Rangoon and the Irrawaddy Delta in May? Extreme jail time, apparently. A popular comedian active in Burma's democracy movement was sentenced to 45 years in jail on 21 November for criticising the junta's slow response to the cyclone, videotaping the damage and organising his own relief efforts - what IFEX members are calling a "historical low point" for free expression in Burma. Just weeks before UN Secretary General's planned visit, Zarganar, Burma's Charlie Chaplin, was sentenced to 45 years for "creating dissatisfaction towards state and government" and violating the Electronics Act, which regulates electronic communications. Sports columnist Zaw Thet Htwe and Thant Zin Aung were sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment each, and Tin Maung Aye received 29 years in prison, for similar roles in the cyclone relief efforts. All four activists still face charges in trials happening as early as this week. Human Rights Watch

described the jailing of Zarganar (which means "Tweezers") as "a cruel joke on the Burmese people," adding that it was "a bigger joke on those abroad who still think ignoring repression in Burma will bring positive change." An outspoken satirist of the junta, Zarganar was arrested in June, shortly after he gave interviews to overseas news outlets such as the BBC, criticising the junta's reponse to the disaster. The day after his arrest, state-controlled media published warnings against sending video footage of relief work to foreign news agencies, says CPJ. The government appears to be expediting the trials of journalists, lawyers, poets and activists, many involved in the relief efforts or last year's monk-led protests, says the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). More than 100 activists have been sentenced to harsh prison terms in the past two weeks, including 65 years to the key members of the so-called 88 Generation of activists, and 68 years to Ashin Gambira, the leader of the monks' alliance that led last year's anti-government uprising. "The sentences we have witnessed in Burma this month are nothing less than an assault on free expression," said CPJ. "That it should stem from reporting in the public interest is a shocking indictment of the ruling military junta." According to IFEX members, the disproportionate punishments send out a clear message that the junta will not tolerate opposition in the lead-up to their alleged "democratic" 2010 elections. And many more cases are lined up - including against magazine editor Zaw Thet Htwe, human rights defender U Myint Aye and activist monk U Gambira. Amnesty International says the junta holds more than 2,100 political prisoners, up sharply from nearly 1,200 in June 2007 - before the pro-democracy demonstrations. Often, the trials are happening in special courts based in prisons, "devoid of any form of openness or transparency," say ARTICLE 19 and Index on Censorship. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) says the defendants' families and lawyers are rarely notified about the trials and witnesses for the defence are not allowed. Nor does the junta care what the international community thinks. The wave of trials has been condemned by the UN, as well as the United States and European countries, but critics are saying their condemnation isn't enough. In the wake of Cyclone Nargis, Zarganar told the news magazine "the Irrawaddy," "I am not happy with the UN. Why are they so concerned with the government's endorsement of their relief work? They should have taken more risks." Human Rights Watch and RSF are calling upon the UN Security Council to address the deteriorating human rights situation in Burma and expand existing international sanctions on the military government and its leaders. RSF is also calling on the EU to create new, targeted sanctions for the head of the judicial system, as well as the judges who took part in the trials. RSF and the Burma Media Association also support the call made by U Win Tin, a leading journalist and member of the opposition National League for Democracy, to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon not to go to Burma under the current circumstances. Meanwhile, ARTICLE 19 and Index on Censorship note that the states with the largest influence on the Burmese junta - China, India and Thailand - have remained silent. They are urging these countries and others in ASEAN to raise these abuses with the Burmese authorities. They are also demanding that European Union member states use the upcoming 11th EU-China Summit in Lyon, France, to bring up these issues with the Chinese government.

High security along state borders to ensure smooth Mizo polls

Aditional forces have been deployed in the areas along the Mizoram’s porus border with Manipur in a run-up to December two Assembly elections to prevent any insurgent activity. “While one platoon of state armed police was deployed at the border hamlet of North Chaltlang, patrolling by the armed

personnel was also stepped up along the sensitive pockets of the border in the wake of threats by the ultras," L Hrangnawna Deputy Inspector General of police (northern range) sai"We cannot be everywhere and the boundaries are extremely porous. But we are our best to seal the border," he said.Additional police personnel have also been posted along the Mizoram-Assam border areas to prevent any insurgent group sneak in and interfere in the hustings.While the state government has asked for 15 additional companies of central para-military forces, the Centre have so far dispatched only five companies. So the state had to manage from its own armed police strength, the DIG said.The state has three Mizoram Armed Police battalions and four India Reserve Battalions besides policemen spread over eight districts.The administration has deployed more policemen in the border areas in view of threats by Hmar People's Convention (Democratic) received by village leaders along the areas adjoining Manipur, last week.The Assam Rifles-BSF personnel have been also deployed along the 722-km long Mizoram-Myanmar-Bangladesh to seal the border during electioneerin.

Gold market fluctuates sharply

Myanmar's gold market, like the global market for gold, has shown sharp fluctuations during the roller-coaster ride that commodity prices have experienced over the past few months.Despite the isolating effect of strict import and export restrictions, as well as the traditional role of the precious metal in the local economy as a repository of wealth and a valuable item of barter, the price of gold in Myanmar broadly mirrors international price movements.During the past several months, fluctuations in both the world market and in the Myanmar domestic gold market have been rapid and severe.Gold hit a peak this year with a March 17 price (on the London afternoon gold price fixings) of US$1011.25 an ounce. By October 1 it had fallen to $880, bottoming out at $712.50 by October 24. This week, the price of an ounce of gold on the international market had edged back up a little at $734.Gold also reached its highest price in Myanmar this year in March, when it touched K601,000 per tical. On October 24 the price hit a low of K516,000, and has risen slightly this week to K519,000 a tical. (One tical is 0.6 oz)As with the world market, the price volatility of Myanmar gold is unpredictable.Fluctuations can happen in minutes. During a recent interview by The Myanmar Times with Maung Kain Gold Shop manager U Thar Naing, the domestic price of gold changed three times, while the international price quoted on the TV screen remained unchanged.U Thar Naing, a member of executive committee of Yangon Gold Entrepreneurs Association, said observers of the international market expected global gold prices to fall to $700, and that the Myanmar gold price would also gradually decline.

Mine casualties in Burma nearly double

Reported cases of landmine casualties in Burma skyrocketed during the course of 2007, with civilians accounting for the vast majority of those injured or killed, says a report by an international landmine watchdog.According to the Landmine Monitor Report 2008: Toward a Mine-Free World, 2007 witnessed at least 409 landmine related casualties in Burma, resulting in a confirmed 47 fatalities. In contrast, the previous year saw only 232 casualties and 20 deaths.The contested district of Taungoo, in Pegu Division, accounted for nearly 60 percent of casualty figures for 2007, in cases where geographic specific data was available.Recorded numbers are almost assuredly below actual figures, as no reliable system for

data collection exists in the country.For the year, Burma and Russia are singled out as the only two countries in the world to have employed new anti-personnel mines. All but nine of the known victims for 2007 were civilians.Civilian casualties, for cases in which details are known, most frequently occurred while: foraging for forest and jungle produce or collecting wood (46), traveling (22), engaged in agriculture (19), portering (18), and during instances of forced labor (16).The International Labor Organization, active in Burma, received a number of allegations from civilians regarding the Burmese Army's employment of civilians for forced landmine clearing operations; allegations consistent with information that Landmine Monitor independently collected.Burma's Army has been chronicled to use mines to both dissuade villagers from returning to their homes and to prevent villagers from wandering beyond their isolated hamlets, given the situation at hand, according to rights groups active along Burma's borders in neighboring countries.As for non-state armed groups, mines are often reputed to be one of the few weapons they have at their disposal to oppose the superior firepower of the Burmese Army – with the detonation of a mine sometimes serving no purpose other than to alert villagers to abandon their homes.If unable to gain assistance from a nongovernmental organization, mine victims are often left to fend for themselves."The high cost of healthcare was the biggest obstacle to receiving treatment; ongoing conflict and travel limitations further hampered access to services," according to the report. Inadequate state facilities and investment into the healthcare industry are also said to blame.Domestically, Myanmar Defense Products Industries, a state enterprise in Pegu Division, is known to produce non-detectable antipersonnel landmines. Landmine Monitor, however, also calls attention to the foreign supply of landmines in Burma, of Chinese, Indian, Italian, Russian and American make.Among the non-state armed groups named by Landmine Monitor as using landmines during 2007, are the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Karenni Army, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S), the Monland Restoration Party and United Wa State Army (UWSA).Landmines littering Burma's rural areas are concentrated along the country's borders with Thailand, India and Bangladesh.Since independence in 1947, Burma's central authorities have intermittently come up against dozens of non-state armed groups, most of whom operate in border regions.Burma is not a signatory to the 1998 Ottawa Convention, or Mine Ban Treaty as it is commonly known. China, India, Russia and the United States are also among those countries not party to the Convention.

Myanmar timber export market declines

Myanmar's timber export market has apparently declined as international purchase power falls, triggered by the global economic crisis, reported the local Weekly Eleven News Tuesday (November 25, 2008).Quoting a recent paper reading session involving timber entrepreneurs, the report said that in Myanmar's legal teak export market, India took up 38 percent, standing atop, followed by Europe with 20 percent and North America 10 percent.As such countries as India, China and European's are facing economic crisis, Myanmar's timber export market are also being impacted, it said.China stands as Myanmar's largest consumer of tropical wood, while India lines up as the second.Some experts also viewed that along with the increased large- scale infrastructural construction in China, demand of timber would certainly be high giving rise to more opportunity to Myanmar's timber export.Meanwhile, as the market prices of teak worldwide rises, the inclusion of teak in furniture shows remain with only

about 5-10 percent, the paper reading session said, however, adding that the teak prices remain steady at 1.5-2.0 million Kyats (1,250-1,660 U. S. dollars) per ton.According to market survey, parquet was priced as 4,500 to 5,000 U.S. dollars per ton previously, while it is now quoted at only around 3,500 dollars per ton.Myanmar held furniture shows occasionally since 2004 to introduce the country's value-added wood products to the world market since export of wood log is restricted and export of teak log by the private sector also banned since 1992 when the government enacted the Forest law.According to official statistics, Myanmar exported 399,596 cubic-meters of teak and 1.12 million cubic-meters of hardwood in the fiscal year of 2007-08 which ended in March, gaining a total of 538 million U.S. dollars of foreign exchange.During the year, timber stood as the country's fourth largest export goods after natural gas, agricultural produces and mineral products.Myanmar is rich in forest resources with forest covering about 50 percent of its total land area.

Betancourt urges more action to free Aung San Suu Kyi

Former hostage Ingrid Betancourt has said the international community needs to do more to bring about the release of detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.Speaking at the Norwegian foreign ministry last week, Betancourt said the international community should not let economic interests prevent them from doing all they can for Aung San Suu Kyi and the people of Burma."If the international community had done enough, she would be free, so the answer is we have not done enough and we need to do more," she said."I think it's very important that economic interests do not get in the way of the struggle of the people of Burma."Betancourt was kidnapped while campaigning for the Colombian presidency in 2002 by rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and was held for six and a half years.Since her rescue in July this year, she has travelled the world campaigning for an end to kidnappings in Colombia and violence against women.She has regularly spoken in support of Aung San Suu Kyi and called for her release.Betancourt said she had a deep admiration for Aung San Suu Kyi and hoped to do more for her cause."I think that she is the soul of Burma, she is the hope of Burma," she said."She needs to stay alive because it doesn't matter how dark the night can be; she is that light in Burma and we need that light to continue shining until it becomes a very big sun."Drawing on her own experience in captivity, Betancourt said that Aung San Suu Kyi should remain positive and look to the future."The only thing that I can tell her – and she knows – is that she has to live it day by day, knowing that the day of freedom and of victory will come for her, and that we will be there with her to rejoice," she said."She needs to know that this will happen and that we are just waiting for that moment to come."

Trials and prison transfers continue in Rangoon

The Burmese regime continued with its program of sending newly convicted political dissidents to prisons in remote parts of the country.hey included two Buddhist monks, Sandar Thiri and Kawvida, of Maggin monastery in Rangoon's Thingangyun Township, who were transferred from Insein Prison to Buthidaung prison in Arakan State, according to reliable sources.A youth member of the opposition National League for Democracy, Thein Swe, and Sithu Maung, a member of the All Burma Federation Students Union (ABFSU), were transferred from Insein Prison to Sittwe prison in Arakan State, while a

third detainee, Htar Htar Thet, was transferred to Pegu prison in central Burma.The five had been given sentences of up to 19 years imprisonment.More than 30 activists sentenced in the recent series of trials were transferred on Monday and Tuesday from Insein Prison to isolated prisons around Burma.The Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) says that more than 100 of the 143 dissidents convicted so far have been sent to remote prisons. By transferring the convicted dissidents to prisons far from Rangoon, the regime is making it difficult for family members and friends to visit them, isolating them still further from the outside world.Court proceedings continued this week against 13 members of the 88 Generation Students group, who have already been sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from three to five years.An ABFSU member, Dee Nyein Lin, who has already been sentenced to six and a half years imprisonment, also appeared again in court in Htantapin Township in Pegu Division on Wednesday. No additional sentence was pronounced, sources said.Court proceedings against 13 members of the 88 Generation Students group are due to continue on Friday. Sources say about 40 dissidents, including volunteers who distributed aid to Cyclone Nargis victims, are still awaiting trial.Burma's best-known comedian Zarganar, who has received a sentence of 45 years imprisonment, will reappear in court in Insein Prison on Thursday, sources said. Court proceedings against two who helped him in his relief work, Zaw Thet Htwe and video journalist Thant Zin Aung, who both received 15 years prison terms, will also reappear in court on Thursday.On Monday, Kyaw Oo and Saw Maung, two members of the dissident group known as Generation Wave, were sentenced to eight year prison terms for offences under Section 13/1 of the Immigration Act and Section 17/1 of the Illegal Organization Act.The severest punishment handed out by the Insein Court in the current series of trials was 68 years imprisonment, imposed on the prominent Buddhist monk Ashin Gambira, who led the nationwide uprising in September 2007. Fourteen members of the 88 Generation Students group were sentenced to terms of 65 years imprisonment.

Burma and a task unfinished, considering the options

Burma and its political conditions are documented frequently in newspapers, websites and blogs across the world and the democratic movements in Burma are supported worldwide, yet despite all the social support, nothing concrete seems to be happening on the political front. An effective political and social agenda would be necessary for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the transfer of power to her political party. There are two possible options that could now be considered for the successful democratic transition in Burma. One is a political and international option of possible military action against the junta and the other is a social and regional option, a movement led by the Burmese people and these options don't have to be mutually exclusive either. The Democratic Voice of Burma has reported on monk leaders and student activists being continually imprisoned and given long term prison sentences. The junta has been cracking down on all forms of freedom of speech and human rights initiatives by monks, students, support groups and local people for allegedly 'inciting public unrest'. Ironically though the Burmese junta itself is the greatest and only source of public unrest in the nation and has been holding on to power illegally and it is high time that the world leaders, the United Nations and other organizations take action against such a criminal government. There has been no definite and concrete action on the part of world leaders to free Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters and China and Russia have consistently downplayed the Burma issue as regional rather than an international problem. China

and Russia seem to have their own political and diplomatic interests in maintaining a military government in Burma but this is against the interests of Burmese people and all supporters of democracy.Among the recent resolutions passed by the UN on the situation in Burma, the 28 February 2008 Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, reports on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar. The Report mentions that the UN General Assembly:1. Strongly Condemns the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators in Myanmar; and2. Expresses Concern on the systematic violation of human rights and fundamental freedom of the people of Myanmar. The Report also calls upon the military government of Myanmar to:Participate in a dialogue with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights; Put an end to military operations on civilian targets; and Participate in a political transition process engaging in discussions with ethnic minorities, and other political groups including Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy.As of now it seems highly unlikely that the military government of Burma would engage in any form of dialogue with the UN or suddenly stop its abuse on Burmese people unless a very strong and strict joint statement is released by the UN and the world leaders to either free Aung San Suu Kyi and all other pro-democracy activists or face dire consequences. Since the Burmese junta understands only the language of violence, maybe world leaders and the US should consider a military operation as a last option to free Aung San Suu Kyi and the other prisoners. Aung San Suu Kyi herself is a follower of Gandhian principles and has opposed all forms of violence in her political struggle.Yet the military junta does not seem to understand her language of non-violence, so there could be only two possible solutions:1. A Mass Uprising in Burma – by the people of Burma and this has to be considerably large and consistent until the junta is left unable to control the situation any further. The uprising by the people would need the support of human rights groups, religious groups and activists all around the world and there has to be a systematic call to this kind of revolutionary change. Strong regional participation by the Burmese people should be complemented by international support. This of course requires effective leadership inside and outside Burma and proper coordination of all Burmese democracy support groups and activists, so that there is a force of 'collective action'. Violent resistance on the part of the junta is inevitable but this could be defeated if the collective action of the supporters of democracy is strong enough.2. The Military Option – This seems to be the only effective political and international option that could be considered as a last option if dialogues are no longer possible with the Burmese junta and if a social uprising also fails. US and other world leaders could use military force to oust the Burmese military government and hand over power to the pro- democracy movement of Aung San Suu Kyi. This again has its pitfalls as military action results in civilian deaths as well and this is one option that many supporters of democracy wouldn't want. Considering the need for peace and stability in the region, the first 'social' path to democracy seems to be a better option and the Burmese people and international activist groups, are almost working towards it, yet the strong condemnation and action by world leaders and the UN are long overdue. It is hoped that the hushed and directionless speeches on Burma by world leaders and organizations including the UN, and the US and EU governments will be replaced by stronger and clearer statements with promise of concrete actions for democracy in the region.

The failure of ART scale-up in Myanmar

The situation for many people living with HIV in Myanmar is critical due to a severe lack of lifesaving

antiretroviral treatment (ART). MSF currently provides ART to more than 11,000 people. That is the majority of all available treatment countrywide but only a small fraction of what is urgently needed. For five years MSF has continually developed its HIV/AIDS programme to respond to the extensive needs, whilst the response of both the Government of Myanmar and the international community has remained minimal. MSF should not bear the main responsibility for one of Asia's most serious HIV/AIDS epidemics. Pushed to its limit by the lack of other services providing ART, MSF has had to make the painful decision to restrict the number of new patients it can treat. With few options to refer new patients for treatment elsewhere, the situation is dire.An estimated 240,000 people are currently infected with HIV in Myanmar. 76,000 of these people are in urgent need of ART, yet less than 20 % of them receive it through the combined efforts of MSF, other international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Government of Myanmar.For the remaining people the private market offers little assistance as the most commonly used first-line treatment costs the equivalent of a month's average wage. The lack of accessible treatment resulted in 25,000 AIDS related deaths in 2007 and a similar number of people are expected to suffer the same fate this year, unless HIV/AIDS services - most importantly the provision of ART - are urgently scaled-up.The Government of Myanmar and the International Community need to mobilize quickly in order to address this situation. Currently, the Government spends a mere 0.3% of the gross domestic product on health, the lowest amount worldwide, a small portion of which goes to HIV/AIDS. Likewise, overseas development aid for Myanmar is the second lowest per capita worldwide and few of the big international donors provide any resources to the country. Yet, 189 member states of the United Nations, including Myanmar, endorsed the Millennium Development Goals, including the aim to "Achieve universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it, by 2010". As it stands, this remains a far cry from becoming a reality in Myanmar.As an MSF ART patient in Myanmar stated, "All people must have a spirit of humanity in helping HIV patients regardless of nation, organization or government. We are all human beings so we must help each other". Unable to continue shouldering the primary responsibility for responding to one of Asia's worst HIV crises, MSF insists that the Government of Myanmar and international organizations urgently and rapidly scale-up ART provision. A vast gulf exists between the needs related to HIV/AIDS and the services provided. Unless ART provision is rapidly scaled-up many more people will needlessly suffer and die.Myanmar is experiencing one of Asia's most serious HIV epidemics, yet the available care and treatment meets only a fraction of the needs. As a result people are dying unnecessarily, people who are desperate to live and contribute to their family, community and country. An estimated 240,000 people are thought to have HIV in Myanmar. Of these people, 76,000 are in urgent need of lifesaving antiretroviral therapy, yet less than 20% of those in need of treatment receive it.This is one of the lowest coverage rates for ART coverage worldwide. As it stands, MSF provides ART to more than 11,000 people, which makes up the majority of all available treatment countrywide. The Government of Myanmar and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide ART to around 4,000 people. While there are a number of NGOs working in HIV/AIDS in the country, efforts are largely focused on the provision of care rather than treatment. Although well meant, care alone can only support people in dying, whereas ART can assist people to live. Having put significant resources into its Myanmar programme, MSF can no longer continue to scale-up ART provision, in the face of so little response by other actors. Therefore, it has had to make the painful decision to restrict the number of new patients it can treat. With few options to refer new patients for treatment elsewhere, the situation is dire.

Urgent Lack Of HIV/AIDS Treatment Threatens Thousands

Thousands of people are needlessly dying due to a severe lack of lifesaving HIV/AIDS treatment in Myanmar , said the international medical humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in a report released today. Unable to continue shouldering the primary responsibility for responding to one of Asia's worst HIV crises, MSF insists that the government of Myanmar and international organizations urgently and rapidly scale-up the provision of antiretroviral therapy (ART). An estimated 240,000 people are thought to be living with HIV/AIDS in Myanmar. Among them, 76,000 are in urgent need of antiretroviral treatment, yet less than 20 percent of them are currently able to access it. "Last year, around 25,000 people died of AIDS related illnesses," said MSF Operations Manager Joe Belliveau. "A similar number of people could suffer the same fate in 2008 unless there is a significant increase in accessible antiretroviral treatment." With more than 11,000 people in treatment for HIV in the country, MSF is providing the majority of ART in the country. The government of Myanmar and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide relatively little. "It is unacceptable that a single NGO is treating the vast majority of HIV patients in a crisis of this magnitude," said Belliveau. "It is unacceptable because it is wholly inadequate. We cannot meet the needs, and we therefore call upon those who can to take up this responsibility." Pushed to its limit, MSF has recently been forced to make the painful decision to drastically reduce the number of new patients it will treat. With so few other actors providing ART, there is little option to refer new patients for treatment elsewhere. "With so many needs still unmet, we strongly urge all actors, led by the government, to scale-up the provision of ART," said Belliveau. The urgent need for increased treatment is evident, yet investment from both inside and outside of the country remains grossly insufficient. In 2007, the Government of Myanmar spent just $0.70 USD per person on health care, with a paltry $200,000 USD allocated for HIV/AIDS in 2008. This sum is hugely disproportionate when compared to the extent of the needs and availability of resources. The government of Myanmar has proven its ability to treat HIV/AIDS patients in the public sector, but must commit the necessary resources to scale-up.

Indian puppet show launched in Myanmar former capital

An Indian puppet show was launched at the National Theater here Wednesday evening under the program of cultural exchange between Myanmar and India. The show was performed by puppet group led by Suresh Dutta, a popular Indian puppet artist, who received Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for his contribution towards the enrichment of Indian Pupptery. Suresh Dutta has organized an international puppet festival of India, and has represented India at various international festivals abroad, including Japan, Poland, Yugoslavia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Canada and the United States. In February and March this year, Indian film festival was held in Myanmar's two largest cities of Yangon and Mandalay, aimed at promoting the cultural exchange between the two countries.

Bilin monks boycott government officials

Monks in Bilin township, Mon state, decided during a recent meeting to launch a boycott against government officials and supporters by refusing alms from them and not performing religious rites in

their homes.The monks, who are led by the abbots of Kyauktalone-taung, Three Pagodas and Kaylatha-taung monasteries, could not be reached for comment.But Aye Myint, a lawyer from Bago and leader of the Guiding Star legal aid group, recently visited the area and heard about the boycott.Aye Myint said he had found out about the protest when his relatives had asked the monks to perform a religious rite at their home."It was only when they told the abbots that they were from the authorities that the monks agreed to come to the house," Aye Myint said."They also spoke to me because they found out that I was Aye Myint of Guiding Star," he said."They are boycotting the officials because they are still feeling aggrieved by the arrests and imprisonment of monks."U Thuriya, the abbot of Kinywa monastery, told Aye Myint that the monks had decided not to perform religious rites at the homes of ward, village or township chairs, civil servants or members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association.The abbot said the decision had been taken in protest at the public humiliation of monks during last year's Saffron Revolution and at the recent sentencing of monks.

Bhutan:

POLITICAL:

- Kathmandu based Bhutanese felicitate Dhan Kumar
- Demonstrations for repatriation
- Former king urged to expedite repatriation

SOCIAL:

- GNH conference begins
- King Father to get Indian award
- Helvetas exhibition on bridges

ECONOMIC:

- UNUSG launches Bhutan's MDG report

GEO-STRATEGIC:

- Danish government delegation to visit Beldangi

Demonstrations for repatriation

About 150 exiled Bhutanese organized demonstrations at the Nepal-India border in Kakarvitta urging Indian authorities to allow them passage to go back to Bhutan.The demonstrations were organised in the initiative of United Bhutanese Refugee Repatriation Programming Council. According to Dilli Ram Ghorsai, an exiled leader who participated the sit-in at Mechi Bridge, they demonstrated peacefully urging India to allow them return home through Indian soil.Indian security personnel deployed in the area barred the demonstrators cross the Mechi Bridge into India, after which the demonstrators organised sit-in protests.Similarly, UBRRPC organized sit-in program in Beldangi camp coinciding the visit to Indian external affairs minister Pranab Mukherjee to Kathmandu. Few hundred exiled Bhutanese participated the sit-in demonstration. Additionally, 406 exiled Bhutanese jointly wrote a letter to

Mukherjee and sent him through Indian embassy in Kathmandu seeking Indian support for solution of the refugee crisis.

Former king urged to expedite repatriation

Bhutanese human rights leader Tek Nath Rizal has urged the former king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk to opt for immediate measures to expedite the dignified return-home process for exiled people.In an appeal recently sent to the former king, Rizal expressed words of happiness and extended congratulation to him for handing over the crown to his son, Jigme Khesar. "But we are deeply sad for the completion of your tenure", reads the appeal."When viewed from external point, Bhutan seems like a developed country with high literacy rate but it is clear that Bhutanese people are still under suppression--they are crying", reads the appeal, adding- "The international communities have already proved that exiled people in Nepal are genuine citizens from Bhutan." Rizal further argued that the responsibility for greeting such a situation inside the country should be owned-up by the former king, as was head of the state during the period. Rizal also pointed out the failure of former king in furnishing appropriate solution to suggestions and appeals by exiled political parties and human rights groups including various international organizations at different times. "It was necessary on your part to study such appeals; books related to suggestions and alike other means of appeals and decide what was wrong and right", reads the appeal, adding- "We were hopeful that we would be compensated during your reign thereby getting united under your guardianship." Leader Rizal said the issue would further get complicated following Jigme Singye's abdication of the throne. Rizal further expressed hopes that the former king would immediately make exiled people return home in a dignified way.

Helvetas exhibition on bridges

Swiss INGO Helvetas, one of the major donors to Bhutan, has started exhibition in Thimphu. Inaugurated by Minister for Works and Human Settlement Yeshy Zimba at the CICCC ground, the exhibition displays the photographs of bridges in Bhutan constructed with the support of Helvetas. Helvetas has supported construction of over 90 bridges in Bhutan’s rural areas, except in southern districts.

Kathmandu based Bhutanese felicitate Dhan Kumar

Around three dozens of the exiled Bhutanese staying in Kathmandu felicitated Dhan Kumar Rai, who was recently released from 17 years of cruel jail life inside Bhutan.The exiled leaders Tek Nath Rizal, Ratan Gazmere and Jogen Gazmere were among the participants of the program coordinated by Hament Lama

at the United Nations House in Pulchowk.The participants including the leaders appreciated the efforts of Rai, who is under special medical care of Center for Victims of Torture (CVICT) Nepal in Kathmandu.

UNUSG launches Bhutan's MDG report

UN Assistant Secretary General for Asia and the Pacific Ajay Chhibber launched Bhutan's progress report on meeting the Millennium Development Goals here in Thimphu. The report is jointly prepared by UN system in Bhutan and the Royal Government of Bhutan. The reports states that nutrition problems in Bhutan have dropped to 10-15 percent, water scarcity to 19-22 percent and sanitation to 10-12 percent. The report said Bhutan is among the few countries that have been making good progress in achieving the MDG adding it has already achieved three of the MDG indicators and is on track to meet most of the other targets by 2015.Addressing the function Chhibber emphasized the need to "deepen and strengthen democracy to the grass root level and empower people" which will not only help achieve the MDGs but also strengthen the democratic process. He highlighted the need for targeted programs that will deliver development benefits directly to the poor, enhancing their human development and addressing the root causes of their impoverishment. Such intervention, he said will help address the contrasts across districts on a number of MDG target areas such as poverty incidence, child malnutrition, food security, net primary education enrolment and access to safe drinking water.Minister for Education Thakur Singh Powdyel said there are certain areas that need to be addressed in poverty, gender parity at tertiary level of education, youth unemployment and women's participation in decision making to meet the MDG. The UN Resident Coordinator Nicholas Rosellini said that Bhutan's success on the MDGs is attributed to the strong political will and commitment of the Government in integrating the MDGs into the national planning framework but underlined the challenges ahead.

King Father to get Indian award

Vishva Bharati, an Indian university in West Bengal state, has announced that King Father Jigme Singye Wangchuk will be conferred with 'Deshikottama', the highest award from the institution. He will be among eight personalities to get the award from Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during the university's annual convocation scheduled for December 6. The university said he will be given the award for transforming the country's political system to parliamentary democracy. Other recipients of the award are former vice-chancellor of the same university Amlan Dutta, economist J Endrez, historian Irfan Habib and theatre man Habib Tanvir.

Danish government delegation to visit Beldangi

A Danish delegation headed by the country's Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr. Per Stig Møller will arrive Nepal to visit the camps of the exiled Bhutanese as part of the country's effort to accelerate the resettlement process. Denmark, the second largest donor to Bhutan, has pledged to take some exiled Bhutanese for resettlement, besides US, Canada, Australia, Netherlands and Norway. Besides the political consultations with Nepalese leaders, the Danish minister will travel to Beldangi camp in Jhapa on November 27 in order to familiarise himself with the situation about the exiled Bhutanese, Kathmandu based Danish embassy statement reads.

GNH conference begins

The fourth international conference on the Gross National Happiness began in Thimphu where around 90 participants from 25 countries will deliberate on the ideology. The three-day conference was inaugurated by Prime Minister Jigmi Thinley.Addressing the inaugural fucntion, PM claimed the ideology will benefit not only the Bhutanese people but the whole human society. He said the conference has its significance since it is being held amidst the ceremonies organized nationwide celebrating the coronation of fifth king and centenary of the Wangchuk monarchy. Participants during this conference will present papers on various themes such as psychology, environment, community relations, education, health, living standard, governance, culture, time use and economy, and their indicators relating them to GNH. According to the organizers, the fifth conference will be held in Brazil, South America, next year where a delegation from Bhutan has reached recently for its publicity.

Business and Politics in Muslim World

India

Sadia Khanum

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- Mizoram first-time voters take their cue from Obama

Political front:

Congress rejects charges on Malegaon probe

With the Malegaon blast issue continuing to be at the centre-stage of national politics, the Congress today rejected the allegations made by the BJP and Sangh Parivar that it has been misusing the Maharashtra police's Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) to "target Hindus in the name of Hindu terrorism" for electoral gains. "The ATS is a most credible body, we have nothing to do with its investigations (that are) being supervised by courts," said the Congress party's principal spokesman, Mr Veerappa Moily. "We have also never talked of Hindu terrorism terrorism is terrorism, it cannot be linked with any religion or sect." With the ATS' investigations into the 29 September blast reportedly throwing up evidence pointing to possible involvement of several right-wing Hindutva extremist bodies and individuals in various terror acts or plans, the Congress accused the BJP and the Sangh Parivar of "politicising and communalising" the situation in order to "polarise" the people. Mr Moily also took umbrage at BJP president Mr Rajnath Singh's statement that such alleged targeting of Hindu religious leaders could lead to a "civil war". "Could we call the BJP a party of patriots, do they want to capture power through fascist means rather than the democratic way?" Mr Moily asked.Regarding national security advisor Mr MK Narayanan's meeting with the Opposition leader Mr LK Advani yesterday, Mr Moily stressed that Mr Advani has held that his concern was "limited" to Pragya Singh Thakur's allegations of torture and not the ATS investigation. "There is nothing wrong if such concerns are addressed, but you cannot put a spanner in a terror probe," said Mr Moily who also ruled out any independent inquiry into the matter. National Conference president Mr Omar Abdullah served a legal notice to People's Democratic Party (PDP) leaders Ms Mehbooba Mufti and Mr Tariq Hameed Karra for making "false, incorrect and motivated allegations against him" regarding his alleged links with Malegaon blast-accused Swami Dayanand Pande. Mr Abdullah, who has denied any such link, has sought an apology from the PDP leaders, failing which he shall file a suit for damages to the tune of Rs1 crore.

Patil warns of terror WMDs

The Union home minister, Mr Shivraj Patel warned that terror groups might use "nuclear, biological and chemical devices" and favoured a multi-pronged approach to deal with the menace. Mr Patil, who inaugurated a conference of police DGs and IGs in the Capital, also ruled out a POTA-like law to deal with terrorism. "We have laws, which have provisions to deal with terrorism. They should be used properly," Mr Patil said, citing in particular, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Mr Patil laid emphasis on inter-state cooperation to tackle terrorism, suggesting that each state should have a nodal officer, who can deal with his counterparts in other states. He also asking the states to strengthen their intelligence gathering mechanism.

Mizoram election ~ the countdown is yet to begin

MIZORAM candidates are used to the dos and dont's imposed by the Presbyterian Church but they, however, have little choice but to obey the diktat laid out by the Mizoram People's Forum, the social wing of the church. The MPF has prohibited road shows, door-to-door campaigns, separate public rallies and, of course, the feasting that characterises all elections in tribal states of the North-east. Door-to-door campaigns have ostensibly been used by candidates to buy votes by putting money in envelopes and handing these out to voters. But the MPF decree has failed to dampen the spirits of political hopefuls. They are using modern technology to reach out to voters. SMS messages are being sent out to voters by all candidates. So much so, a mobile phone vendor said his sale had tripled in the last few

weeks. About the outcome of this election, all political pundits are keeping their lips sealed. Predicting the election results this time is difficult for two reasons. One, because the delimitation of constituencies has completely altered the boundaries of all 40 constituencies. Second, because the candidates would not have a personal touch with voters since door-to-door campaigns are banned. In tribal societies, candidates can easily make out during personal visits whether a voter is opting for them or not. This is true especially in rural areas where people have not learnt artifice. Sitting MLAs would, therefore, have to work harder because they cannot depend on their traditional vote banks. Like every other state in the North-east, millionaires are not far to seek. In Aizawl, the state capital, if you throw a stone you are likely to hit a millionaire. So millionaire candidates no longer make news. However, it is the sign of the times that those with no money cannot expect to win seats. Mizoram has 10 candidates having assets worth over a crore of rupees. They include four from the ruling Mizo National Front and three each from the Congress and the United Democratic Alliance. What is heartening is that every election throws up a few thinkers and responsible citizens who take it upon themselves to mobilise public opinion on the prime purpose of elections and what to demand from candidates and political parties. The idea is to create mass awareness on the need to elect more responsible legislators. A voluntary movement of people calling themselves the People's Right to Information and Development Implementing Society of Mizoram (Prism) has taken great pains to prepare the profiles of all political aspirants and a check list of how much to expect from a particular candidate based on realistic indicators. Prism has released its critique on each candidate and political party in the fray and also the assets of each candidate. According to this NGO, some of the manifestos are so much of promises and not based on realistic goals. Hence they would be difficult to implement. They found the Congress manifesto more down to earth. Prism is asking people to question the candidates and their manifestos. They have also called a review meeting of professionals, economists and intellectuals to discuss the issue of candidates trying to sell unrealistic goals to the people. Another very positive development is the number of women candidates in the fray this time. In a very dominantly male society embedded in patriarchy, the fact that nine women candidates have mustered enough courage to push their way through a male-dominated political boxing ring is very encouraging. Whether they win or lose is a different matter. They will at least be giving their male opponents a run for their money, thanks to the campaign of Women Welfare Federation with moral support from the state's largest women's body, the Mizo Hmeiche Insuihkhawm Pawl. Most of the political parties have fielded women as their official candidates.The North-east was glued to the television during the US presidential election campaign. Every state going to the polls is raising the mantra of "change" which they attribute to youth. It is sad that politicians cannot read the signs of the times.

In a way this election could throw up a completely new political arrangement. But whether this would lead to better governance is anybody's guess. Politicians have never aspired to come to power to serve the people. Those of us who nurture such idealism tend to get hurt when our dreams turn sour. Yet this is the only way out in a parliamentary democracy even if elections in themselves have become mere rituals and a game of musical chairs where contenders for the chair continue to exchange them among themselves. Yet hope springs eternal in the human breast because there is so little to hope for. One can only hope the voters of Mizoram elect the "change they can believe in".

'Divisive politics: a challenge for nation'

In the backdrop of a face-off between the government and BJP over Malegaon blasts, Congress President Mrs. Sonia Gandhi termed "divisive politics" as a major challenge and warned that those using religion or caste to come to power would plunge the country into darkness.
In her first election rally in Delhi for the 29 November assembly polls, she denounced politics over terrorism, saying terrorists have no religion except to spread terror. She asked the voters to choose between Congress, "which takes all religions and sections of the society for peace and development" and "those who are not in support of development but play divisive politics and spread fear among different sections of the society". She, however, did not name anybody in this regard. "Divisive politics is a major challenge before the country," Mrs. Gandhi said at a well-attended rally in Mangolpuri in North West Delhi while asking the electorate of the capital to return Congress to power for the third time. "Those who create fear in the name of religion, caste or any other pretext, they may come to power for some days. But they cannot escape the responsibility of plunging the future of the country into darkness," she said. Her comments assume significance as BJP has been attacking the government over the arrest of some Hindu figures in connection with Malegaon blasts, alleging Hindus were being targeted deliberately in view of the elections.

Govt has woken up too late: Advani

Taking a dig at the Prime Minister for suggesting formation of a task-force to deal with terrorism, BJP leader Mr LK Advani claimed it was an "admittance" of failure by the UPA which has "risen from its slumber" only as it neared the end of its five-year tenure. "UPA government is soft on terrorism," the BJP's prime ministerial candidate said, claiming the country's internal security was at stake while the economy was in doldrums following the policies being pursued by the ruling coalition. Mr Advani said it was disturbing that the Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh had only now called a meeting of state police chiefs, where he suggested setting up of a task force to initiate a 100-day plan to address "emerging challenges" in the areas of terrorism, naxalism and insurgency. "Since 2004, the UPA completed its 1600 days in power. However, from this suggestion it is clear that the government has woken up now from its slumber to tackle the scourge of terrorism and had done precious little before," he said alluding to Dr Singh's comments. Advocating re-enactment of the stringent Pota to deal with terrorism, he said that "now the people in government too have realised that a tough law was needed to firmly deal with terrorists".Mr Advani claimed that the UPA government not only lacked the will power to fight out terrorism "but also does not have clear vision to deal with it".

Gujjar: A lost ground for BJP?

Bandh Ki Dhani and Bhurja villages near Sikandara in Dausa district have remained off the mark for BJP and its supporters. The villagers claim that neither BJP candidate Ms Gita Varma nor her supporters have come to these Gujjar villages to seek their votes. If they are to be believed, it would be better for the saffron brigade to skip these two places while running their poll campaign. "We do not want them at our doorsteps. If they come seeking votes, especially the BJP workers, then we will welcome them with sticks and slippers. There were eight bullet wounds on my son's dead body," said a highly agitated Nanak Ram, father of Gokul Gujjar who fell to police bullets in Sikandara on 24 May. Sikandara in Sikrai Assembly constituency witnessed the most brutal police firing to crush Gujjar agitation and 20 Gujjars from the nearby villagers were shot dead on 24 May, a day after retd Col. Bainsala launched the second phase of his violent Gujjar agitation from the Bharatpur district. However, in the subsequent turn of events, the long standing demand for ST status remained unfulfilled which have made Sikandara loose their faith in retd Col. Kirori Singh Bainsala and Bharatiya Janata Party."Col. Bainsala is Vasundhara Raje's stooge. She had promised our community that she will give us ST reservation if we elect her to power. She won the elections with our votes. But she betrayed us not once but twice. We will not let Bainsala enter our villages ever again," said Ramesh Singh Gujjar whose brother-in-law was a victim of Gujjar strife. Jagdish Gujjar, pradhan from Gheejghar, a neighbouring village claims that neither the BJP nor the Congress were in favour of the community's demand for ST status. Majority of the Gujjar community members said that they would neither vote for the Congress nor the BJP but for Mr Pappu Ram Nat, the candidate fielded by Lok Tantrik Samajwadi Party and a close aide of anti-Bainsala Gujjar leader, Mr Prahlad Gunjal. "Gujjar's demands were sidelined for their political gains. Why should we vote for them? They are at great risk if they dare to enter our villages," said Mr Jagdish Gujjar.

Survey predicts Congress victory in Delhi

The Congress may return to power for the third consecutive term in Delhi, according to a pre-poll survey which claims that the party will lose its vote share by 4.3 per cent but still manage to pull through. The Star TV survey said the Congress, which has 47 MLAs now, would get 39 seats in the 70-member Assembly while the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party would improve its tally from 20 to 27. Its first survey in the last week of October gave the Congress 38 seats and the BJP 29. This survey, conducted between November 15 and 20 claimed that the Congress would lose its vote share by 4.3 per cent 48.13 per cent in 2003. The BJP is poised to increase its share with 38 per cent votes as against 35.33 per cent last time. On the popularity chart, Sheila Dikshit is well ahead, with 43 per cent of the respondents favoring her as Chief Minister while the BJP's chief ministerial nominee V.K. Malhotra got only 16 per cent votes.

Campaigning reaches feverish pitch in Delhi

With just two days to go for the Delhi Assembly elections, campaigning reached a feverish pitch in the Capital on Wednesday with bigwigs of all major parties, including Mayawati of the Bahujan Samaj Party and L.K. Advani and Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party, hitting the road to woo voters. And after Mr. Advani and Ms. Mayawati, it was the turn of the young Congress MP and Gandhi scion Rahul Gandhi to keep his date with Delhi's voters as he set out on a roadshow, addressing his first public meeting at Tahirpur in East Delhi after having addressed a series of rallies in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh earlier. Lashing out at the BJP's strategy for the Delhi elections, the Congress general secretary said the saffron party's campaign was focussed solely on "shortcomings" of the Congress government in

Delhi and that the party had no poll manifesto of its own. Mr. Gandhi recounted the development initiatives of the Sheila Dikshit Government and urged people to vote for the Congress once again to keep up the pace of development. The rally was preceded by an impressive road-show in the trans-Yamuna area in support of Anil Choudhary who is contesting from Patparganj against Nakul Bhardwaj of the BJP. The roadshow saw the leader giving a miss to his usual high-security protocol and mingling with the crowds who turned up in large numbers showering flowers and garlands on him.

60 p.c. polling in Madhya Pradesh

The Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh saw an estimated 60 per cent turnout on Thursday, but the exercise was marred by the killing of a BJP candidate, stabbing of a presiding officer and disruptions. Briefing reporters, Chief Electoral Officer J.S. Mathur said Sunil Nayak was shot near Nayakheda village, in Prithvipur constituency of Tikamagarh, 45 minutes after polling ended in a clash that ensued after the BJP candidate's supporters were involved in a verbal duel with those of Congress nominee Brajendra Rathod. The elections will decide the fate of prominent leaders, including Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan, Bharatiya Jan Shakti chief Uma Bharti and senior BJP minister Babulal Gaur. Senior Congress ministers, including the former Chief Minister Digvijay Singh, are giving the polls a miss. A total of 3,180 contestants were in the fray and their fate sealed by the 3,56,88,173-strong electorate. Officials said there were also some attempts to snatch and damage EVMs.

Domestic situation:

VHP stops Modi bulldozer

Under pressure from the VHP which accused him of doing a Mahmud of Ghazni, Gujarat chief minister Mr Narendra Modi today suspended the unprecedented demolition drive against unauthorised temples in the state capital Gandhinagar where over 200 such structures were razed down."Chief minister reviewed the demolition drive against unauthorised structures this morning and has decided to put it on hold for the time being," sources in the office of the chief minister said.The decision was announced within hours after a meeting between an agitated VHP president Mr Ashok Singhal and Mr Modi. The VHP had raised a hue and cry over the demolitions, saying it hurt Hindu sentiments and demanded that the drive against the temples be immediately stopped.
The VHP leader had conveyed his displeasure to Mr Modi over the issue of demolition of temples in Gandhinagar and also arrest of VHP worker Mr Ashwin Patel, secretary of VHP Mr Ranchhod Bharwad said. Authorities are on demolition spree in Gandhinagar and in the past one month more than 200 'illegal' temples have been razed here to undertake development works.

Maoist wake-up call for cops

State Intelligence officers are worried over the efforts Maoist rebels are making to set up strong bases in the tribal hinterlands of West Bengal. Security experts are analyzing the possible ramifications of the move. An official said agencies are worried because the presence of Maoist rebels would further complicate the situation in the region. A report on internal security states: "The security situation in the Maoist-infested blocks of the district would further deteriorate if ultra-Left extremists succeed in getting their foothold in the tribal belts." A visit to the remote tribal villages in Lalgarh, Belpahari and Binpur bordering Jharkhand reveals that Maoists have already established strong bases among the tribals and they have many squads inside 700 square km forests of the district. "The Maoists meet almost every day in Laljol forest and a trained squad leader from Jharkhand was also seen recently. The Belpahari squad has recently recruited a few youths after giving them a short training in Dumka, Jharkhand. The Maoists are

also eager to fulfill their long-cherished dream of establishing a Red Corridor from Andhra Pradesh to Nepal. The forest blocks of this district are gradually becoming a safe haven for the Maoists since six of eight districts of Jharkhand that border West Bengal ~ Dumka, Dhanbad, Bokaro, Ranchi, West Singhbhum and East Singhbhum are strongholds of the Maoists. A few months ago, some members of Belpahari squad were killed in an Orissa police operation and then this squad became weak but with the passage of time, they have freshly recruited some youths. Mr Babu Bose, general secretary of Jharkhand Jana Mukti Morcha said: "This movement is now not under control of the tribal organisations. Currently, Maoist leaders are dominating the movement and they may intensify the stir if the state government does not come forward to settle the impasse".

Rash of terror attack in Mumbai

The city witnessed a major terror strike on Wednesday with explosions and firing reported from several places. Reports said 20 people were killed and 348 injured. Unconfirmed reports put the death toll at 60. Maharashtra Director-General of Police A.N. Roy confirmed that there were seven attacks, three of them encounters. A.K. Sharma, Railway Police Commissioner, said two or three persons, carrying AK 47 rifles and grenades entered the Chattrapati Shivaji Terminus with AK 47 rifles at 8.35 p.m. and opened fire indiscriminately and the panic-struck people rushed out. He said 10 people were feared dead and 30 injured. "The situation is still not resolved. However, there has been no firing for the last 45 minutes," Mr. Sharma said. The entire area has been cordoned off and no vehicles were allowed near the station. Commandos and special police teams were trying to get the situation under control. Random shots were still heard from the station at the time of our going to press. Many of the injured have been rushed to nearby hospitals. Several blasts were reported across the city from places in South Mumbai and suburbs such as Vile Parle. Two low-intensity explosions and firing were reported outside The Trident Hotel. Forty people were taken hostage inside the hotel, even as occupants and staff were being evacuated. At 11.15 p.m., the firing had not stopped and smoke was billowing from the hotel lobby. A constable on the spot said a third blast took place in the hotel lobby. He said commandos had gone inside. A police officer said two persons were injured. They were taken to hospital. Firing was also reported outside Leopold Café at Colaba. Windscreens of cars were shattered and bloodstains seen all over. Hasan Gafoor said the police operation was still on. Three persons, employees of the Taj Hotel in South Mumbai, were shot dead and two others died in a bomb blast in a taxi on Dockyard Road.

Red alert in U.P.

A red alert has been issued in Uttar Pradesh in the aftermath of the Mumbai terror attacks. In a circular, Director-General of Police Vikram Singh has asked district police chiefs to strengthen security around bus stations, railway stations, airports and other public places. Directives have been issued for activating the intelligence network. Dog squads are pressed into service at railway stations and bus stations and a strict vigil is being maintained on all Mumbai-bound trains. Condemning the terrorist attacks, Chief Minister Mayawati on Thursday said political parties must rise above party lines to tackle terrorism. Addressing a press conference here, Ms. Mayawati said the Centre must take stringent steps to ensure that there was no recurrence of terror attacks. Action against the accused should be taken on the basis of solid evidence, divorced from caste and religious considerations.

Make no mistake, its war

The full details of the Mumbai bomb blasts are yet to come. But sufficient is known to suggest broad conclusions. The attacks were conceived and carried out with meticulous commando efficiency. Considerable homework must have gone into the planning for the attacks against five-star hotels, the

best time to target elite foreigners, and the best approaches to the hotels. The attackers came by sea at the foot of the Taj Hotel. At the moment of writing Intelligence agencies reportedly have claimed the arrest of one Pakistani attacker belonging to the Lashkar-eTaiba. The agency has also reportedly claimed that the attackers came by the sea route from Karachi to Mumbai. Several eyewitnesses saw the boats on which the terrorists landed. Therefore the terrorists certainly came on ships or trawlers from wherever, armed with grenades and weapons.

The attack, its scale and nature, are a turning point in terrorist attacks against this country. It comes in the wake of serial blasts across metropolitan cities of India that have steadily escalated. The government's failure to stem terrorism has emboldened the terrorists to attack brazenly. It is most likely that such attacks will proliferate, become deadlier, and come in quick succession. Terrorism has declared full fledged war against India. This war may not be directed by any government. Recall the Marriot Hotel bombing in Islamabad. Are these Mumbai blasts a follow-up? They seem to be directed by Al Qaida, possibly aided by its proxies within and outside governments. Some governments may have substantial penetration by terrorists, others may have miniscule penetration. But terrorist infiltration recognises no boundaries and spares no nation, including India. Before formulating strategy to win this war there is need for an appropriate instrument to fight the war. To achieve that two steps are needed. Mr LK Advani has offered to the PM his party's full cooperation against terrorism. That is not enough. The PM should respond by inviting all the major national and regional parties to join a national government.

The second required step is that a state of National Emergency should be declared. This would in no way replicate the Emergency days of 1975 when the media was muzzled to prevent criticism of Indira Gandhi. That fraudulent Emergency was justified by a public speech attributed to Jaya Prakash Narain which was distorted beyond recognition by official agencies. Now India faces a genuine Emergency situation. Article 352 (1) of the Constitution states: "If the President is satisfied that a grave emergency exists whereby the security of India or any part of the territory thereof is threatened, whether by war or external aggression or by armed rebellion, he may by Proclamation, make a declaration to that effect in respect of the whole of India or of such part of the territory thereof as may be specified in the Proclamation." Should not the Cabinet advise the President to issue the Proclamation?

Icon of grace to symbol of terror

The iconic Taj Mahal Palace and Tower Hotel in Mumbai, that had over the decades hosted world leaders and royalty and was feted for its heritage building, Thursday became the symbol of a nation under attack as armed terrorists laid siege to it. “We will rebuild every inch that has been damaged in this attack and bring back the Taj to its full glory," the Taj group of hotels said on its website as news came in of the hotel's two buildings, which have 565 rooms, being extensively damaged in the attack. Built in 1903, the hotel was a treasure trove of valuable paintings and works of art. It was decorated with Belgian crystal chandeliers, hand-woven silk carpets and antique furniture many of which are believed to have been destroyed in the terror attack.

“The old wing, especially the sixth and seventh floors, has suffered severe damage. The famous presidential suite is on the sixth floor. The central and western domes of the building have also been badly burned," a Taj hotel official told IANS. The old wing of the hotel has borne the brunt of the attack

by terrorists Wednesday night. A blast was heard inside the building and it was seen being engulfed by fire and thick smoke. This portion of the hotel houses the ballroom as well as other banquet halls like the Crystal Room, Golden Room and the Princess Room. A speciality Indian cuisine restaurant called Masala Craft is also in the old wing. Three of Mumbai's best known police officers - Hemant Karkare, Ashok Kamte and Vijay Salaskar - were killed in the hotel while leading from the front in the battle against the terrorists. Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) MP N.N. Krishnadas, who was dining at the Taj hotel when terrorists struck, recalled being trapped during the night of horror, which saw 101 people being killed as terrorists struck at over seven places in south Mumbai."I was having dinner with some of my colleagues when two masked militants barged into the restaurant. They fired indiscriminately, I saw three people being shot. The terrorists left the room soon after that," Krishnadas said.

Terrorists were prepared for a long siege

The Maharashtra Police said on Thursday that the rucksacks of the terrorists killed and arrested during the attacks in Mumbai contained dry fruits, suggesting they were prepared for a long siege. Investigators, however, discounted television reports that the terrorists had travelled on a ship identified as m.v. Alfa. “Both the Coast Guard and the Indian Navy have searched dozens of ships off the Mumbai coast,” a senior Maharashtra police officer told. “But we as yet do not know which ship or ships were involved.”

Lashkar denial

Agence France Presse reported from Islamabad that a Srinagar-based Lashkar spokesperson, who uses the codename Abdullah Ghaznavi, had denied that the Lashkar was involved in the attack on Mumbai. It was not clear, however, how AFP’s Islamabad office determined that Mr. Ghaznavi was calling from Srinagar, since there are no telephone links between Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Srinagar-based journalists who sometimes receive phone calls from the Lashkar had not heard from Mr. Ghaznavi on the fighting from Mumbai until late Thursday.

Lashkar tested sea route to Mumbai in 2007 dry run

Lashkar-e-Taiba commanders had used a commercial fishing boat to send a fidayeen squad to Mumbai in 2007. Investigators now believe it was a dress rehearsal for the latest terror attacks.Eight Lashkar fidayeen, all Pakistani nationals, was sent across the seas from Karachi on the morning of March 3. The men arrived in Mumbai late that night, and hid in a safe house near the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre. It was organised by a local Lashkar sympathiser. Unlike the suspected Lashkar fidayeen unit that staged the attacks, the eight-man squad had instructions to travel north from Mumbai to Jammu and Kashmir. However, Maharashtra Police investigators believe that Lashkar commanders carried out the operation to test the reliability of the Karachi-Mumbai sea route. Jammu and Kashmir Police investigators say the eight men travelled by road from Bait-ul-Mujahideen, the Lashkar’s operational headquarters in Muzaffarabad, to Rawalpindi before heading south to Karachi by train. Travelling in groups of two, they had strict instructions to board separate compartments on the Rawalpindi-Karachi journey, and to avoid conversations with each other and other passengers. In Karachi, they were made to wait in a room on the outskirts of the city for almost a week. They were finally told that the time had come for them to begin their journey to Mumbai. Four days out to sea, the commercial fishing boat in which they were travelling was stopped by an Indian Coast Guard vessel. The boat was allowed to go after its captain paid a bribe. But unknown to them, the “corrupt” Coast Guard officials had used the opportunity to plant a tracking

device on the boat. The device later enabled Indian intelligence personnel, who had learned of the Lashkar operation from informants, to track them until the time of their arrest in Jammu.

Economic Front:

Five lakh textile workers may lose jobs

With economic crisis deepening, five lakh workers may lose their jobs in the next five months in the textile sector which, along with other export-oriented sectors, is yet to see the worst impact of one of the most grievous financial turmoil ever. "According to the estimates of the textile ministry, there will be job losses of about five lakh workers in the next five months," commerce secretary Mr GK Pillai told reporters on the sidelines of a Ficci function here today.
While the commerce ministry has launched a job-loss study of about 800 exporting firms across different industries, Mr Pillai said: "Possibly, the worst period may come by March-April... So you have not seen the worst of it." Commerce secretary's projection of five lakh job losses is the biggest number given out by the government ever since the economic crisis broke out.
The commerce secretary's warnings about the worsening state of the economy comes the same day the Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh confirmed that the current crisis was "deep".

Rupee weakens further

Fast depleting dollars because of intense selling pressure on Indian equities by foreign funds is taking toll of the rupee which is now in the 50s in its exchange value per US dollar. Even intervention by state-run banks on behalf of RBI failed to prop it up. The rupee firmed up a bit at 50.35, but once again slipped as foreign funds started putting pressures on Indian stocks. Till date they have withdrawn around $13.5 billion from the bourses. Experts say that the partially convertible Indian currency might see plunging to 52/$ in coming weeks or months notwithstanding fall in crude oil cost which today fell down to $53 per barrel as dollar continued to increase in comparison to other currencies. The Central bank might find it difficult to control the volatility in foreign exchange market, they say. RBI has already depleted its forex reserves by more than 15 per cent by selling dollars to stabilise the rupee. The Central bank and state run banks are the only sources of dollar supply in the market. When stock exchanges closed for the day the rupee was quoted at 50.47 per dollar.

Markets bounce back

The Bombay Stock Exchange Sensitive Index as well as Nifty 50 of the National Stock Exchange today reversed hammering for the last seven sessions to post major gains mainly on two counts: Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh's assertion that Indian economy was strong enough to retain eight per cent GDP growth and much publicised meeting between corporate chiefs and BJP leader Mr LK Advani where "the shadow PM" too held out hope of early revival of the economy.

30-stock Sensex which opened in positive terrain gathered strength speedily but slumped as some profit booking cut short the upward mobility of the Index. It went into red zone but revived with gusto to close at the day's top level. The mid-session was soon forgotten as Sensex closed for the week at 8,915.21 points gaining 464.20 points or 5.49 per cent. The Nifty 50 of NSE was up 5.5 per cent at 2,693.45 points gaining 140.30 points. The comeback was fuelled by buying interest in power, consumer goods and IT shares. Earlier in the day the Nikkei 225 of Tokyo Stock Exchange closed 2.20 per cent up gaining 207.75 points at 7,911 points and Hang Seng of Hong Kong was up three percent at 12,659 points.

Easy entry into India for foreign firms

As it tries hard to attract investments in the face of the global economic slowdown, India said it was relaxing documentation for foreigners to start a business in the country. Foreign companies no longer need to get their documents certified at the Indian embassy or high commission of their respective countries and new rules would shortly come into place. "New arrangement for certification and apostillisation under the Hague Convention is in place and will be announced soon", corporate affairs ministry joint secretary Mr Jitesh Khosla said. Apostillisation is the legalisation of a document for international use under the terms of the 1961 Hague Convention. Firms based in countries other than India till now have to get their documents and articles certified and apostillised by the Indian embassy of their country. "Now they (foreign firms) don't have to go to the Indian embassy for the purpose of certification of their articles", he said.

Federal Bank to recruit 3,000 people by 2011

At a time when the idea of cost-cutting has gripped banks all over the world strongly, the country's private lender Federal Bank said it expects to recruit nearly 3,000 people by 2011. "We expect to recruit about 1,000 people every year for two to three years. During this year we have recruited 700 people and 100 more will be joining soon," Federal Bank CEO and MD, Mr M Venugopal told. The bank is looking at employing people from the finance or marketing streams, he said, adding that the recruitments will be done mostly through campus placements. Federal Bank, fourth among private banks, is on an expansion mode to establish its brand all over India. The bank needs manpower for the expansion, Mr Venugopal said. Many global banks such as Citigroup, J P Morgan and HSBC, which have a presence in India, recently announced job cuts in the wake of the financial crisis. Federal Bank's recruitment drive comes at a time when the banks are mulling cost-cutting measures by reducing their headcount. Commenting on the issue, Mr Venugopal said: "We still have enough scope to grow... it could be that they have overgrown in size but we are expanding so there is enough scope for us to grow in size." At present, about 7,200 are working with the bank and it expects that the headcount would grow to 10,000 by 2011, he said adding that the bank expects to have nearly 1,000 branches by 2011. However, Mr Venugopal admitted that the expansion plan of the bank was affected to an extent this year due to the financial crisis. But even then,

the business growth of the Kerala-based bank is pegged at about 25 per cent this year. Federal Bank is trying to create a niche brand for itself, “may be the SME sector or retail”. The bank has recently appointed Boston Consultants to submit a report on this. The bank's total business, he said, stands at Rs 47,757 crore with deposits of more than Rs 26,430 crore. The bank has 607 branches at present.

Emami plans unit in Africa

Kolkata-based FMCG major Emami is planning to set up a manufacturing facility in Africa expected to be operational by 2010, as it looks to strengthen its hold in the continent.
The company, which has been witnessing robust growth in the African continent, mainly in the skin-care range and over-the-counter (OTC) products, is mulling to invest around Rs 90 crore in the greenfield plant. “We are having a very good response from the African market in the past three years. Our products are doing well there. So we are setting up a manufacturing base in Africa in the next 18 months in order to enhance our business there,” Emami director (international marketing division), Mr Prashant Goenka said. Though he did not give any details of the exact location and the capacity of the manufacturing facility, Mr Goenka said it would come up in the Common Market For Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) belt, which provides duty exemption. COMESA comprises portions of North Africa, East Africa and Central Africa. “With this facility we would be able to access the African market easily. We will benefit from import duty that we are currently paying as well as save our delivery time,” Mr Goenka said. He said the company has earmarked an investment of around Rs 90 crore and expects the facility to be fully operational by March 2010. The amount would be spent in construction and installation of the ancillary units. The new facility would manufacture Emami skincare products as well as its OTC products, which are marketed under the brand 'Himani'.

Curbs on import of more steel items

In order to prevent dumping from China, government has slapped restrictions on imports of specific steel items used widely in the automobile, oil and construction industries. With the shift in seamless tubes and pipes from the 'free' to 'restricted' list, the user industries will need a licence from the government to import the items. Government has already put curbs on import of hot-rolled coils, the mother steel product, along with imposition of five per cent customs duty on specified iron and steel items. Along with seamless tubes and pipes, wood and wood products would also come under the 'restricted' list, as per the Directorate General of Foreign Trade notification. The domestic steel industry with over 55 million tons capacity has seen a sharp change in fortunes with over 30 per cent decline in demand following the global meltdown.
With drying of export demand as well, largely because of surpluses in China post-Olympics, the market

for steel has turned into a buyer's delight. The prices in the international market have seen sharp correction from $1,250 a ton to around $500 a ton, forcing steep erosion in the domestic rates.

520 workers may lose jobs as management decides to quit

The management of Orissa Synthetics Ltd, owned by Reliance Industries Ltd, has reportedly started negotiations with its employees in the presence of the collector and the state labour minister recently before the closing of its plant here. The management has decided to close the plant claiming that the products do not have marketability any more owing to the global economic recession which has resulted in high cost of production. The industry, which has been running for the past 20 years, is spread over 227 acres and manufactures polyester staple fiber, polyester filament yarn and other such fibers which are exported to Egypt, Bangladesh and parts of Europe. With the closing of the plant more than 520 employees will be rendered unemployed. As many as 26 officials have not been given any notice and have not been paid their salary, sources said. However company officials claim that notice has been served to 184 employees. The employees on the other hand allege that the company dismissed employees forcefully on 8 May by asking them to resign or their jobs shall be terminated. Subsequently the main gate of the plan was reportedly barricaded on 1 July, the employees said. Following the closure 130 contract laborers and 127 casual laborers were removed from duty. The employees are now seeking the intervention of the state government and the concerned ministry in this matter, sources said.

Inflation falls to 8.84%

Inflation continued its declining trend to hit 8.84 per cent for the week ended 15 November from 8.90 per cent the previous week. It fell by 0.06 percentage points from 8.90 per cent during the previous week. However, prices of many food and manufactured products rose. Inflation for the third consecutive week fell to more than a five-month low of 8.84 per cent, providing support to the RBI to signal a cut in interest rates to spur economic growth amid fears of moderation, analysts said. The annual inflation rate was 3.35 per cent during the corresponding week of the previous year. The wholesale price index is more closely watched than the consumer price index, which is published monthly, because it covers a higher number of products and is released weekly. Manufactured products such as imported edible oils, rubber, iron and steel, and some primary food articles such as fruits, sea-fish and tea turned cheaper, while fuel products' prices remained unchanged. The decline in inflation may prompt the RBI to cut policy rates or reserve ratios as demanded by bankers to enable them to cut interest rates to give a fillip to growth rates. The data for economic growth during the second quarter of this fiscal is slated for tomorrow amid fears of slowdown, analysts said.

Bad turns worse for tourism

With foreign tourists being targeted in Mumbai's terror attacks, the situation appears to have gone from bad to worse for India's tourism industry already hit by the global economic meltdown. Within hours of the attack being broadcast live on international news channels, tour operators were flooded with cancellations and postponement of tours by foreign tourists. "This terrorist attack has added fuel to the fire as far as the tourism industry is concerned Things were not very good due to the global meltdown and cancellations have been reported following the Mumbai attack," the president of Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO), Mr Vijay Thakur, told. "This attack will have a very negative effect on India's tourism as hotels and foreign tourists especially from the US and European countries have been attacked," he added.
Global consultancy firm KPMG's travel and leisure vertical head, Mr Joydeep Ghosh, said as foreign tourist arrivals fall, hotel occupancy in the country might dip 85 per cent.
Many countries have already advised their citizens to avoid travel to Mumbai and some have even asked them to reconsider visits to India as there is "very high risk of terrorist activity by terrorists and militant groups". This information follows details of recent terror attacks in the country. Between 13 May and 26 November, eight terror attacks have taken place in seven cities, including Mumbai last night. In its advisory, Australia's department of foreign affairs and trade has told citizens: "We advise you to reconsider your need to travel to India at this time because of the very high risk of terrorist activity by terrorists and militant groups. "The Mumbai attacks show terrorists in India are deliberately targeting Westerners. Further attacks cannot be ruled out," the Australian advisory said. The advisories issued by Canada and United Kingdom make are clear that terrorism remains a threat throughout India in 2008.

Geo-strategic developments:

Anti-piracy: Govt for proactive UN

Ruling out sending any more ships to the pirate-infested Gulf of Aden, the Centre is of the view that the United Nations has to play a "more proactive role" in the region. "It is high time the United Nations took on a more proactive role rather than groupings like Nato as it could ensure better coordination among the countries," highly placed sources said. The Indian Navy has been operating close to the Somali waters at the request of the Somalian government which had informed the UN that it would allow such operations by foreign navies, the sources said. The sinking of a "pirate mother ship" by the Navy's stealth warship INS Tabar clearly shows that the Indian Navy has an important role to play in the coming years in the region. The action by the Navy has been appreciated by analysts who feel that this would give a boost to the Indian Navy's prowess. Meanwhile, a top official of an international maritime agency has suggested that all foreign navies present in African waters conduct "stop and search" operations on suspicious vessels like India did, as it could deter piracy, adds a report from Kuala Lumpur. Mr Noel Choon, head of the International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Centre in Kuala Lumpur, praised INS Tabar's attack on the pirates' mother ship in the Gulf of Aden and said other navies should follow the Indian Navy's example. Malaysia has also commended the action.

Naval security for cargo ships

The Navy will provide security cover for Indian cargo ships passing by the Somalian coast, Defence Minister A.K. Antony said here on Wednesday. As the Somalia coast was very wide, it was hard for the security forces to reach every trouble spot. Warships of many countries were stationed in the area, he

pointed out. The sea off the Somalia coast is infested with pirates and in the recent past they hijacked several cargo ships including Indian vessels. Recently, a couple of Indian ships were hijacked and the Navy got one of them released. Mr. Antony said all ships carrying the Indian flag would be given protection in the Indian Ocean. He recalled that India moved the United Nations for an international operation against piracy there. If this issue was not immediately addressed, littoral countries should join together to fight the menace.

Agni-V design completed; to be test-fired in 2010

When India test-fires the 5,000-km range Agni-V in 2010, it will be one of the most sophisticated, smart and intelligent missiles of its class, featuring a host of new technologies, including measures to counter a ballistic missile threat. This surface-to-surface missile, which will have the longest rangeof all Indian missiles, will form a crucial element of the country's nuclear deterrence programme. With scientists at the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) deciding to make it a canister-launch weapon system, Agni-V is expected to provide a major tactical advantage as it can be launched from anywhere in the country. Avinash Chander, director of the Agni programme and of the Advanced Systems Laboratory (ASL) Avinash Chander, who is also the director of the Agni programme, said the design was completed and the first development flight test will be conducted in 2010. Two of the three stages of the solid-propellant missile will be made of composites, making it lighter. While 60 per cent of the sub-systems will be similar to those of the 3,500-km-range Agni-III, the rest will comprise new and advanced technologies like the ring laser gyroscope and accelerometer, which provide navigation and guidance. The gyroscope was developed by Research Centre Imarat (RCI), sister laboratory of ASL, and is part of DRDO's missile complex here. This advanced technology was proved successfully in Agni-III and in the recent test-firing of Shourya, the tactical missile. Referring to ring laser gyroscope, G. Satish Reddy, director, navigation, observed "this technology is developed by very few countries and we are on a par with them now."Underlining the importance of canister-launch, Mr. Chander said all future Agni missions will have canister launch. Canister had nothing to do with silo or non-silo. V.G. Sekaran, associate director (programmes), ASL, said the Agni-V programme was on schedule. "We are in the development mode and qualification trial will follow." All the sub-systems will be ground-tested till 2010.

Kashmir

2 killed in J&K firing

Two young men were killed when police and paramilitary troops fired at people protesting against the holding of elections in Jammu and Kashmir, officials and witnesses said.
The deaths sparked off wide demonstrations prompting the government to order a probe.
Manzoor Ahmed Kumar, a Class 10 student, died after police guards of Congress candidate Mir Mushtaq fired at a stone pelting mob in Khanpora area of Baramulla the police said. Kumar died on the spot after being hit in the chest, witnesses told IANS on phone.

65% turnout in J&K polls

An estimated 65 per cent of the nearly five-lakh strong electorate voted in the second phase of Assembly polls in Jammu and Kashmir even as police fired in the air to disperse two warring factions. A dozen people sustained injuries when clashes broke out between supporters of various political parties and independent candidates at 10 polling stations in the Jammu region, where voters turned up in large numbers for the second phase of Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir. Polling was disrupted after the clashes at 10 polling stations in Darhal, Rajouri and Kalakot constituencies in the region's Rajouri district following clashes between supporters of various political parties and independent candidates. The police had to open fire to disperse stone-pelting groups of supporters of the National Conference (NC) and other parties at the Badadarhal polling station in the Darhal constituency. District election authorities said order had been restored and balloting had begun at the polling stations. Nearly 4.94 lakh voters are eligible to cast their vote at 530 polling booths in Ganderbal, Kangan, Nowshera, Darhal, Rajouri and Kalakote.

Manmohan, Sonia to campaign in J&K

United Progressive Alliance chairperson Sonia Gandhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and AICC general secretary Rahul Gandhi will campaign for the party in Jammu and Kashmir this week. Pradesh Congress Committee spokesperson Ravinder Sharma told that Mr. Rahul Gandhi will visit Tangdhar and Udhampur on November 28 to address the election rallies. Ms. Gandhi is scheduled to join the party's election campaign in border town of Uri and Doda on December 3. Dr. Singh is likely to visit the State in the second week of December and will most probably campaign ahead of elections in Jammu and Srinagar cities which will go to polls on December 24. Mr. Sharma said that besides these leaders, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Union Power Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde and Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal are likely to campaign in the State. "Rahul Gandhi's visit will infuse confidence among the youth of Jammu and Kashmir as he is an icon for the youth. It will help the party a great deal and we are eagerly looking forward to receive him," he said. Ms. Gandhi had special love for the State and she had been frequenting Jammu and Kashmir in the past as well. The Congress spokesperson was confident of winning a good number of seats given the "spectacular achievement of the Congress led government headed by Ghulam Nabi Azad till recently." He further said that Mr. Azad did a lot for the State's development and the combination of Mr. Azad and PCC chief Saifuddin Soz would push the party through victory.

"No third-party mediation"

India has made it clear that the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir is a bilateral issue with Pakistan and third-party mediation is not welcome. "Jammu & Kashmir is essentially a bilateral issue and we will resolve it through dialogue. It is part of the composite dialogue. There is no question of intervention by any side," observed Mr. Mukherjee when asked about reports of U.S. President-elect Barack Obama planning to name the former U.S. President, Bill Clinton, a special envoy on Kashmir.

Social front

Where monkeys top the agenda

Issues like power and water rule the roost when it comes to elections, but voters in Sihora in poll-bound Madhya Pradesh, accord priority to tackling the monkey menace in this tribal seat.
Slogans like Nahin chahiye bijli, pani, door karo bandar ki pareshani (We do not want power and water but want the monkey ousted) and Bandar bhagao, vote pao (Drive out the monkey and get votes) are on the air in this constituency seat reserved for tribals. Sihora Jagruk Manch President Mr Amol Chourasia said that whenever a candidate contesting elections comes to their area, they ask him/her to drive the 6,000-odd monkeys out of the area if he/she wants their votes.
No candidate till date, he said, had given them a firm assurance. “Monkeys snatch tiffin boxes from our children on their way to school. They run away with our clothes left to dry outside. A number of people, including me, have been bitten by these monkeys,” Mr Chourasia said.
He said they were upset with the civic body as it brought in monkey catchers who free the animals in the nearby jungles from where they return in a day or two. “We want that these monkeys be sent to Kanha National Park and Bandhavgarh National Park. This problem must be solved for the good,” Mr Chourasia said.

Men can bring about the change

On the eve of International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, nongovernmental organisations working in the field have sought cooperation of men to put an end to the social menace. Violence against women and girls has gone up alarmingly. According to a report published by the National Crime Records Bureau crimes against women are increasing at ten times higher rate than overall crimes in society. In 2006, around 11,000 women died due to domestic violence. Of these 7618 dowry deaths were reported while dowry murder, culpable homicide due to dowry and suicides following dowry disputes claimed 825,7 and 2276 lives respectively.Mrs Anuradha Kapoor, director of women's rights organisation Swayam, said to create awareness a rally would be taken out from Dwarkanath Mitra park in south Kolkata tomorrow. Welfare organisations and people from various walks of life would participate in the rally that would finish at Triangular park.

Foreign Relations

India, China major world powers?

India and China have been identified as “major rising powers” in an emerging multi-polar world, and this could bring in “new stakes and rules of the game” in the international arena, according to a new US Intelligence forecast. “We believe chances are good that India and China will continue to rise, but their ascent is not guaranteed and both will have to overcome high economic and social hurdles,” a report by the US Directorate of National Intelligence has said. The report titled Global Trends-2025, a World Transformed has come out as the new Barack Obama administration takes over and clearly points out that if current trends continue by 2025, China will have the world's second largest economy and will be a

"leading military power."
The report said India would continue on the road to rapid economic growth, but warned "regional and ethnic insurgencies that have plagued country since independence are likely to persist. "But they will not threaten India's unity. We assess New Delhi will remain confident that it can contain the Kashmiri separatist movement. However, India is likely to experience heightened violence and instability in several parts of the country because of the growing reach of the Maoist Naxalite movement." it is silent on what India's future military strength would be?
The report while projecting a brisk relationship developing between India and the USA particularly in transfer of high technology and trade, said the political leadership in New Delhi will avoid transformation of these ties into some sort of an "alliance" framework.
"Indian leaders do not see Washington as a military or economic patron, and now believe the international situation has made such a benefactor unnecessarily," the report said.
It, however, said New Delhi would follow on the course of currently developing close ties with the USA, "apparently as a hedge against any development of hostile ties with China".
The report said Indian leaders could also position their country as a "political and cultural bridge between rising China and the USA."

'UNSC without India an anachronism'

Pitching for a greater role for New Delhi in world affairs, former British Prime Minister Mr Tony Blair today termed as "anachronism" the UN Security Council without India as a permanent member. "A UNSC without India as a permanent member is an anachronism. An IMF or a World Bank without a proper role for India will no longer do," Mr Blair said addressing the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit here. However, he was quick to sound a word of caution. "But, beware one thing: with the power will come the responsibility. Of a sudden, you will find the expectation that you will, in partnership with others, lead the world; so you will be able to solve its problems. "It is an exciting prospect, but also a daunting one," he said. The Labour party leader was optimistic that the world's largest democracy, which has "come so far" over the last 60 years, has a "spring in its step" and would rise to the challenge. "The poverty for millions remains. But those that have escaped it, and can lead others to do so, those who here and round the world are evidence of the dynamism, enterprise and ingenuity of the Indian people, show what the true spirit of India can do. Such a spirit will design your future. And that future will shine bright," Mr Blair said.

Zardari pledges nuke no-first-use

Signalling a radical departure from Pakistan's nuclear doctrine, President Asif Ali Zardari today said his country will never be the first to use nuclear weapons and expressed readiness to accept a South Asian Non-Nuclear Treaty. The Pakistani President said his country does not "feel threatened" from India and the latter should also not feel threatened by Pakistan. He also vowed to take the relations with the "great" neighbour to new levels despite existing disputes.
While India had announced a no-first-use policy soon after the 1998 nuclear tests, Pakistan has consistently refused to adopt a similar posture. "I am against nuclear warfare altogether," President Zardari said, addressing the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit being held here via satellite. "Most definitely". We hope we will never get into that position (of using nuclear weapons). I am for a South Asian Non-Nuclear Treaty... I can get my parliament to agree to it right away. Can you (India) get your parliament to agree to it?" he asked, responding to a query whether Pakistan would adopt a policy of no-first-use of nuclear weapons. He said India and Pakistan have a great future together despite their

problems, and favoured enhanced trade, particularly to meet the challenge posed by the global financial crisis. The challenges and difficulties for both India and Pakistan are from within rather from across the borders and the two countries needed to "outgrow" the old mindsets, he said. President Zardari also underscored that Kashmir belonged to the Kashmiri people. "The PPP government had long followed a hands-off policy towards India and it will continue," he told a questioner who sought to know whether India could expect peaceful elections in Jammu and Kashmir in the remaining phases. President Zardari favored India and Pakistan rising as an "economic block" like greater Europe, and said borders should be made accessible to people of either side.

Shah Mahmood Qureshi visit to Delhi

The alleged links of radical Hindu activists to the bombing of the Samjhauta Express is among the issues that are likely to be raised by Pakistan foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi during his visit to India next week. Mr Qureshi is also expected to hold talks on the row over sharing of Chenab waters with his Indian counterpart Mr Pranab Mukherjee in New Delhi on 26 November. He is also likely to call on Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh.

Myanmar finds a 'real friend' in India

The ambassador of Myanmar U Kyi Thein said that India and Myanmar have a long history of friendly relationship. "It is of not only maritime, but also cultural, religious and ethnic affinities since time immemorial," he said while informing that both the countries had established diplomatic relations on 4 January 1948 after Myanmar gained independence. Expressing gratitude to India for its help when his country was hit by Nagis in May this year, Mr Thein described India as a "real friend". India had sent the first relief material at that point of time, he recalled. "It is now our turn even as Orissa and Bihar has faced devastating floods. Today's donation of syringes is a small donation for the state," he pointed out.

Responding to Zardari

By all accounts, President Asif Ali Zardari received the loudest applause after his address to the HT Summit of world leaders. Some commentators said that he made the right noises to please India. In fact, he went beyond Gen. Pervez Musharraf in reaching out to India. It was the right opportunity and an appropriate high profile non-official platform for him to do that. Consider his constraints. He is confronting a divided domestic constituency. He is threatened by jehadi militants. He is pressured by an impatient Washington. He is dependent upon China that is cool to US influence in Pakistan. He faces unrest in NWFP and Baluchistan. In the light of all this he went as far as he could. It almost sounded like a desperate effort to create an opening for India to respond. The Indian government has not responded as yet. After all, it did not respond to the out-of-the box proposals by Musharraf either. The wimps who misgovern India are unlikely to respond to Zardari unless some first secretary of some embassy advises them accordingly. But Zardari deserves a response. So recall what he said and consider what should be said to him.

Zardari declared that Pakistan would pursue a policy of "no-first-use" of nuclear weapons. He went on to propose a non-nuclear South Asia. He said: "I am for a South Asian non-nuclear treaty and can get my Parliament to agree to it right away. Can you [India] get your Parliament to agree to it?" Our reply should be: Don't get too smart. A non-nuclear South Asia would be hailed by your mentors in the West

and China. Why don't you talk of a non-nuclear Asia in which China, Japan, India, Pakistan, Israel, Iran and North Korea commit themselves to it? You propose that and we will support you. Pending that, why talk about just a "no-first use" treaty? Why not joint defence between India and Pakistan as the late Ayub Khan proposed? That would, today, include nuclear weapons too! Zardari said he was seeking enhanced trade and economic ties with India. He said: "If you can trade with China, why not with Pakistan?" Our reply should be: Get real! If Pakistan can have most favoured nation agreement with China, why not with India? Before making glib proposals for enhanced trade, how about giving muscle to SAFTA? Put your money where your mouth is. Zardari favoured the opening of the India-Pakistan border for trade. He said there was no need for a strict visa regime to enter each other's country. The two countries could create a special card for their people to cross the border without hitch. He said there is a little Pakistani in every Indian and a little Indian in every Pakistani. Our reply should be: These are fine sentiments. Why not pursue them to their logical conclusion? You want visas abolished. You really think that is possible unless cross-border terrorism ends? Do you seriously deny it exists? If you can't handle it, why not seek India's cooperation? You acknowledge that there is a little Indian in every Pakistani. Is there even the tiniest Chinese in every Pakistani? You very well know our history. Then why does your government support silly proposals of making China a full member of SAARC? If you want to give adequate political expression to the cultural unity of India and Pakistan, if you want to abolish visas, if you want total nuclear security between India and Pakistan, if you want to stabilise Kashmir without altering international borders, you cannot be unaware that the only sensible option is to create an arrangement between both our nations akin to what obtains in the European Union. India and Pakistan must have a common market and joint defence. Only such a commitment in principle will help us to jointly end the scourge of terrorism. You evidently know all this. Why are you afraid of stating it? Don't wait for the political twits in the Indian government to take the initiative. The people of India and Pakistan will welcome it. Don't just fly kites, Mr Zardari. If you mean business, go the whole hog and speak up. Believe me; your country doesn't have time to waste! Already, think-tanks in the West are redrawing the map of Pakistan....

India condemns Gaza blockade

India has condemned the recent upsurge of violence in the Gaza Strip and expressed concern at the adverse effects of Israel's closure of access points into the area. "There can be no justification for the denial of essential supplies, including food and fuel, to the civilian population of the Gaza Strip numbering over a million people. Like any other people in the world, Palestinian people have the undeniable right to live in a safe and dignified manner," Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahmed said. He called for an end to the expansion of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories and for an early and significant easing of restrictions on the free movement of people and goods within Palestine. "We believe that the cycle of violence must end. Peace in the region requires sustained and substantial negotiations among the parties."

Pranab leaves Nepal satisfied

External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee on Wednesday "reiterated India's commitment to supporting the government and the people of Nepal in their quest to build multi-party democracy." Speaking in connection with an interactive discussion with members of the Constituent Assembly, Mr. Mukherjee said

political consensus was needed to achieve "the ultimate objective" of multi-party democracy and to draft a new constitution. He said his visit to the country was satisfying and timely.

World condemns attack

World leaders have reacted with shock and outrage to the terrorist attacks on India's financial capital, Mumbai, and expressed their condolences to the bereaved families. The US Secretary of State, Miss Condoleezza Rice, called up the external affairs minister, Mr Pranab Mukherjee, and expressed US support and assistance in the fight against terrorism. President George W Bush later called the PM. The US President-elect, Mr Barack Obama in a statement said: "These coordinated attacks on innocent civilians demonstrate the grave and urgent threat of terrorism. The USA must continue to strengthen our partnerships with India and nations around the world to root out and destroy terrorist networks... We stand with the people of India." US Ambassador to India Mr David C Mulford offered condolences and all assistance to the people of Mumbai and the government of India following the tragic terror attacks. British Prime Minister Mr Gordon Brown and foreign secretary David Miliband condemned the attacks. The Pakistan Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani also condemned the incidents of violence. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said: "We are concerned about the loss of life and consider that acts of terrorism of this type are harmful to the whole international order and are a challenge to humanity." The Israeli vice Prime Minister and minister of foreign affairs Ms Tzipi Livni spoke to the Israel Consul General in Mumbai, who briefed her on last night's events.
Back home, strongly condemning the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, business conglomerate Tata Group's head Mr Ratan Tata today urged the nation to remain united to beat the divisive forces. "We must show that we cannot be disabled or destroyed, but that such henious acts will only make us stronger. It is important that we do not allow divisive forces to weaken us. We need to overcome these forces as one strong unified nation," Mr Tata said in a statement.

Militants want to destabilise peace: Pakistan

The Mumbai terror attacks and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's statement that the attackers came from a "neighbouring country" have spread widespread gloom here. They have spurred fears for the future of India-Pakistan relations, with leaders, officials and analysts urging both sides to work "more aggressively" towards peaceful ties. Local television channels gave the happenings in Mumbai the maximum coverage through the day, packing in discussions and talks shows on the incident and its implications for the relations between the two countries. President Asif Ali Zardari telephoned Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Thursday evening and said that militancy and extremism in all its forms and manifestations had to be eliminated and all countries needed to cooperate with each other in this regard, his spokesman Farahtullah Babar said. Mr. Zardari termed the killings of innocent people "a detestable act" and condemned the attacks "in the strongest possible terms," his spokesman said. Mr. Babar told that "militants and extremists want to destabilise the peace process and it is in the interests of both countries not to allow this."

Reaction on Obama's Victory in Presidential Election 2008

Saddams hopeful with Hussein victory

Dead Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein might have fought relentlessly against the USA and spat venom on its president Mr George W Bush until he was hanged. However, hundreds of Muslim villagers settled in the "Village of Saddam Husseins" in Bihar have suddenly had a change of heart towards the country after Mr Barack Hussein Obama was elected its new President last fortnight. The people are hopeful the USA will withdraw forces from Iraq and allow the Iraqis, and the rest of the world, to govern on their own. The Lakhano village, tucked away in Amraha panchayat under town block of Gaya district in Bihar, became known as the "Village of Saddam Husseins" after hundreds of children was named after the dead Iraqi dictator. Whether it was the decade-long Gulf War, US attack on Iraq, arrest of its dictator or his subsequent execution, any developments concerning Iraq in the last three decades has had its direct impact on this village. Villagers laughed when Saddam challenged the USA and mourned when he was caught by American forces and then hanged. People at this village consider Saddam as their "hero" because of the way he dealt with the USA without caring for his life. Perhaps this is the reason there is virtually a mad competition among the villagers to name their children as Saddam Hussein. There is not a single house in this village which does not have a Saddam Hussein as the people's sentiments are deeply associated with the executed Iraqi president. "We never liked (George W) Bush or his policies but now we hope things will improve on the Iraq front and international relations will improve now that Mr Obama has been elected the new president of the USA," a local villager Mohammad Imtiyaz said. "Bush was the enemy of humanity, widowed many women and orphaned scores of children. But, we have information that Obama is a nice man who achieved this position after hard work and dedication. We are sure the world will change under his leadership". The sentiments of the Saddam Husseins are similar. They have great expectations from Mr Obama, a black man, who managed to reach the esteemed White House after the presidential elections held last fortnight. "We don't know much about Mr Bush or Mr Obama but we can only assure we will not hesitate, even for a moment, sacrificing our lives for the sake of our country, the way Saddam Hussein smilingly kissed the gallows for his Iraq," said a boy named as Saddam. Reports said teachers at a government school running at this village have been facing a lot of difficulties in handling the children since many of the students have a common name Saddam Hussein.

Mizoram first-time voters take their cue from Obama

Inspired by U.S. President-elect Barak Obama's victory speech and his trademark slogan "change we need," first-time voters in Mizoram say they want the December 2 Assembly polls to bring about a change in every sphere of life in the north-eastern State. "Like Obama said change we need, it is time we change. We need change in every sphere. Change for the better. More particularly in education, we need a drastic change. We need better courses, infrastructure. We need better institutions…," Lalnunmawii, III year student of B.A. (English) of the Pachhunga University College here, told. Endorsing his friend, Jonathan Lalthingpuia, a student of third year of B.A. (Sociology), says: "We need quality educational institutions like the IIT, good engineering colleges, better courses, Internet facilities in our schools, colleges so that we can be on a par with students elsewhere in the world. We need a government in Mizoram that can bring about these changes." The total number of electorate has increased from 5,32,462 voters in the 2003 Assembly polls to 6,11,124, and a majority of the new voters are first-time electors. R. Lalrinmawia of III B.Sc (Chemistry) said Mizoram needed a combination of young people with new ideas and old people with experience to run the government.

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BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Fertile Crescent

Aisha Rehman

From 29th to 5th December, 2008

December 10, 2008

Iraq

Political front:

- U.S. to hand over its Iraqi detainees to government
- War of words rages between Kurds and central government
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Geo strategic front:

- Maliki calls to enlarge cooperation with NATO
- VP says Iraq eager for new page of relations with Japan
- John McCain makes surprise visit to Baghdad
- Obama will seek to end war in Iraq
- Iraq-Iran war victims' remains to be exchanged
- FM calls on Russia to assist Iraq at UN

Social front:

- UNAMI's report rings alarm bells- IIP
- U.S. U.N. envoy ends talks, leaves Kurdistan
- FM calls on UNICEF to reopen Baghdad office
- Freedoms observatory says gov't must handle all violations
- Red Cross welcomes war dead exchange
-

Syria

Political front:

- President al-Assad Reiterates Syria's Readiness to Assist Lebanese People, Forces and National Parties
- Minister Bilal underlines important role of the Youth in construction process
- Al-Shaar Discusses Cooperation with UNHCR Delegation
- Ghafari Elected Deputy Chairman of Arab Justice Ministers' Council

Economic front:

- Al-Dardari: Syria Committed to Achieving Millennium Development Goals
- Turkey Looks for More Exports to Neighboring States, including Syria
- Prospects of Cooperation in Investment Fields Between Syria & UAE Discussed
- Syria and UAE, Cooperation March in Continuous Advance
- Ottri Meets French Businessmen Delegation, Calls for Investing in Syria
- General Aoun meets businessmen, visits the Umayyad Mosque
- Al-Atrash Discusses Cooperation with French Companies

Geo strategic front:

- IAEA approves aid for civilian nuclear research against US objections
- President al-Assad and General Aoun Discuss Syrian-Lebanese Issues
- Syrian-EU Association Agreement close to conclusion
- Assad expresses disapproval of Iraq-US security pact
- Ottri and Basti Review Cooperation between Syria and Tunisia
- Mikdad: Bush Administration Blamed for Crises in the World
- President al-Assad Receives Message from President Sarkozy on Bilateral Relations and Regional Developments

- Janibiyeh Underscores Syrian-Russian Relations
- The Syrian-Lebanese Relations are on the Right Track
- Lebanese President Underlines Importance of Arab Solidarity
- President al-Assad Discusses with Paraguay Foreign Minister, Bilateral Relations
- Otri and Zahabi Discuss Cooperation between Syria and Jordan
- UN General Assembly Demands Israel to Withdraw from Occupied Syrian Golan
- Ottri Meets Syrian Community in Belarus, Visits Minsk Metro, Returns Home
- Syria's Aid Convoy to Palestinian People

Social front:

- Public Sit-in in Front of International Red Cross Headquarters in Damascus Protesting Israeli Practices against Syrian Captives
- Palestinian Refugees Stress Adherence to their Right to Return to Their Homes
- Syria Wins the 1st UNICEF Award for Media on Child's Rights
- The Arab Journalist Federation Underlines Support to the Restoration of Occupied Golan
- Minister Bilal calls for helping people with special needs
- Al-Ridawi Confirms Importance of Supporting UNICEF Efforts in Social Development Process

Lebanon

Economic front:

- U.S. Gives $50,000 to USJ, Launches New Website for Batroun Municipality
- Second Qoreitem Roundtable Aimed at Solving Lebanon's Economic Problems
- Central Bank Governor: Lebanese Banks Growing
- Lebanon's cellular service to drop in price and expand

Geo strategic front:

- Muallem: Embassy by Year-End, Ambassador Appointment to Take Place Gradually
- Security Council 'Consensus' on International Tribunal
- Lebanese president requests weapons from Iran
- Sarkozy expects maximum transparency in Lebanon's next election
- Geagea blasts Aoun over subservience to the Syrian regime
- Aoun tries to justify his visit to Syria
- Aoun paying the debt to Syria for his return to Lebanon
- Lebanon's Hariri tribunal to begin work in March says UN's Ban
- UN adds new suspects in Lebanon assassinations
- Saudi protests against verbal attacks by pro-Syrians

Social front:

- Pro-Syrian Palestinians say no to Palestine embassy in Lebanon
- Lebanon enjoys in 2008 best tourism season since 2004

- Lebanese journalist called 'a jew' by pro-Syrian attackers
- Lebanon outraged over journalist attack by SSNP
- South Lebanon: "Stop making cluster bombs"
- Leanese army arrests SSNP members
- Lebanese students demonstrate in support of Gaza

Jordan

Political front:

- MPs walk out as debate over Gaza aid ship delayed
- MPs censure colleagues who publicly criticise House

Economic front:

- Khalili highlights deal with Daewoo to establish electric equipment plant in Jordan
- Agricultural investment in Sudan to resume early 2009
- 72 municipalities to receive funding for development projects
- Kingdom granted three-year extension of its mine-clearance deadline
- International firms to bid on Arab railway project early next year
- Pakistani envoy underlines need for FTA to boost ties
- Al Aman Fund seeks to increase beneficiary base

Geo strategic front:

- EU, Kingdom launch joint initiative
- Jordan, NATO member states to expand security, political ties
- King renews support for Palestinians
- King to hold talks in Seoul
- S. Korea willing to help in key schemes
- Kingdom to host region's largest appliances factory

Social front:

- 'Long Eid holiday has adverse impact on productivity'
- RJ first airline to land in Bangkok
- Students tackle global issues through robotics competition
- Deputies endorse law regulating drug trials on humans
- E-journalism growing but hard to rule – experts

Palestine and Israel:

Security issues:

- Israel Approves Release of 250 Palestinian Prisoners
- Israel Eases Blockade on Gaza
- IOF Attacks Peaceful Demonstrations against the Wall
- IOF Arrests Palestinian from Bethlehem, Attacks Nablus
- PCHR: IOF Continues Aggressions against Palestinians

- Colonizers Attack Palestinians, International Activists after Eviction of Illegal Outpost
- Colonizers Rebuild Illegal Migron Outpost in West Bank
- Hammad denounces deviation of Senator Obama's statements in Meeting with President Abbas
- Barak to right-wing leaders: Avoid clashes over Hebron house
- Israeli leaders call for war in Gaza, Likud MK calls for using detainees as human shields

Economic front:

- Palestinian Companies Start EXPOTEC 2008 Exhibition Tomorrow
- Norway Donates $447,000 to UNRWA for Nahr Al-Bared Operations
- Africa-Israel loss reaches over NIS 2.1 billion
- Netanyahu presents Likud economic plan
- Al Marwa, the first of several Arab ship to break the Gaza Siege

Geo strategic front:

- Libya Complains of Israeli High Sea 'Piracy' to Security Council
- UAE Urges Donors to Fund UNRWA Programs
- President Abbas Meets with Romanian President
- EU Condemns Colonizers' Violence against Palestinians
- Egyptian War Games Cause For Concern In Israel, Lawmaker Says
- Indirect prisoner-swap talks resume under Egyptian mediation

Social front:

- UNRWA Appeals for Funding Its Program in Nahr Al-Bared
- Islamic-Christian Front: Israel Expands Attacks on Jerusalem
- UNHRC: Human Rights Violations in Palestinian Territory Stem from Israeli Attacks
- Treasury chiefs: PMO exceeding authority on pensions

Iraq

Political front:

U.S. to hand over its Iraqi detainees to government

Iraqi detainees in U.S. custody will be handed over to the Iraqi authorities by the end of they year in line with the security agreement the countries signed last month. ***The U.S. says there are 15,000 Iraqis in its prisons in Iraq. The Iraqi authorities are*** required to run these prisons also. Some of these detainees are former high-ranking Iraqi officials. Apart from a few high-profile cases, almost all the detainees have been languishing in U.S. prisons for years without trail. ***It is not clear what will the government do with the detainees.*** The figure was much higher but more than 17,000 detainees have been released this

year. U.S. troops say they are proceeding ahead with a plan to set 50 detainees every day, 1,500 every month. It is doubtful whether the government will adopt the plan when all the detainees become its sole responsibility. Under the security agreement, U.S. troops in Iraq have no right to run their own jails. And if they detain Iraqis they must handed them over to the authorities.

War of words rages between Kurds and central government

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani are supposed to be close friends since their political factions dominate the parliament and the government. They understand that they need each other to prevent their ruling coalition and government from collapse. But there is little they see eye-to-eye. Maliki wants to clip Barzani's wings. But he does not seem to have enough troops and power to do so. Iraqi troops are bogged down in fighting al-Qaeda and other armed groups opposing the presence of U.S. troops in the country.

With the troops busy quelling an internal insurgency in central Iraq, Barzani has seized the opportunity by deploying his own militias in areas traditionally not part of the Kurdish enclave.

KA takes part in Diala elections with 6 parties

The announcement of the Kurdistan Alliance's list which will enter the Diala provincial council elections with six Kurdish parties, a Kurdish official said. "The list of the Kurdistan Alliance which will enter the Diala elections was announced today," Dara Hamma Ali told***, noting that the list includes six parties; Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), Kurdistan Communist Party (KCP), Drudging Kurdistan party and the Kurdistan Socialist Party.***
"The announcement came during a press conference held in Khaniqeen center of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, attended by the representatives of the six parties," he added. Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, under President Jalal Talabani, is one of the main two parties in Kurdistan with Kurdistan Democratic Party under Kurdish President Massoud Barzani.

SIIC head, former U.S. envoy discuss situation in Iraq

The head of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), Abdelaziz al-Hakeem, discussed the recent developments in the country with the permanent U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Zalmay Khalilzad. Hakeem, who is also the head of the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), received Khalilzad and discussed with him means of boosting mutual relations between the two countries, according to a statement published on the official web site of the SIIC. The meeting tackled the Iraqi government's efforts to rid Iraq of the repercussions of Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

Responding al-Maliki's accusations attempt to correct situation - Kurdistan

Head of the Kurdish presidency's divan described the response of the Kurdish government to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's accusations as an attempt to correct the situation and get back to the constitution. "We tried to correct the situation with the Iraqi government because accusations made against us were related to the constitutional work in Kurdistan and the government of the region asserted in its response that it works according to the constitution and al-Maliki was the one who does not," Fouad Hussein told. Media adviser to Premier Nouri al-Maliki had said on Monday that the Iraqi federal government will respond to the points mentioned by the release issued by Kurdistan's regional cabinet through an official release that will be issued by al-Maliki. ***the relation between Baghdad and Kurdistan region witnesses disagreements over forming the support councils in the disputed areas, oil contracts with the foreign compan***ies as well as solving the disputed areas problem.

National reconciliation behind security improvement – PM

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said that national reconciliation has provided positive atmosphere for the success of the government and security agencies in improving security conditions and progress in the country's political process. "Reconciliation is part of the system to enhance security and the political process as well as the protection of the democratic experiment," Maliki said during a meeting of the national reconciliation follow-up committee. "Reconciliation has brought about many positive outcome and successes. We have been able to set up *sahwa* (awakening) councils, absorb the former army officers and settle the problem of military industry," he said ***Maliki pointed out that the most important success within the reconciliation process was t***o "win the clans and have them standing by the national unity government in the efforts to impose the rule of law and order thanks to their active contribution to combating terrorism and outlaws".

URGENT / PB OKs SOFA

The Iraqi Presidential Board (PB) approved a controversial long-term security pact between Baghdad and Washington, according to the presidential cabinet chief. "The PB has unanimously approved the status-of-forces agreement, including the plebiscite over it in mid-2009 and the reform document," Nusseir al-Aani told. The Iraqi parliament had passed SOFA on November 27 and a political reform document signed by political powers.

KRG's UN coordinator says UNAMI's report partly false

The Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) coordinator to the United Nations said that part of the report issued by the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) on human rights abuses in the country is "incorrect.""Being the source of information for the United Nations, we make it clear that part of the report is incorrect," Dindar Zibari said during a press conference attended. "The regional government has taken positive steps to improve the situation of human rights in the region," Zibari added. ***UNAMI released a report in which it said that grave human rights violations persisted i***n Iraq during the first half of the current current year despite significant improvements in the security situation.

UNAMI official calls on Iraqi forces not to interfere in election process

The UNAMI chief for elections team helping Iraqis called on the high security committee of elections not to interfere in the coming elections to facilitate the supervisors' mission. "We still have 57 days before the elections and the security committee have to secure the Iraqi voters and poll stations and to order the security forces not to interfere in the elections process," Sandra Michel told. ***She demanded the Iraqi security forces to facilitate the elections supervisors who*** will hold special badges. ***Iraq's Parliament has set a January 31 deadline for elections in 14 provinces, excluding*** the three Kurdish provinces and the disputed oil-rich province of Kirkuk. Leaders of Iraq's minority's communities claimed the law did not provide for their representation in the councils that would be formed after the vote.

Next year elections made by Iraqis - IHEC

The head of the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) said that the provincial councils' elections, which will be held early next year, differ from other elections, because their laws and programs were made by Iraqis. Speaking at the second security conference held by the high security commission of elections in Baghdad, Farag al-Haydari told "the provincial councils elections which will be held next January 31 are different than other elections held in the past, because Iraqi put their laws and programs without any interference from the U.S. embassy and forces in Iraq." "The formation of the IHEC was made by a decision of the U.S. civil ruler Paul Premer," he noted.

PM will respond to Kurdish release – source

Media adviser to Premier Nouri al-Maliki said that the Iraqi federal government will respond to the points mentioned by the release issued by Kurdistan's regional cabinet through an official release that will be issued by al-Maliki. "The release that will be issued by the premier will represent an official response," Yaseen Majeed told.

Deputy premier discusses pact with U.S. ambassador

The Iraqi Deputy Premier Barham Salih conferred the Iraqi-U.S. pact with the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Zalamy Khalilzad, according to a release issued by Salih's office. "Salih received Khalilzad today," said the release that was received. "The two sides discussed mechanisms to execute the pact after it was approved by the Iraqi Parliament," it added.

PM, Speaker meet on SOFA, reform document

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki discussed with Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al-Mashhadani a number of political issues, including the U.S. troop withdrawal agreement and the political reform document, according to a parliamentary statement. "Security and services issues were also raised during the meeting," according to a statement received. the Iraqi Parliament approved the security pact with the United States, also known as the Status-of-Forces Agreement (SOFA), with a majority of 149 votes to 35.

Political differences shouldn't affect UN work – official

The Kurdish government's coordinator for the UN affairs said that the differences between political powers should not affect the work of the international organization in Iraq by not issuing reports about Kirkuk and the disputed areas. "The political differences in Iraq should not be a reason for th0e UN to stop making reports about Kirkuk and the disputed areas but the international pressure should continue to develop the political process in Iraq not to delay it," Dindar Zebari said. "If the UN mission's recommendations do not have appropriate solutions for the disputed areas, the international organization should intervene to tackle this problem which hinders the national reconciliation," he added.

Ninewa Fraternal List for provincial elections announced

The deputy governor of the Ninewa province said that the Ninewa Fraternal List which will take part in the next provincial council elections was announced. ***"The Ninewa Fraternal List, which includes seven parties; the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Islamic Union of Kurdistan, Kurdistan Communist Party, Iraqi Communist Party, the Assyrian Party, and Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party, was announced," Khisro Kouran told***. "The announcement came during a conference held near Suwaifa village in northeastern Mosul, attended by Muslims and Christian clerics and Yazidis as well as a number of personalities," he also said. ***For his part, the first deputy chairman of the Ninewa provincial council and the head of th***e Fraternal List announced the list's agenda which includes; rule of law, compensating damaged people and emigrants, supporting the health work, and activating the industrial movement. The provincial council has 37 seats, according to the provincial council elections law approved last September.

Economic front:

Agreement to export oil from Kurdish fields collapses

An agreement to allow Kurds to export up to 100,000 barrels of oil a day via national pipelines has collapsed, Oil Ministry officials said. The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said differences over collection of royalties and the Kurdish region's right to strike oil deals on its own led to the collapse of the deal. Oil Minister Hussain al-Shahristani and Kurdish Region Prime Minister Nejervan Barzani agreed last month on the export of oil produced from fields within the Kurdish enclave. The Kurds want to have a say in the foreign cash in return of exporting oil produced in their region and also have the sole responsibility in developing oil fields. Shahristani has turned down both requests, saying the collection of royalties and signing of contracts must the prerogative of the central government. Disparate Arab political factions, both Shiite and Sunni, are said to have united behind Shahristani. Barzani said those deals would not be revoked and that the Kurds were determined to export oil on their

own. ***It is not clear how the Kurds*** could do that as countries neighboring their region – Syria, Iran and Turkey – have said they would not let the Kurds do so without central government approval. Kurds now get 17% of foreign cash Iraq earns on its oil exports.

Five committees set up to solve differences over oil with Kurds

The government has set up five separate committees to negotiate with Kurds on how to solve differences over a draft oil and gas law. The law has been ratified by the government but has yet to be approved by the parliament to become effective. The Kurds are reported to have accepted a government condition not to export oil on their own. Hassani described Kurdish acceptance to ship any quantities of crude oil produced in their enclave via twin pipeline via Turkey as "positive." Oil Ministry officials privately say Kurdish agreement to let the central government control exports is a major concession. They said it removes one major hurdle and makes the central government the sole body in charge of exports and collecting the revenues. But it is not clear whether the latest concession by the Kurds will eventually persuade the parliament to pass the law. One remaining thorny issue relates to the signing of contracts. The Kurds say they have the right of striking oil development deals without central government approval. They have already singed nearly 20 such deals which have helped them develop several fields in the Province of Dahouk capable of producing up to 100,000 barrels a day.

Partisan interests hinder constitutional amendments

An Iraqi parliamentarian called on leaders of political blocs to find a common ground on constitutional amendments, which he said have been hindered by political disputes. "National duty compels the leaders of political blocs to come to the table of dialogue and reach an accord that ends all political disputes…," MP Sami al-Atroushi from the Kurdistan Islamic Union told. The Kurdistan Islamic Union has five seats in the 275-member Parliament.

Kurdistan Parl. ratifies draft civil airports institution law

The Kurdistan Parliament ratified the draft law on the civil airports' institution during its 22 nd session, presided over by Deputy Speaker Kamal Karkouki, according to a parliamentary statement. "Today, the Parliament unanimously approved the draft law on the civil airports' institution following amendments and removals of some of its clauses," according to the statement. The session was attended by the parliamentary affairs minister, Saad Khaled; and the directors of Arbil and Sulaimaniya airports.

Kurdish PM calls on South Korean companies to invest in Kurdistan

Kurdish Prime Minister Negervan Barzani called on the South Korean companies to invest in Kurdistan, expressing hope for the continuation of relations between the two countries after the withdrawal of the Korean troops. Speaking at a ceremony marking the end of the mission of the South Korean forces stationed in the Kurdistan region, Barzani said "I hope that the withdrawal

of South Korean forces will not be a reason to cut relations between the two countries and i call on the South Korean companies to use the chance and invest in our region."For his part the commander of the South Korean troops said "our presence in Kurdistan region has an important indication and we thank the Kurdish government for its cooperation during our presence." "The troops will start leaving Arbil between December 11-14 heading for Kuwait then they will leave Kuwait on December 20," he told.

$680 thousand for new bridge in Amara

A local company began the construction ona bridge on the Tigris River at central Amara city, with a total cost of around $680 thousand, said the manager of Missan province's roads and bridges directorate. "The bridge will be devoted for pedestrians," Engineer Mohammed Jassib al-Mouri told. "Execution period will not exceed six months," he said. Amara, the capital city of Missan province, lies 390 km south of Baghdad.

Starting 5 new projects in Wassit of 4 billion ID

Wassit Governor Latif Hameed al-Tarfa opened five new executed projects to the south of Kut city, at a total cost of more than four billion Iraqi dinners (ID), according to a source from the province. "The five executed project are at al-Hay suburb, 40 km south of Kut city," the source told. "The total cost of all of them is 4.201 billion ID," he added. Kut, the capital city of Wassit province, lies 180 km southeast of Baghdad.

Kurdistan PM says oil minister shouldn't make decisions alone

Prime Minister of Iraq's Kurdistan region Negervan al-Barzani said the minister oil has no right to make unilateral decisions about the oil contracts signed by the regional government, which he described as "constitutional." "The oil contracts were made in accordance with the constitution and the Iraqi minister of oil is not entitled to make a unilateral decision about the matter," Barzani said in his speech during the inauguration ceremony of the 60 th festival on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Arbil city. "A committee has been set up by the central and regional governments to examine the legitimacy of the contracts signed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)," Barzani added. Minister Hussein al-Shahrestani has criticized the regional government on several occasions for signing "illegal" contracts with foreign oil companies.

Two rehabilitation tenders of $3.35 million awarded in Missan

Two tenders totaling around $3.35 million, to purchase spare parts to rehabilitate power stations in Missan, were awarded according to the province's electricity distribution deputy director general. "The committee supervising the urgent grant to Missan awarded the two tenders today," Engineer Jomaa Ithafa Slaman told. "The grant has an amount of $100 million, and was made by the Iraqi government," he added. Amara, the capital city of Missan province, lies 390 km south of Baghdad.

Luxury hotel, shopping mall soon in Baghdad

Baghdad's municipal council revealed a 50-year investment plan to build a five-star hotel, a shopping mall and a theme park on the land of the 14 Tammuz Park. "An additional area of 18 donums (1 donum= 2,500 square meters) in al-Moheet Street will also be zoned for the project," according to a statement released by the council and received by Aswat al-Iraq, quoting Baghdad's Mayor Sabir al-Issawi as saying.
The 15-storey hotel will be designed to accommodate a large number of visitors who arrive in the city.

Sewage, rain water networks set up in Basra

A local company on Monday initiated work on a project to establish sewage and rain water networks in Basra city at a cost of nearly $2.85 million U.S. dollars, the head of the local construction unit said. "Work includes the establishment of new sewage networks and the rehabilitation of old ones…," Engineer Ziyad Ali told. Work on the project will last more than six months, Ali said, adding that it will be financed through the provincial development budget for the year 2008. Basra, 590 km (340 miles) south of the Iraqi capital Baghdad, has an estimated metropolitan population of 2,300,000 in 2008.
Basra, a Shiite province with 20% of the population are Sunnis, is the cradle of the first civilization of Sumer. It has the seven main Iraqi ports. The first built in Islam 14 A.H. (After Hegira), the city played an important role in early Islamic history.
The area surrounding Basra has substantial petroleum resources and many oil wells. The city's oil refinery has a production capacity of about 140,000 barrels per day (bpd).
The only Iraqi outlet to the sea, Basra is in a fertile agricultural region, with major products including rice, maize corn, barley, pearl millet, wheat and dates as well as livestock. A network of canals flowed through the city, giving it the nickname "The Venice of the Middle East" at least at high tide. The only Iraqi outlet to the sea, Basra has the commercial ports of Iraq.

Maliki in Nassiriya to open major water project

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki arrived morning in Nassiriya city to inaugurate a major water project, according to a parliamentary media source. "A number of ministers and advisors, including the minister of water resources, Jamal Rasheed Abdellateef, have accompanied Maliki in his visit," the source told. ***The project is one of the largest and most significant in Iraq. It transfers salt water in c***entral and southern Iraq through a network of canals to the Persian Gulf.
Thi-Qar, 380 km south of Baghdad, has an area of 12,900 square kilometers (4,980.7 sq mi). In 2003 the estimated population of the governorate was 1,454,200 people. Thi-Qar was the second Iraqi province where security responsibilities were transferred from the Multi-National Force (MNF) to the Iraqis.
The province's capital is the city of al-Nassiriya. It also includes the ancient Sumerian ruins of Ur, Eridu, Lagash and Ngirsu. Before 1976 the province was known as al-Muntafiq.

Iraq faces economic crunch- VP

Iraqi Vice President Adel Abdemahdi said that Iraq is currently facing an economic crisis as a result of the fall in international oil prices. "The government has to handle this crisis as early as possible, not wait unit its repercussions affect the lives of people, and reconstruction and development projects," according to a presidential statement received. The statement was issued following Abdelmahdi's meeting with President Jalal al-Talabani in Baghdad.

$150m to rehabilitate cement factory

A preliminary agreement was signed to rehabilitate and develop a cement factory of the Iraqi Ministry of Industry and Minerals by a group of international companies, a media source from the ministry said."The agreement was made at the Jordanian capital, Amman," the source told. "The companies will invest up to $150 million in the factory over a period of 15 years, including a 24-month rehabilitation period," he said. "The design capacity of the factory is 1.8 million tons per year," he added.

+100 companies request investment permits in Basra

More than 100 foreign and Arab companies have requested investment permits in Basra province throughout the current month, an official source from the Basra Investment Authority said. "The authority has received nearly 100 requests throughout the current month, including 18 official requests for investment permits in the province," Munadil Abd Khanjar al-Mayahi told. Basra, 590 km (340 miles) south of the Iraqi capital Baghdad, has an estimated metropolitan population of 2,300,000 in 2008.

Deputy PM opens investment conf. in Jordan

Iraqi Deputy Premier Rafie al-Issawi inaugurated the first international conference on investment in the electricity sector in the Dead Sea area in Jordan. "The meeting is part of the Iraqi Electricity Ministry's activities and the government's efforts to boost Iraq's energy sector," Issawi was quoted by a statement from his media office as received. He said that the conference aims to encourage international corporations to invest in Iraq and to build mega power stations to bridge the electricity gap in Baghdad and other provinces. Iraqi Minister of Electricity Kareem Waheed will attend the conference in which representatives of several firms in the field of power production and grid maintenance will take part.

Jordan receives 700,000 barrels of Iraqi oil in 2 months

Iraqi crude oil received by Jordan during the period between September 23 and November 29 reached 700,00 barrels, on a rate of 10,000 barrels per day (bpd), carried in 42 tanks, according to the CEO of the company that implements oil transport from Iraq to Jordan. "Oil flow from Iraq to the kingdom (of Jordan) still continues in accordance with the agreement signed between the two countries' governments," the Jordanian saying. "Transport and unloading operations are going smoothly. The stable security conditions inside Iraqi territories have helped facilitating all procedures," he said.

ID1.9b project to rehabilitate street in Diwaniya

A local company on Sunday finalized a project to rejuvenate a street in central Diwaniya city at a cost of 1.9 billion Iraqi dinars (ID) as part of the Provincial Development Budget (PDB) plan for the year 2008, a local official said. "The local company today finished works on the al-Zira'a street, the second corridor, in central Diwaniya. It is 1.5 km long and 11.20 meters wide," Hazem Omran, the assistant governor of Diwaniya, told.

Geo strategic front:

Maliki calls to enlarge cooperation with NATO

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki called for an increase in the cooperation between the defense and interior ministries, and NATO which contributes toward developing the Iraqi military capabilities. "Army and police forces managed in a short time to maintain security and stability throughout Iraq," al-Maliki said. "The security forces, despite the great progress they realized, still need for more training and equipments," he added. ***For his part, the NATO official expressed the organization's readiness to help maintainin***g security throughout Iraq, which witnessed significant progress in the past months.

VP says Iraq eager for new page of relations with Japan

Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi said that his country is looking forward to a new page of mutual relations with Japan following the stoppage of the logistic support by the Japanese forces in Samawa city. "During a Japanese embassy reception in Baghdad, Hashemi pointed out that following the withdrawal of the Self-Defense Forces from Samawa (southern Iraq) and the stoppage of the logistic support provided by the Japanese air force, Iraqis are waiting for a new page of mutual relations that focus on economy, science and technology," according to a statement published on the official web site of the Iraqi presidency. Japan deployed 600 troops in the southern Iraqi city of Samawa from 2004-2006 to provide humanitarian assistance in the war-torn country. Japanese air logistic support operations were carried out in 2006

John McCain makes surprise visit to Baghdad

Former U.S. presidential candidate John McCain made a surprise visit to Iraq and discussed with Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi the U.S. troop withdrawal agreement, according to a statement released from al-Hashemi's office. "Al-Hashemi received at his office in Baghdad Republican Senator John McCain and discussed with him issues if common interest and the security pact between the two sides," said the statement received. The ***Iraqi parliament had passed SOFA with a majority of 149 out of 198 members who*** attended the session. The agreement legalizes the presence of 150,000 U.S. troops after a UN mandate for the United States to intervene in Iraq is due to expire at the end of this year.

Obama will seek to end war in Iraq

U.S. President-elect Barack Obama said he will seek to end the war in Iraq after assuming office. This came during a press conference today to name his stuff for the next U.S. administration. Obama named former Democratic rival Hillary Clinton as a secretary of state and decided also to keep the current defense secretary Robert Gates in his office.

Iraq-Iran war victims' remains to be exchanged

Remains of the 1980s Iraq-Iran war victims will be exchanged today between the governments of Baghdad and Tehran. The Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights will sponsor the ceremonies to bury the remains of 200 Iraqis after being received from the Iranian side and hand them over to the Martyrs Center in al-Zubeir area, Basra province. Ali al-Dabbagh, the Iraqi government's official spokesman, had said last week that Sun***day would see Iraq and Iran exchanging the remains of 200 Iraqi soldiers and 41 Iranian soldiers at the border point of al-Shalamja.*** "Out of the 200 Iraqi bodies, there are only 24 identified martyrs that would be handed over to their families to bury them," said Dabbagh, adding the necessary measures to identify the others will be taken.

FM calls on Russia to assist Iraq at UN

The Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari on Monday called on Russia to support Iraq's attempts at the UN Security Council to get out of the authority of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, according to a release issued by the Foreign Ministry of Iraq. "Zebari received the new Russian Ambassador in Iraq," said the release that was received. ***"Iraq is in need to Russia's support in its attempts at the Security Council to get out of the*** authority of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, and to protect its funds outside the country," the release quoted Zebari. "Iraq and Russia have distinguished relations that have not been discontinuous," he added.

Social front:

UNAMI's report rings alarm bells- IIP

The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) on Wednesday said that the report made by United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) on rights abuses in the war-torn country "has rung alarm bells." "There are worrying indications that predict a continuation of human rights violations in Iraq and an absence of progress in this regard," according to a party statement. On UNAMI released a report in which it said that grave human rights violations persisted in Iraq during the first half of the current year despite significant improvements in the security situation.

U.S. U.N. envoy ends talks, leaves Kurdistan

The permanent U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Zalmay Khalilzad, has wrapped up his visit to Iraq's Kurdistan region following meetings with the region's president and senior politicians in Sulaimaniya and Arbil cities. "The president of the Kurdistan region, Massoud al-Barzani, met with Khalilzad, who arrived in Arbil evening, and discussed with him recent developments on the political scene…," the head of the presidential office in the Kurdistan region, Fouad Hussein, told. Khalilzad served as the U.S. ambassador to Iraq from June 2005 to March 2007.

FM calls on UNICEF to reopen Baghdad office

The Iraqi Foreign Minister (FM) Hoshyar Zebari called on The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to reopen its office in Baghdad, according to a release issued by the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Zebari called on UNICEF to reopen its office in Baghdad, and to arrange training programs in Iraq instead of outside the country," said the release that was received. "He urged the UNICEF to exploit Iraqi experts in the fields of development and training, as they now the real world in Iraq where Iraqi kids live," it added.

Freedoms observatory says gov't must handle all violations

The Observatory of Constitutional Rights and Freedoms in Iraq called on governmental bodies to respect all rights and freedoms enshrined in the constitution and recognized in international covenants and conventions. On the occasion of the 60 th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which falls on December 10, the observatory commemorates the suffering and the violations incurred by Iraqis throughout the past decades, according to a statement released by the observatory and received. The observatory urged the government to adopt practical measures to prevent further violations of human rights. The Observatory of Constitutional Rights and Freedoms is a non-governmental organization working in the field of human rights and freedoms.

Red Cross welcomes war dead exchange

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) welcomed the Iraqi-Iranian exchange of the remains of soldiers killed during their war in the 1980s, offering to provide help to both countries. "The return of bodies is significant for the families of the victims," according to a statement received by Aswat al-Iraq, quoting a Red Cross official, Jameela Hamami, as saying. The remains of 250 Iraqi and Iranian soldiers were exchanged at al-Shalamija border crossing near Basra under the auspices of the ICRC, the statement noted.

Syria

Political front:

President al-Assad Reiterates Syria's Readiness to Assist Lebanese People, Forces and National Parties

President Bashar al-Assad reiterated during his reception of a delegation from the Lebanese Tashnag Party Syria's readiness to assist the Lebanese people and Lebanon's national forces and parties to help them continue with their roles in preserving Lebanon's internal unity which guarantees its strength. The delegation is headed by Secretary General of the Tashnag Party Hovik Mekhitarian. Other members of the delegation include Lebanese MP Agop Bakradonian and former Cabinet Minister Sebouh Hovnanian. Talks during the meeting touched on the positive developments witnessed recently in Lebanon and the need to build on achievements, particularly regarding Syrian-Lebanese relations, to benefit the two countries' people in various fields.

Minister Bilal underlines important role of the Youth in construction process

Minister of Information Mohsen Bilal underlined the important role of the youth in the construction and development process in Syria, and the effective role of media in bringing up generations to be capable of dealing with challenges facing the Arab culture.
The Minister, during a lecture tilted "The Youth and Media in light of contemporary Culture", referred to the strong correlation among media, culture, the youth and knowledge, saying "modern mass media is considered as the basic factor of culture and mentality." He underlined that the human resources and the investment in "the human capital" are considered as a true guarantee for the development in Syria which is rich of high rates of youths.

Al-Shaar Discusses Cooperation with UNHCR Delegation

State Minister for Red Crescent Affairs Dr. Bashar al-Shaar discussed with a delegation from the UN High Commission for Refugee Affairs (UNHCR) headed by Radwan Nuwaisir the standing cooperation between Syria and the UNHCR and means for developing these relations to include various medical, humanitarian and development fields. Talks also touched on future projects that the UNHCR plans on carrying out in Syria in cooperation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. The meeting was attended by Director of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Marwan Abdullah.

Ghafari Elected Deputy Chairman of Arab Justice Ministers' Council

Minister of Justice Mohammad al-Ghafar was elected as deputy chairman of the Executive Office of Arab Ministers of Justice during the conclusion of the 24th session of the Council held in Beirut on 28 and 29 last October. Ghafari, after his return from Beirut, said that the council adopted a number of decisions

on combating terrorism and money laundering in addition to strengthening Arab and international cooperation in filed of combating the organized crime and terrorism. The Council reiterated the need to distinguish between terrorism and the legitimate right of peoples to resist the occupation and aggression.

Economic front:

Al-Dardari: Syria Committed to Achieving Millennium Development Goals

Syrian Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdullah al-Dardari affirmed that Syria is commitment to achieving the millennium development goals, adding the country is on the right track in most indicators and even surpassed some of them allowing it to take its rightful place in running the global economic system which is currently being crystallized. In his speech at the Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development meeting in Doha, Qatar, al-Dardari pointed out that developing the capabilities of individuals and providing opportunities for them, achieving sustainable economic development ratios and justice in distributing the results of development require massive resources that most countries cannot provide. He stressed that development is an international responsibility in addition a national responsibility, and that it can only be achieved through true partnership between developed and developing countries. ***He also pointed out to non-democratic practices that hinder achieving development, such*** as the US attempts to prevent Syria and other countries from joining the World Trade Organization, in addition to the regional issues hindering development such as the continued occupation of the Syria Golan, the Palestinian territories and Lebanese land, not to mention the US invasion of Iraq and the resulting instability.

Al-Dardari said Syria realized that providing financial resources is the basis for achieving economic and social development and providing general and necessary services like education, health and infrastructure, which is evident in Syria's 10th five-year plan.

Turkey Looks for More Exports to Neighboring States, including Syria

Turkish Minister of State for Foreign Trade Kursad Tuzmen said his country was looking for markets in neighboring countries to confront the deflation witnessed by the European markets towards Turkish exports as a result of the global economic crisis.

Mr. Tuzmen was quoted as saying that there is deflation in the world, particularly in Europe, and to face that Turkey seeks to diversify its export markets and plans to move towards the region and neighboring countries. The Turkish Minister added that his country's exports to Syria, Iraq, the Gulf states, North Africa, Asia Central, Iran, India and China will continue to grow over the next few months. He expected that cooperation with theses countries to confront the current world crisis will yield common positive outcomes.

Prospects of Cooperation in Investment Fields Between Syria & UAE Discussed

Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Ottri reviewed with a delegation of the UAE Chambers of Commerce and Industry Union, headed by Chairman of the Union Salah al-Shamesi, relations of cooperation between Syria and the UAE and ways of developing them in various fields. ***Ottri explained the economic*** and financial reforms, development of investment prospects and opportunities and investment projects available in Syria which enjoy administrative and service facilities. ***Both sides discussed areas of cooperation in*** the fields of investment in all development and service sectors, focusing on agricultural production projects and development of livestock and food industries associated with it, in addition to projects of roads, phosphate manufacturing and electric power. Then, members of the UAE delegation visited headquarters of the one-window in the Syrian Investment Commission and were briefed on functions and objectives of this project and mechanism of its work. ***Dardari made an overall review*** on the big and important economic developments which Syria is witnessing, calling on the UAE businessmen and companies to invest in Syria, especially in the agricultural sector and agricultural industry, tourism, infrastructure and all other areas. For his part, Shamesi expressed ***desire of the UAE businessmen to*** establish development projects in Syria due to the distinguished investment climate in. Talks also dealt with ways of expanding the inter-trade base between the two countries. Minister of Housing Omar Ghalawanji also reviewed with the Emirati delegation the available investment opportunities in the housing sector, clarifying that the real estate development and investment law opened the way for the establishment of local and external partnerships to work in the real estate market.

Syria and UAE, Cooperation March in Continuous Advance

The United Arab Emirates Ambassador in Damascus Salem Issa Al al-Qttam al-Zuabi has underlined the importance of the existing fraternal relations between Syria and the United Arab Emirates which are going ahead in various fields thanks to the two countries' leaderships. In a statement the occasion of the UAE' s National Day, the ambassador touched upon the outstanding stations in coordination and cooperation relations between the two countries and to the mutual visits of senior political officials and representatives of the economic and investment activities. " The Economic and investment relations have witnessed remarkable developments in the recent years particularly in the last year which witnessed many social and cultural activities, including the UAE cultural day in the framework of festivity of Damascus, Capital of Arab Culture." The ambassador said.

The Arab dimension is the mainstay of Syria and the UAE policy through their joint work to restore Arab solidarity, activate institutions of the joint Arab action and to achieve just and comprehensive peace in the region based on the relevant Security Council resolutions and the Madrid terms of reference.

Ottri Meets French Businessmen Delegation, Calls for Investing in Syria

Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Ottri affirmed during his meeting with a French businessmen delegation headed by Jacques Saadé that Syria achieved significant achievements in economic reform and in the process of development and modernization.

During the meeting, Premier Ottri reviewed the ***GDP and growth increase indicators*** in Syria, pointing out that the five-year plan aims to improve the citizens' livelihood and carry out vital projects through ***focusing on the education, health and housing sectors***, along with other developmental and services projects in transport and infrastructure sectors. ***He also discussed the development of the investment environment in Syria and the accom***panying financial and banking reforms, in addition to the founding of industrial cities and developing road network, harbors, airports and railways. Ottri stated that the general development process which was called for by President Bashar al-Assad focuses on combining efforts, bolstering the concept of partnership among national economic sectors, and allowing the private sector to participate in the process of building and construction. He called on French businessmen to invest and hold projects in Syria, underlining the country's elements of ***tourist attraction.*** He concluded by affirming the strength of the historic and cultural bonds between the Syrian and French people, which form the basis for developing the cooperation and friendship relations that were pushed forward by the meetings of Presidents al-Assad and Sarkozy and their insightful and wise directives.

General Aoun meets businessmen, visits the Umayyad Mosque

Chairman of the Change and Reform Bloc at the Lebanese Parliament Michel Aoun met a number of businessmen and members of Damascus Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Tourism. Talks during the meeting dealt with the necessity of working together to achieve economic integration between Syria and Lebanon to face impacts of the global financial crisis and find necessary means to keep the Syrian and Lebanese economies away of this crisis bad repercussion. General Aoun also met a number of Islamic scholars in the presence of the Endowments' Minister Mohammad Abdul-Satar al-Sayyed and Syria's Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun. ***During the meeting, both sides underlined the need for boosting the culture of openness to the others, calling for collective working and dismissing*** attempts of sedition and division. Deputy Foreign Minister Fayssal al-Mikdad attended the two meetings.

Al-Atrash Discusses Cooperation with French Companies

Minister of Local Administration and Environment Hilal al-Atrash met on with a French delegation representing companies specializing in construction, drinking water management, waste management and sea water desalination, discussing with the delegation members the possibility of cooperation in establishing projects in Syria and developing work relations between the two sides. Minister al-Atrash expressed his Ministry' readiness to work with these companies, reviewing the various venues of cooperation with the French companies, which include the aforementioned fields in addition to managing marine disasters, pollution from waste disposal station and industrial pollution. ***For their part, members of the French delegation affirmed their desire to work and establish projects in Syria. They*** asked to be briefed on the general plan of waste disposal and drinking water projects in Syria, in addition to potential projects and financing parties. Minister al-Atrash also discussed with a group representing French companies specializing in construction, civil work, electricity, maintenance and engineering consultations the potential joint work fields and basis for cooperation between the two sides. He expressed hope that French companies will play a role in handling the issue of random housing.

Geo strategic front:

IAEA approves aid for civilian nuclear research against US objections

Syria will receive nuclear aid from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in spite of objections lead by the United States that Damascus has pursued a covert nuclear program that could be used to make weapons. The decision was made at an IAEA board members meeting in Vienna on November 26 and will see the ***UN nuclear body provide SYP 16.3m (USD 350,000) to study the feasibility of a nuclear power plant in Syria.*** Western ***states, including France, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, had argued*** that it was not appropriate to provide such aid to a country being investigated by the IAEA. In the end, however, Washington and its allies agreed to the deal, ending a three-day deadlock at a closed meeting of the agency's 35-nation board. ***Syria's Atomic Energy Commission head Ibrahim Othman said approva***l by the IAEA board showed an "understanding of the position of Syria."

The US-back down regarding nuclear aid to Syria follows a call from the agency's head Mohamed ElBaradei on November 24, urging greater caution against pre-judging Syria's nuclear programme before the results of the investigation are concluded and reminding Western diplomats about false US claims concerning Iraq. The US has charged Syria was building a plutonium-producing nuclear reactor at the site with North-Korean assistance. Syria has denied the charges and called the matter closed following the IAEA report, saying it will not allow any further inspections.

President al-Assad and General Aoun Discuss Syrian-Lebanese Issues

President Bashar al-Assad received Leader of the Change and Reform Bloc at the Lebanese Parliament and the Free Patriotic Movement General Michel Aoun and the accompanying

delegation at the People's Palace. President al-Assad and General Aoun held a productive meeting, during which they discussed various standing issues between the two countries. ***Talks also dealt with the positive developments in Syrian-Lebanese relations, in addition to the regional situation and changes in international circles***. Viewpoints were in agreement regarding the significance of this historic visit to Syria, which heralds a new age marked by the mutual desire to build future relations based on mutual respect of sovereignty and independence that serve the interest of the Syrian and Lebanese people. The meeting was marked by the two sides' mutual desire to benefiting from the lessons of the past in order to build a strong and unique base for relations between the two countries. ***For his part, President al-Assad*** lauded General Aoun's national stances principles, expressing appreciation of his visit to Syria. In turn, ***General Aoun expressed happiness*** over meeting President al-Assad, underlining Syria's stances and dedication to holding the best relations with Lebanon.

Syrian-EU Association Agreement close to conclusion

The long delayed Association Agreement between Syrian and the European Union (EU) is likely to be signed “in the near future”, EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said during a visit to Damascus. “We are finalising the adaptation of the Agreement to recent development from both sides and I will very soon submit a proposal to member states with a view to signing it in the near future,” Ferrero-Waldner said. “I value the recent positive developments in Syria’s regional policy, in particular the establishment of diplomatic relations with Lebanon and the indirect peace talks with Israel … These steps are an opportunity to bring Syria and the EU closer and, at the same time, support further the on-going economic reforms in Syria.”Syria is the only country not to have signed an Association Agreement with the EU.

Assad expresses disapproval of Iraq-US security pact

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad voiced his first public condemnation of the Status-of-Forces Agreement (SOFA) currently being negotiated between Iraq and the US. The agreement, if approved by the Iraqi parliament, will keep US troops in the country for a further three years and allow US forces to launch raids into neigbouring countries. In a speech to a meeting between Arab parliamentarians in Damascus, Assad said the US presence in Iraq was contributing to regional instability, calling for the withdrawal of American troops as soon as possible. He pointed to the US raid at al-Saukariah farm in Syria on October 26 as evidence that the US will use Iraqi soil as a base to attack neighbouring Arab lands if the Iraqi parliament ratifies the agreement. “The latest American aggression on Syrian territory shows that the presence of US occupation forces constitutes a source of continuous threat to the security of Iraq’s neighbouring states and a factor of instability for the region,” Assad said.

Ottri and Basti Review Cooperation between Syria and Tunisia

Prime Minister Mohamed Naji Ottri reviewed with Tunisian Culture Minister Abderraouf Basti cooperation relations between Syria and Tunisia and prospects of developing and upgrading them in all fields. ***The meeting discussed cultural relations and ways to support and promote them. There was an emphasis on the exchange of cultural events and weeks and intellectual programs to*** support communication and interaction between the Syrians and Tunisians innovators in the various fields of creativity. The meeting was attended by the Tunisian Embassy charge d'affaires in Damascus.

Mikdad: Bush Administration Blamed for Crises in the World

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Fayssal al-Mikdad blamed US President George Bush's administration for the global financial crisis and its subsequent recession which swept most of the countries in the world. Dr. al-Mikdad, in statements on the sidelines of the Doha International Conference on Financing for development, said President Bush's administration was responsible for the successive catastrophes that befell on the world following the American occupation of Iraq as a result of the reckless policy of this administration. He also strongly criticized certain countries that seek to blame the developing world for the burdens of their mistakes, adding it was unacceptable that oil producing countries be responsible for shortage and failures in world development and financial crises. The Deputy Foreign Minister called on the Arab countries to coordinate and come up with a united stance in the forthcoming Arab Summit scheduled in Kuwait early next year. He also called for enhancing the inter-Arab cooperation and with the countries of the South. "We as Arab countries have to come up with a united stance to avoid any consequences as a result of the crisis that emerged in the western countries, especially the US," he said.

President al-Assad Receives Message from President Sarkozy on Bilateral Relations and Regional Developments

President Bashar al-Assad received a verbal message from French President Nicolas Sarkozy on bilateral relations between the two countries and the latest developments in the Middle East. The message was relayed during President al-Assad's meeting with General Secretary of the French Presidency Claude Gueant, Diplomatic Advisor to the French President Jean-Davit Levitt, and Advisor to the French President on Middle East and North Africa Boris Boillon. ***Talks during the meeting affirmed the need to build upon the recent achievements in bolstering Syrian-French relations, stressing the importance of cooperation and coordination between the two countries, especially as this cooperation proved***

successful in serving Syria and France's interests and serving security, stability and peace in the region and the whole world.

President al-Assad expressed relief over the role played by France through its work with the region's countries to find suitable solutions to regional problems, calling on France as the current president of the European Union to work for lifting the unjust siege imposed on the Palestinian people in Gaza Strip. Both sides expressed relief over the positive developments in Syrian-Lebanese relations. For his part, Mr. Gueant expressed France's satisfaction over the imminent signing in initials of the Partnership Agreement between Syria and the EU, affirming France's high appreciation of Syria's pivotal role. He added that Paris is determined to continue working and coordinating with Damascus in order to achieve security and stability in the region.

Janibiyeh Underscores Syrian-Russian Relations

Member of the Regional Leadership of al-Baath Arab Socialist Party and Head of the Trade Unions and Public Organizations Dr. Bassam Janibiyeh underscored firm and deep Syrian-Russian relations and friendship. In an interview with the Arabic-speaking "Russia Today" channel on the sidelines of his participation in the 13th Conference of the Russian Communist Party, Mr. Janibiyeh said Syria has always worked for a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East in line with the international legitimacy resolutions. Mr. Janibiyeh, on behalf of al-Baath Arab Socialist Party, expressed the hope the Conference would make success for the interest and advancement of the Russian people. For his part, Gennady Zyoganov, leader of the Russian Communist Party, said in a political report submitted to the Conference that that the national forces in the Middle East can play a great role in confronting the US and Israel's policies and enhance the solidarity movement with the Palestinian people.

The Syrian-Lebanese Relations are on the Right Track

Information Minister , Mohsen Bilal has underlined that the Syrian-Lebanese relations are on the right track officially and popularly . In an interview broadcast by the Lebanese satellite channel , OTV, Bilal said that there was coordination and follow –up of the brotherly relations by the leaderships of both countries. He added that Syria was satisfied for the course of the events in Lebanon , and to ***the course of Syrian-Lebanese relations , pointing out to the historical relations between the two countries that are more important than diplomatic traditions and protocols.*** Bilal expressed hope that the diplomatic relations would be a new factor for strengthening further the brotherly relations. ***He demanded the Israeli occupation*** withdrawal from occupied Syrian Golan and all the occupied Arab territories to the line of June 4th 1967.

Lebanese President Underlines Importance of Arab Solidarity

Lebanese President Michel Suleiman underlined the importance of Arab solidarity in all areas to serve the Arab's higher interests, pointing out to the importance of conferences which bring Arab officials together and work to strengthen Arab solidarity and unity. Receiving a delegation of Arab Justice Ministers' Council President Suleiman said: " The meeting of Arab Ministers of Justice in Beirut focused on the concepts of freedom, the right and facilitation of reaching to justice, pointing out to the importance of the topics examined by the ministers, in particular the issue of combating terrorism.

President al-Assad Discusses with Paraguay Foreign Minister, Bilateral Relations

President, Bashar al-Assad, discussed with Paraguay Foreign Minister , Alejando Hamed Franco, bilateral relations between Syria and Paraguay and ways of boosting them particularly in the political, trade, and cultural spheres. The ***developments of the situation in the Middle East, and Latin America were discussed in addition to the developments on the international arena.*** President al-Assad , and Minister Franco underlined the necessity for boosting relations between the Arab countries and Latin America with the aim of creating economic integration and coordination of the stances of these countries at international forums***. Stress was made on*** the importance of the role of the Arab communities in Paraguayan and other countries of Latin America's political, economic, and cultural life, and what can be done by these communities to strengthen ties among the countries and peoples of the both regions. ***Agreement was also made*** on intensification of exchange of visits between the two countries on various levels with the aim of contributing to boosting of bilateral relations and common visions between Latin America and Arab countries.

Otri and Zahabi Discuss Cooperation between Syria and Jordan

Syrian Prime Minister, Mohammed Naji Otri discussed with his Jordanian counterpart, Mohammed Nader Zahabi bilateral relations of cooperation between the two sisterly countries and ways of boosting them and expanding their prospects for reaching integration and fulfilling mutual interests in various fields in addition to issues of mutual concern. Otri and Zahabi reviewed the issues on the agenda of the Syrian-Jordanian Higher Committee , and ways of activating the already signed agreements and back them with new agreements to boost bilateral cooperation . Otri who is heading an official delegation of a number of ministers and businessmen, arrived in Amman before noon today to head the Syrian side to the meetings of the Syrian –Jordanian Higher Committee which are scheduled to begin today.

UN General Assembly Demands Israel to Withdraw from Occupied Syrian Golan

The United Nations General Assembly again demanded Israel to withdraw from the occupied Syrian Golan to the June 4th 1967 line in implementation of the UN Security Council relevant resolutions, stressing that Israel law on the annexation of the Syrian Golan is null and void. The General Assembly, in a resolution titled "the Syrian Golan", reiterated the main principle of banning the acquisition of lands by force in line with the international laws and the UN Charter as well as the application of the Geneva Pact on the protection of civilians at time of war on the occupied Syrian Golan.

The ***resolution also demanded Israel to annul its decision on imposing its laws, legislation and administration on the occupied Syrian Golan,*** stressing that this decision is null and void and has no legal legitimacy at all as confirmed by the UN General Assembly resolution No. 497 for 1981. The resolution stressed that building Israeli building of settlements and other activities in the Golan are illegal. It added that the continuation of the Israeli occupation of the Golan and its de facto annexation block the establishment of a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. It also expressed relief over the convening of Madrid peace Conference in 1991 on the basis of the UN Security Council resolutions 242, 338, 425 and the land-for-peace formula.

Ottri Meets Syrian Community in Belarus, Visits Minsk Metro, Returns Home

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Ottri met head and members of the Syrian Arab Community Association in Minsk at the Syrian embassy in the city as part of his just-concluded visit to Belarus. Premier Ottri conveyed the best greetings and wishes of President Bashar al-Assad to the Syrian community in Belarus, wishing they would be ambassadors of their homeland Syria and a ***tool for further development of the Syrian-Russian bilateral ties*** Premier Ottri briefed them on the latest regional developments, stressing that Syria has been able with her steadfastness to confront all the pressures and challenges which some powers sought to impose on her.

Head and members of the Syrian community in Belarus talked about their issues and questions regarding their situations there, stressing that they are keen to raise the name of Syria high, and help strengthen her steadfastness and share in the national development.

Premier Ottri and the Syrian accompanying delegation earlier toured Minsk Metro Station, and were briefed by its director on the stages of constructing the Metro, its dimensions and capacity.

Syria's Aid Convoy to Palestinian People

The 22nd convoy carrying humanitarian aid from Syrian citizens to their brothers in the occupied territories left Damascus The convoy includes ***4 trucks loaded with foodstuff, clothes and***

medicines. Chairman of the Syrian Popular Committee for Supporting the Intifada and Resisting Zionist Ahmad Abdul-Karim said: "This convoy is a gift from the Syrian people on the advent of the blessed Eid Al-Adha to their brothers in the Gaza Strip who suffer hunger because of the Israeli unjust blockade and depriving them of all means of life. Abdul Karim reiterated Syria's stand by the Palestinian people's struggle to achieve their legitimate goals including the right to return, self-determination and to establish an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital

Social front:

Public Sit-in in Front of International Red Cross Headquarters in Damascus Protesting Israeli Practices against Syrian Captives

The Syrian masses staged a sit-in, in front of the International Red Cross headquarters in Damascus, denouncing the inhumane Israeli practices against Syrian captives and calling on international organizations to interfere and pressure Israel to release all Syrian captives and detainees from occupation prisons immediately. ***Families and relatives of Syrian captives in Israeli prisons and students from the occupied Syrian Golan studying in Syrian universities participated in the sit-in,*** in addition to representatives of economic and social activities. They called on the Red Cross to work to stop the inhumane practices and force Israel to comply with the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of captives. Liberated captive Ali Younes made a statement on behalf of the masses and the Committee for Supporting Captives and Detainees in Occupation Prisons, urging UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the International Red Cross and international organizations to pressure Israel to end the mock trial of journalist Ata Farhat and Yousuf Shams who were detained because of the adherence to their Syrian identity and reporting the truth, calling for their immediate release along with all Syrian captives from the occupied Syrian Golan. ***For her part, the Damascus Delegate of the International Red Cross Sonya al-Urbawi vowed to relay the prot***estors' message to the committee's headquarters in Geneva, expressing hope that her efforts will help release all detainees and captives in occupation prisons.

Palestinian Refugees Stress Adherence to their Right to Return to Their Homes

Palestinian refugees stressed their adherence to the right to return to their homes they were expelled from in 1948 and their absolute rejection of the settlement under any circumstances. That came in a letter by the Palestinian refugees to Commissioner-General of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees UNRWA Karen Abu Zaid on the occasion of 60th anniversary of issuing the UN General Assembly decision No. 194 which stressed the Palestinian refugees' right to return home.

They stressed that Palestinian people will continue struggle to achieve their goals and restore their rights guaranteed by the international resolutions, particularly 194 resolution.

They absolutely rejected all kinds of settlement and attempts to obliterate their inalienable rights. ***The Palestinian refugees appreciated Syria' support for the Palestinian people and her cooperation with the UNRWA to perform its functions and provide services*** to all Palestinian refugees.

Syria Wins the 1st UNICEF Award for Media on Child's Rights

Syria has won the UNICEF award on the Middle East and North Africa Media on adolescents issues. The program titled Mounaataf, The Turning Point, prepared by Manal Salhya at the Syrian TV, focuses on three teenagers who talks about the influence of this stage of their lives .The award is considered the first to be granted to journalistic work among four different categories , printed press, radio , TV, and electronic press**.**

The Arab Journalist Federation Underlines Support to the Restoration of Occupied Golan

The Arab Journalists Federation has stressed its support to Syria in her right to restore the occupied Syrian Golan to the line of June 4th 1967, and denounced at the same time the US. aggression on the Syrian territories. In its final statement wrapping the deliberations of its 11th conference in Cairo, the federation demanded the release of the Syrian captives in the Israeli prisons and also the release of the Syrian journalist Ata Farahat .

The conference elected former Chairman of the Egyptian Journalists Union , Ibrahim Nafae as Chairman of the federation , and Chairman of the Syrian Journalists Union, Elias Mourad as his deputy and Dr. Saber Falhout was named as advisor to the chairman of the federation.

Minister Bilal calls for helping people with special needs

Minister of Information Mohsen Bilal said all citizens have to assume responsibility for helping people with special needs and standing by them to ease their suffering and overcome their ordeal that affects their souls and the society as a whole. Minister Bilal, speaking at the final session of the First Syrian Forum on the People with Special Needs, underlined the importance of the issues that were discussed during the Forum, calling on the governmental institutions and civil organizations to be committed to the affairs of the handicapped. The Forum's final statement concentrated on the necessity of merging the disabled people with their society and finding a suitable infrastructure for this purpose, changing the society's view towards the orphans, caring about the older people and rehabilitating human cadres to reach this goal. The statement called on civil organizations to take real responsibility for caring about

people with special needs, rehabilitating and training them and considering collective responsibility as a main duty for all.

Al-Ridawi Confirms Importance of Supporting UNICEF Efforts in Social Development Process

Head of the State Planning Commission Tayssir al-Ridawi underlined the importance of supporting the United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF national efforts in the social development process, particularly in the field of childhood. During a meeting of the annual reviewing of cooperation plan with the UNICEF which was attended by representatives of the government agencies cooperating with the UNICEF, Ridawi indicated that cooperation with UNICEF through the 7th regional program for the years 2007 until 2011 guaranteed component of child survival and development and the main education of good quality. ***He pointed out that these components are fully consistent with the objectives of the 10th 5-Year Plan which affirmed the integration of childhood*** actively in the development process through the appropriate enabling and environmental conditions. For her part, ***the UNICEF representative in Syria Shahrazad Bo'alia stressed*** continuation of the organization support to the Syrian government's efforts to achieve objectives of the 10th 5-Year Paln related to children and commitment to the program planning approved on human rights which focuses on children living worrying situations and working to secure their rights.

Lebanon

Economic front:

U.S. Gives $50,000 to USJ, Launches New Website for Batroun Municipality

USAID/Lebanon Mission Director Denise Herbol has presented $50,000 to Saint Joseph University (USJ) in Beirut to equip the Faculty of Dental Medicine with a digital X-ray system for multiple use radiographic images, the U.S. embassy said in a statement. "Since 1995, USAID has supported the University's Faculty of Dental Medicine, which provides high quality, low cost dental services to 2,500-3,000 economically disadvantaged persons per year, 20% are children. The Faculty also provides practical training to 100 students per year," the statement said. Herbol also attended the launching of the Batroun Municipality's new website and Municipal Citizen Guide at Saint Estephan Church. "In partnership with the State University of New York, USAID funded the creation of a new website and a new Municipal Citizen Guide for the Municipality of Batroun," the embassy said. "The website, www.batroun.gov.lb, provides useful information about the Municipality. The Municipal Citizen Guide is a step-by-step information guide for citizens on how to conduct municipal transactions," it added.

Second Qoreitem Roundtable Aimed at Solving Lebanon's Economic Problems

MP Saad Hariri headed a second economic roundtable meeting at his mansion in Qoreitem in an attempt to come up with solutions for Lebanon's economic problems. The meeting was attended by Finance Minister Mohammed Shatah, Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh and former ministers, parliamentarians, bankers and businessmen. Discussions covered ideas proposed during the previous roundtable session. ***They included issues like ways for Lebanon to adapt to the current world crisis, economic growth and new job opportunities. Conferees also discussed ways to reduce the budget deficit.*** Experts at the meeting stressed the need to "separate economic issues from political ones." A committee was formed to follow up on proposals and issue a working paper. Saniora Urges World Leaders to Fight Corruption Prime Minister Fouad Saniora has warned against implications of the global financial crisis and urged world leaders to confront corruption. "Advanced and developed nations are to equally confront corruption and illegal inflow of funds," Saniora said Sunday at the International Conference on Financing for Development in the Qatari capital. In his address to the U.N.-sponsored summit in Doha, Saniora said: "In Lebanon, through truly correct economic policies that were designed for confronting specific circumstances in our country, in addition to united efforts by the Central Bank and cabinet, we managed to protect our banking and financial systems from the crisis." Saniora said Lebanon is making efforts to move forward with its reform schedule. "We are also discussing means for launching a partnership between private and public sectors, to implement a continued and balanced development strategy regionally and locally. This will work on stimulating demand and supply in Lebanon," he said.

Central Bank Governor: Lebanese Banks Growing

Lebanon's banking sector is weathering the global financial crisis and profits are expected to increase by 10 percent this year, the Central Bank governor said Wednesday, in a reflection of the country's ability to rebound from a legacy of adversity. Riad Salameh attributed the growth in the banking sector, which comes at a time when a liquidity crisis has gutted some of the world's top banking giants, to strict regulations imposed by the Central Bank, including a cash reserve requirement of 15 percent. The strength of the country's banks is largely a reflection of the country's resilience as it has repeatedly looked to rebuild after years of conflict and instability turned broad swaths of Beirut into a gutted battleground with different areas controlled by competing militias and armies.

Lebanon's cellular service to drop in price and expand

The Lebanese Cabinet has approved the reduction in cellular fees as well as the establishment of ties with the Palestinian state. Following a marathon meeting on Thursday, Information Minister Tareq Mitri said the Cabinet approved a plan to cut down the price of mobile phone calls by no less than 10 percent per minute as well as reduction in service fees. He announced following the meeting which ended shortly after midnight that the government also approved expansion of the mobile phone network and recommendations for improving its services. He said the Cabinet okayed measures taken by Telecommunications Minister Jebran Bassil last week to end the contract of Alfa and have the ministry itself manage the Alfa network. Alfa's services and coverage have suffered in recent months. The

government is planning an international tender for Alfa and MTC Touch, Lebanon's only mobile operators, in early 2009. The Cabinet also approved establishment of diplomatic relations with the Palestinian state. Mitri said the ministers discussed the issue of opening a Palestine embassy in Beirut.

Geo strategic front:

Muallem: Embassy by Year-End, Ambassador Appointment to Take Place Gradually

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem has confirmed that an embassy would be established in Lebanon by year's end, but that the appointment of an ambassador would take place gradually. In an interview with Orange TV, Muallem said Free Patriotic Movement leader Gen. Michel Aoun "came to Syria to write a (new) white page together with President Bashar Assad." Muallem, however, said it was premature to talk about the outcome of Aoun's visit. He also announced that the controversial Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms area belongs to Lebanon. Muallem said that Syria's representative to the U.N. had presented documents that prove Shebaa Farms belongs to Lebanon. He rejected calls to demarcate Shebaa Farms at the time being, saying those who demand demarcation "are defending continuation of the Israeli occupation."

Security Council 'Consensus' on International Tribunal

Key U.N. Security Council members have reportedly vowed not to politicize the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and agreed to ask countries for more funds to guarantee the operation of the court in the next three years. An Nahar daily, quoting diplomatic sources, said the pledge was made by Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Belgium and Libya during a closed-door meeting. ***The sources said the names of suspects involved in Hariri's assassination will only be released after guaranteeing their safety.*** U.N. Legal Counsel Patricia O'Brien briefed the Council during meeting on efforts to establish the international tribunal which Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said is on track to begin its work on March 1, 2009.

Lebanese president requests weapons from Iran

President Michel Suleiman requested medium weapons from Iran during his visit to Tehran, that would help the Lebanese army combat terrorism and maintain national security. Suleiman visited Iran early in the week where he met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Supreme Guide to the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iranian Defense Minister. Suleiman also toured the Iranian Military Industries Exhibition. Sources close to the delegation accompanying President Michel Suleiman on his recent visit to Iran said Tehran has expressed its readiness to provide Lebanon with defensive weapons. He said "Iranian assistance would be carried out soon via exchanged visits of officials from both countries."

Regarding Iranian assistance to the Lebanese Army and Security Forces, the source said "an agreement was reached during bilateral talks and following the president's tour of an Iranian weapons exhibition, to provide Lebanese Armed Forces with arms allowing it to rapidly and flexibly move in confronting and preventing any criminal and terrorist action, including difficult missions." Suleiman stressed Lebanon's rejection to the naturalization of Palestinians and urged Iranian support in this regard. ***the Iranian side promised to "use its good offices to help Lebanon in this regard." The*** Iranians also vowed to support Lebanon in all key dossiers, particularly national dialogue.

Sarkozy expects maximum transparency in Lebanon's next election

French President Nicolas Sarkozy has said the international community will be observing Lebanon's 2009 parliamentary elections closely, as no country would accept the obstruction of Lebanon's independence and sovereignty by any means. In an interview ***Sarkozy said that the elections would mark a decisive period in the process of reconciliation in Lebanon, as well as the accomplishment of a free and independent Lebanese democracy.*** Sarkozy pledged that "no one would accept that Lebanon's independence and the sovereignty of its people are targeted in any way." Sarkozy also called for "fair and extremely transparent" elections. "That is why we conveyed to the Lebanese authorities, along with our partners in the European Union, our readiness to comply with any request for technical support or [sending] observers," he said. The elections, he added, should be held with "maximum transparency and fairness."

Sarkozy also said that there has been "clear progress" in Lebanese-Syrian relations as four joint committees had been formed to work on a number of sensitive issues, most notably the issue of missing persons, detainees, and borders. The French president said he hoped to see ambassadors appointed in Beirut and Damascus by the end of this year.

Geagea blasts Aoun over subservience to the Syrian regime

Lebanese Forces leader Dr. Samir Geagea criticized Change and Reform Bloc leader MP Michel Aoun for seeking to clear Lebanon's conscience in Damascus prior to settling Lebanon's differences with Syria. "The President of the Republic of Lebanon, who represents all the Lebanese people, is the person entrusted with the task of clearing the collective conscience," Geagea stressed. "Clearing conscience can only be achieved through settling pending issues (with Syria)," he added. He said "hundreds of Lebanese citizens are still jailed in Syria, We have bases manned by Palestinians loyal to Syria and we have non demarcated borders with Syria, especially in Shebaa Farms, not to mention persisting Syrian efforts for more than three years to destabilize Lebanon." ***Aoun's reference to French-German relations as a model for Lebanon's relations with Syria is "not accurate***. France had relations with Germany only after the Nazi regime was toppled," according to Geagea. He accused Aoun of discussing with the Syrians the formation of election tickets, saying "Iran pays the money and Syria provides weapons, personnel and more."

Aoun tries to justify his visit to Syria

Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun insisted that his upcoming visit to Syria, his former foe, was justified now that diplomatic ties have been agreed on between the two countries. "I am going to Syria with my head held high," Aoun told a press conference ahead of his planned visit this week, without revealing a specific date. "They are welcoming me with admiration and respect... I was a rival and the rivalry has ended and I may become a friend," he added. ***"This is a friendly and introductory visit," he said.*** Aoun's visit has come under fire from members of the ruling anti-Syrian parliamentary majority who accuse him of being a turncoat and of kow-towing to his former adversaries for political gain.

Aoun paying the debt to Syria for his return to Lebanon

March 14 General Coordinator Fares Soueid said that it was too early to say that Syria was capable of extricating itself from Lebanon and beginning a new period of dealing with Lebanon as an independent country. "The formula with Syria is: maximum cooperation in return for the clearest images of sovereignty and independence," he said.

In an interview, Soueid said that Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun was a willing actor who had begun a period of paying the debt for his return to Lebanon. "There are figures, like General Aoun, who tried to establish relations with Syrian in the past, but then they were surprised they were used by the Syrians without any gain [in return]," he said.

In an interview, Aoun said: "If all mankind told me (Hezbollah) is a terrorist organization I would say no they are a resistance group … they are Lebanese citizens who founded a party to defend their land." Aoun also defended the four generals held in connection with the Rafik Hariri assassination, echoing statements by former President Emile Lahoud, saying they are "political detainees." He said his forthcoming visit to Syria is "important to develop relations between the Lebanese and Syrian peoples."

With regard to the 2009 parliamentary elections, Soueid said that it was becoming clear that they would not be simple. He said they did not follow the pattern of any previous elections, although he added that they would most closely resemble the 1943 elections. Soueid said that the elections would take place on time. "We should all be ready to sacrifice to make [the elections] succeed and to guarantee victory," he said. Soueid said that the country was heading toward a defining battle and that if the Iranian-Syrian tie was "detached" the March 14 coalition would win. He added that he did not think this extrication would occur before the 2009 parliamentary elections.

Lebanon's Hariri tribunal to begin work in March says UN's Ban

The international tribunal to prosecute the murderers of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and 20 other murders will begin on March 1, 2009, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said. ***Ban said the date was agreed upon between him and Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Sin***iora. The proceedings will focus on the assassination of Hariri in February 2005, as well as on the murders of other Lebanese politicians and journalists murdered since that time. "I and Prime Minister Siniora agree that the launch of the Special Tribunal will be a significant step towards the end of impunity," Ban said in a statement issued at UN headquarters in New York. "We also hope that the UN Security Council will endorse the plan."***The 15-nation council established the tribunal to bring before justice the perpetrators*** of the murders. Most of the victims had spoken out against the Syrian military occupation of Lebanon, as well as that country's interference in Lebanese politics. The council ordered the investigation of the murders, carried out by an independent investigation team. ***Ban said the team will begin on January 1 to gradually transfer*** from Beirut to The Hague, where the tribunal will hold the trial on evidence presented by the investigators.

UN adds new suspects in Lebanon assassinations

The UN International Commission probing the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri reported acquiring "new information that may allow it to link additional individuals to the network that carried out the assassination." The commission, in its 11th report to the U.N. Security Council, also said it has "additional elements corroborating the connection between the Hariri attack and other cases with which links had already been found." "Preliminary indications also suggest that there may be a link between one additional case and the Hariri case," said the report by Commissioner Daniel Bellemare. The commission requested a two-month extension of its mandate, to Feb. 28, "so that it can continue its investigation without interruption," the report said. The statement noted that "the launching of the tribunal does not mean that the investigation has been completed … the commission and the office of the prosecutor, once it begins to operate, must continue to gather evidence that would support an indictment before the tribunal." It said the "office of the prosecutor of the tribunal will need to continue to investigate all the cases within the commission's current mandate in order to establish which of the cases are connected to the Hariri case in the manner required by the tribunal's statute." "It will also require the full cooperation and support of the Lebanese authorities, as well as the member states, in order to conduct effective investigations and prosecutions," the statement added. It said Syria has "provided generally satisfactory cooperation."

Saudi protests against verbal attacks by pro-Syrians

Saudi Arabia has protested against verbal attacks on the kingdom and Western diplomats advised Lebanon to stay out of this crisis to avoid turning Lebanon into an arena for Syrian-Saudi conflict. Saudi ambassador Abdul Aziz Khoja has conveyed to President Michel Suleiman his country's objections to the attacks. Sources told that this objection, an unprecedented step by Saudi Arabia, reflects a negative attitude toward the stepped up campaigns led by pro-Syrian Lebanese leaders and politicians. They said the protest is clear indication that Riyadh would no longer tolerate continuation of this campaign

without an equal reaction from the Lebanese government. Meanwhile, Western diplomatic circles have advised Lebanon to stay out of this for fear the crisis could explode across Lebanon.

Social front:

Pro-Syrian Palestinians say no to Palestine embassy in Lebanon

A coalition of Palestinian forces supported by Syria in Lebanon viewed the initial approval by the Lebanese cabinet to change the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) bureau to an embassy of Palestine. "a dangerous resolution in content, even if some consider it to be a formality," adding that the Palestinian people do not yet have a state saying:" priority is in giving (Palestinians) their rights in Lebanon first." In a published statement, the Palestinian coalition of factions said: "The people of Palestine do not have a state yet, if some are to accept an illusion, then this won't be limited to a purely Palestinian concern. Those that adopt this position cannot be considered an authority by (Palestinian) refugees." The statement explained that priorities of Palestinians in Lebanon begin by granting them their civil, social and legal rights and settling all concerns via an open Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue that will work on defining relations. It pointed that a "united Palestinian authority is the only guarantee for the dialogue," Palestinian factions statement said. The Syrian-backed coalition of Palestinian factions in Lebanon includes, Fatah al Islam, Jund el Sham, Usbat al Ansar , Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) and as-Saiqa.

Lebanon enjoys in 2008 best tourism season since 2004

The first 10 months of 2008 recorded the highest number of visitors to Lebanon since 2004. The number jumped to 1.10 million, an increase of about 29 percent compared to the same period of 2007 when the figure stood at 855,573, the ministry of tourism reported. Arab tourists accounted for 54 percent of visitors , the ministry said. Last month Minister of Tourism Elie Marouni said Lebanon should expect more than 200 thousand Chinese tourists next summer

Lebanese journalist called 'a jew' by pro-Syrian attackers

Lebanese, Arab and foreign journalists, along with March 14 supporters, staged a demonstration outside of the Future News Building in downtown Beirut to protest the brazen daytime attack on journalist Omar Harqous. Earlier, the army announced the arrest of three of the men who allegedly beat Harqous. From his hospital bed at the American University Hospital, Harqous, who is a reporter for Future News, told local television that on Thursday afternoon, while reporting for a story on Hamra, a group of more than 20 Syrian Social Nationalist Party supporters approached him and addressed him by his first name. Harqous said the group told him he was targeted and proceeded to curse him, demanding that he leave the area. Harqous said that he responded by saying he was only journalist and began to leave, when

with his back turned, he was physically assaulted by the group. ***According to the account Harqous gave Future News, the assailants called him "a*** Jew" as they beat his head and neck with his own mobile phone. Harqous said he had blood dripping from face as attackers surrounded him, yet no pedestrians on the street dared to intervene until a fellow journalist from the opposition daily as-Safir arrived and took him to the hospital. ***President Michel Sleiman denounced*** the assault and called on the judiciary to hold the perpetrators accountable. He said he hoped the incident would not hurt Lebanon's image, and he called for "respecting all forms of freedom, especially the freedom of expression."

Lebanon outraged over journalist attack by SSNP

Lebanon expressed its outrage over the partisan driven, vicious attacks of defenseless journalist Omar Harqous by militants of the Syrian Social National Party including condemnation from President Suleiman. Journalists from various media organizations launched a sit-in protest against the assault. A Huge photograph of Harqous in his hospital bed was erected in the parking lot of Future Television complex in Beirut's Qantari district where hundreds of journalists, politicians and members of non-governmental organizations staged the one-hour sit-in to protest against the attack against a reporter on duty. Information Minister Tareq Mitri denounced the attack on Harqous, an FTV reporter, and urged the government to confront such attempts. Mitri also said justifying the attack is "uglier than the attack itself." MP Elias Atallah described the SSNP as a "militia that is a branch of Syrian intelligence" assigned to attack "freedoms and the nation's independence." ***President Suleiman Condemns Attac***k President Michel Suleiman on Friday denounced the attack by pro-Syrian partisans on news reporter Omar Harqous, saying it distorts Lebanon's image.

South Lebanon: "Stop making cluster bombs"

In 2006, shortly after Israel ended its 33-day war against Lebanon, 9-year-old Hussein Sultan and his best friend Hassan stepped on a cluster bomb while playing in the backyard of his home in the southern Lebanese village of Sawaneh. Hassan died immediately, while Hussein, now 11, sustained serious injuries to the hands and chest. Hussein recalls the incident and describes it as "a nightmare that still haunts him." ***On Wednesday representatives of around 100 nations will gather in Oslo to sign a treaty outlawing the use of cluster munitions. Russia, the US - and Israel - will be notable by their absence.*** Asked about such a treaty, to which Israel would not be party, Hussein merely said it would be "useless." Cluster bombs, around 4 million of which were dropped by Israel over southern Lebanon in 2006, are still killing and maiming people in south Lebanon, a region where nearly all the land is used for crops or grazing. Lebanese Foreign Minister Fawzi Salkouh, who will be signing the Oslo treaty on behalf of

Lebanon, said that his country was doing its best to get this treaty signed by many nations to "save the rest of our little children and people as well as the whole world from such dangerous weapons."

Lebanese army arrests SSNP members

Lebanese Troops arrested a member of the Syrian Social National Party who had threatened a checkpoint in Beirut with a weapon, witnesses reported. Witnesses said the SSNP fighter pulled a gun at the army checkpoint in the plush Rawcheh district and took refuge at the adjacent SSNP office. Army troops besieged the area and the SSNP turned over the wanted member to an army patrol," the witnesses added. A reliable source identified the suspect as Atef Awdeh. Tension has been high between the army and the pro-Syrian SSNP since the regular force arrested two members of the party accused of attacking news reporter Omar Harqous and seriously wounding him earlier in the week. Reports said the army, earlier in the day, also arrested Mohammed Ali Awdeh, another SSNP member accused of attacking Harqous. It could not be established if the two Awdehs are related. SSNP advocates the establishment of a Greater Syrian national state, including present Syria, Lebanon, the Hatay Province of Turkey, occupied Palestine , the Palestinian territories, Cyprus, Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait. It is now part of the pro-Syrian bloc, along with Amal and Hezbollah and General Michel Aoun

Lebanese students demonstrate in support of Gaza

Thousands of Lebanese schoolchildren carried Lebanese and Palestinian flags during a protest that lasted for about 30 minutes in front of U.N. House in downtown Beirut, Lebanon against the blockade of the Palestinians in the Gaza strip. The demonstration was peaceful as they sang anti-Israeli songs before dispersing without any violence.
Israel tightened its blockade on the Gaza Strip last month in a move that has been widely criticized throughout the Arab world. An Israeli airstrike in the southern Gaza Strip killed two Palestinians Tuesday, dealing a new blow to efforts to restore a fraying cease-fire.

Hezbollah labels Aoun as top Christian in Lebanon and ME

Hezbollah labeled its ally Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun as the top Representative of Christians in Lebanon and "the Arab orient." Hezbollah 's deputy secretary general Sheik Naim Qassem also praised President Michel Suleiman, Interior Minister Ziad Baroud and Army Commander Gen. Jean Qahwaji for "restoring the path of relations" in favor of Lebanon and Syria. Qassem also called for reactivating an agreement on averting media campaigns between March 8 and March 14. Hezbollah and its March 8 allies, he added, insist on holding the forthcoming parliamentary elections on scheduled "without any delay, even for one day."

Jordan

Political front:

MPs walk out as debate over Gaza aid ship delayed

More than 20 lawmakers walked out of a Lower House meeting, protesting a decision to put off a debate over a proposal to send a relief aid ship to Gaza. House Speaker Abdul Hadi Majali justified his decision to halt the debate "to allow authorities enough time to make diplomatic arrangements to ensure the success of the mission". A memorandum was submitted a month ago by 23 MPs proposing that the House dispatch a ship to Gaza in a bid to break the blockade imposed on the coastal strip by Israel. The lawmakers voted for the proposal but as MPs started to take the podium to discuss the mechanism and details of the initiative, including timing, Majali announced the postponement, endorsing a suggestion by MP Saad Srour (Northern Badia) to approve the plan without setting a fixed date "in order to give the government the time needed to conduct the required diplomatic contacts". Majali's move triggered a row, with some MPs warning that putting off the date might be understood as "killing of the idea". They also complained that they were denied their right to discuss the issue. According to a statement issued by the IAF, party members said they had been informed ahead of yesterday's session that "deliberations over the proposal would be postponed in a bid to kill the idea". The statement did not identify the source of the tip, but the Islamist lawmakers insisted "there was a scheme" behind it.

MPs censure colleagues who publicly criticise House

Five National Current bloc members in the Lower House criticized deputies who publicly criticize Parliament's performance. They said debate among deputies seeks to benefit the country, but it is unacceptable to air arguments at the House "in lectures or seminars". "It is the right of any deputy to talk about any issue, but without insulting others," MP Mohammad Awwad said during session, noting that last week's deliberations on the state budget should not be described as a "comedy". Other deputies said constructive criticism should be encouraged when it aims at serving the general public.

Economic front:

Khalili highlights deal with Daewoo to establish electric equipment plant in Jordan

Osama Darwish Al Khalili, chairman of National Integrated Industrial Complex (NIIC), hailed His Majesty King Abdullah's efforts in propelling the economic development drive. During the Jordanian-Korean Business Forum in Seoul, held concurrently with King Abdullah's recent visit

to South Korea, the NIIC on Tuesday signed an agreement with the South Korean firm Daewoo, to establish an electric equipment factory in the Kingdom. In a press statement, the NIIC chairman said the factory will be the largest one of its kind in the Middle East and the North Africa (MENA) region providing 5,000 jobs for Jordanian citizens, including 1,200 engineers. Khalili said the accord will empower the Kingdom to become the exporting centre for electric equipment to the MENA countries and European markets. Seventy per cent of the NIIC $300 million investment belongs to the Middle East Complex while the remaining 30 per cent is owned by the Emirati Holding National Company.

Agricultural investment in Sudan to resume early 2009

The stalled Jordanian agricultural mega project in Sudan is expected to be resuming at the beginning of 2009, an Agriculture Ministry official told. “We expect the recently established [private] company to embark on the project by then after an update to the project’s feasibility study is finalised within a month,” the ministry’s director of private sector affairs, Abdullah Shishani, told last week. The government has this year decided to update data related to $359,000 project, funded by the Islamic Bank in Jeddah, in light of the skyrocketing prices of commodities and services. The ministry promoted the venture among the local private sector and found investors interested. Once the feasibility study is complete, Shishani said, the government will sign an agreement with the company, which comprises four Jordanian firms that decided to implement the project and benefit from the entailed customs exemptions and other incentives provided by the Sudanese government. Under the scheme, Jordan was entitled to grow its essential cereals and other crops including animal fodder and to rear livestock. But the project was shelved and Khartoum set 2009 as a deadline for Jordan to make up its mind, either to start actual investment or risk losing the opportunity. Prime Minister Nader Dahabi said Jordan will forge ahead with investment on Sudan’s agricultural lands. Dahabi made the remarks during the meetings of the Joint Jordanian-Sudanese Higher Committee, which convened the same day. Jordan’s investments in Sudan stand at $1 billion, with a large chunk of these projects benefitting from the incentives Sudan offers in the agriculture sector.

72 municipalities to receive funding for development projects

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs has allocated JD13 million for various development projects in order to enhance services and create jobs in the Kingdom's 93 municipalities, a senior ministry official said. "The ministry is determined to enhance municipalities' potential and organisation in accordance with international criteria through a $50 million regional and local development programme," Minister of Municipal Affairs Shihadeh Abu Hdeib said in a statement to the press, adding that under the programme, projects will be implemented in 72 municipalities over the next five years. He said the ministry will provide training to municipal staff as well as Cities and Villages Development Bank employees on preparing municipality budget statements. In order to qualify for the programme’s funds, Abu Hdeib said a municipality must work to increase its annual revenue by 10 per cent, while its debt must not exceed 150 per cent of its average operational costs.

Kingdom granted three-year extension of its mine-clearance deadline

The Kingdom was granted a three-year extension of its mine-clearance deadline after stating earlier this year that it would be unable to meet the May 2009 target and requesting a new deadline of May 1, 2012. Jordan, a signatory of the Mine Ban Convention, was granted approval for its request during the 9th Meeting of State Parties to the Ottawa Convention (9MSP) in Geneva, which concluded. Besides Jordan, Britain, Chad, Croatia, Denmark, Ecuador, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Peru, Senegal, Thailand, Venezuela, Yemen and Zimbabwe were also granted extensions. States Parties to the Ottawa Convention were asked to consider Jordan's request and vote to approve the request based on the recommendations made by a 17-country analysing committee. Implementation challenge for Jordan included 60 million square metres of suspected hazardous areas, approximately 500 minefields and around 305,000 anti-personnel and anti-tank mines.

International firms to bid on Arab railway project early next year

The government urged several international firms currently reviewing financial, technical and legal studies of a railway linkage project in Jordan to submit their proposals by January 12. Ministry of Transport Secretary General Muhannad Qudah said that the winning company will begin work on the project, which the government prepared this year, under a build, operate and transfer basis, in mid-March. ***Jordan was among 13 Arab countries that approved an Arab railway project during the meetings of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. Under the agreeme***nt, the states were requested to implement and renovate their internal railway networks within 10-15 years. The project's cost is estimated at JD4.3 billion, with JD2.8 billion allocated for infrastructure and the remaining funds to be disbursed for purchasing rail fleet. The railway will be a multiuse system facilitating the transfer of oil derivatives and gas from neighbouring countries such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and the transport of containers, phosphate and cement. In addition, the railway will also be used for the transfer of general cargo and passengers.

Pakistani envoy underlines need for FTA to boost ties

It has been 18 month since he assumed his post in Amman, but Pakistani Ambassador Mohammad Akhtar Tufail has not been backing home since, because here "I am on vacation". Jordan and Pakistan have decades-long history of distinguished relations at all levels, says the ambassador, noting that around 200 Jordanians seek to study in Pakistani universities every year. About 7,000 Jordanians graduated from Pakistan so far. This level of cooperation led the Pakistani government to switch the venue of teaching the Arabic language to Pakistani diplomats from Egypt to Jordan. Recently, the two sides have been negotiating to renew a 2008-2010

cultural exchange programme. Although it has not been signed yet, the envoy says it is already operational due to the "deep mutual trust between the countries". Tufail highlights the fact that security and stability in Jordan are a valuable asset for investment, stressing that Jordan and Pakistan have to work more on boosting trade exchange, which currently does not exceed $50 million. Once signed, he says, the FTA will be mutually beneficial. Last August, the ambassador signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Agriculture, under which Pakistan will export mangoes for the local market starting next year. The agreement is expected to be finalised during a visit by the Pakistani president or prime minister, who is slated to head the country's delegation to the World Economic Forum and the G-11 summit, to be held next year in Jordan.

Al Aman Fund seeks to increase beneficiary base

Her Majesty Queen Rania emphasized the need to expand Al Aman Fund for the Future of Orphans' financial resources in order to absorb the increase in the number of its beneficiaries. Chairing a meeting of the fund's board of trustees yesterday, Queen Rania also highlighted the importance of boosting its administrative competence, according to a Royal Court statement. Her Majesty said it is important to look for sustainable resources to implement training and guidance programmes in order to help beneficiaries integrate into the community and the labour market, the statement indicated. To maintain the services in light of the rising number of beneficiaries, Saqqa said the fund will enhance and increase training courses and boost networking with recruitment companies and private sector institutions to create jobs for the graduates. Minister of Labour Bassem Salem, Minister of Social Development Hala Lat ouf, Central Bank of Jordan Governor Umayya Touqan, the fund's board members and private sector representatives were present at the meeting.

Geo strategic front:

EU, Kingdom launch joint initiative

Jordan and the European Union (EU) launched a joint-project to combat terrorism and organized crime in the Kingdom. ***The EU-funded project is the first European Commission-sponsored counterterrorism initiative in Jordan, and will include training courses for the explosives unit in the Public Security Department (PSD) and the Forensic Laboratories Department (FLD).*** Jordan witnessed three deadly attacks against major hotels on November 11, 2005, which left 90 people dead and many more injured. Almost a year following the deadly attacks, legislators passed the Prevention of Terrorism Law to curb acts of terrorism against its territory. ***The 18-month project is an EU-Jordan cooperation in the field of security and counter-te***rrorism through twinning of the PSD with an equivalent EU member state

administration, Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Suhair Al-Ali said during a ceremony held at the FLD headquarters yesterday. The ***capacity-building programme*** will focus on the FLD and the explosives handling unit, both of which report to the PSD, according to the minister. The ***FLD training programme will*** concentrate on general forensic methods: Preparation for accreditation to international standards and trace explosives and controlled chemicals laboratory operations. Under the joint-initiative, the EC will supply 1.2 million euros worth of laboratory equipment to the FLD for the establishment of an explosives and controlled chemicals analysis lab. Ambassador Patrick Renauld, head of the European Commission Delegation (ECD) to Jordan noted that the ECD has extensive experience in supporting the exchange of know-how, expertise and capacity between European institutions and the Kingdom.

Jordan, NATO member states to expand security, political ties

NATO and Jordan are working on finalizing a document that will strengthen and expand the country's security and political relations with alliance member states as part of the Kingdom's Individual Cooperation Programme (ICP) with NATO, an alliance official said. According to Nicola de Santis, head of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) Countries Section, the ICP tailors the quality and type of cooperation with the alliance according to key specific national needs. The ***ICP, which aims*** at enhancing political dialogue between partners, incorporates a number of areas in which full cooperation between Jordan and NATO will be established, including the fight against terrorism. ***NATO officials indicated that Jordan has presented a first draf***t of its ICP, which was recently submitted to the 26-member alliance, while Mauritania also presented its draft to NATO's international staff. Once finalised, the ICP will allow for enhanced cooperation in different fields from public diplomacy to crisis management as well as an increase in the number of joint Jordanian-NATO military exercises and further cooperation in the fight against nuclear proliferation. It also paves the way for an improvement of collaboration in the fields of armament and logistics.

King renews support for Palestinians

His Majesty King Abdullah urged intensified efforts to ensure the legitimate rights of the Palestinians as the world marks the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. The world day, celebrated November 29 annually, comes this year at a time when the Palestinians are going through a miserable humanitarian situation as a result of Israel's siege on the Gaza Strip and preventing the entry of essential humanitarian assistance into the strip, King Abdullah said in a letter to Paul Badji, chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, according to a Royal Court statement. The King stressed that supporting the committee and its core mission of serving the cause of the Palestinian refugees has a significant impact on keeping their issue on the world's agenda. UNRWA puts the number of registered Palestinian refugees inside the Palestinian lands and in the diaspora at more than 4.6 million in 2008, growing from 914,000 in 1950. According to the agency's

June 2008 figures, there are 1,930,703 registered refugees in Jordan, of whom 335,307 live in 10 "official" camps.

King to hold talks in Seoul

His Majesty King Abdullah will hold talks with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak on means to bolster bilateral ties, political developments in the Middle East and efforts to bring about peace between the Palestinians and Israelis. King Abdullah, who arrived in Seoul on a several-day visit, will meet with several South Korean officials, businesspeople and key economic figures. Several deals and memoranda of understanding in the fields of energy and economic and development cooperation will be signed during the visit. The deals are intended to increase trade volume and encourage the private sector in both countries to implement joint investment projects.

S. Korea willing to help in key schemes

South Korea's private sector is likely to help the Kingdom implement the vital Red-Dead Canal project, along with nuclear energy and infrastructure schemes. During a summit between His Majesty King Abdullah and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, the two sides agreed to task officials from both countries to look into ways they can cooperate in the targeted fields. Discussions between King Abdullah and the South Korean president covered cooperation in ***renewable energy, water desalination, in addition to the potential contribution of South Korean companies to the implementation of the Red-Dead Canal project, the Jordan News Agency, Petra, reported from Seoul.*** The two leaders emphasised that there is potential for increasing cooperation, especially in light of the growing trade exchange, which doubled over the past few years. King Abdullah said Jordan plans to open an embassy in Seoul in the second half of 2009. Meanwhile, the South Korean leader accepted an invitation by the Monarch to visit Jordan. Timing of the visit is yet to be coordinated. In the presence of King Abdullah and the South Korean president, officials from both governments signed an agreement on cooperation over the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, in addition to a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on economic and development cooperation. Jordan, which signed several deals on cooperation on the use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes with the US, France, Canada, Britain and China, seeks to build a nuclear reactor by the year 2017 to meet the rising demand on energy.

Kingdom to host region's largest appliances factory

Daewoo International Corporation announced plans to establish an electric appliances factory in the Kingdom, which will be the largest in the Middle East and North Africa region. The factory, which will start production in 2009, will create 5,000 job opportunities for Jordanians. The appropriate investment climate in Jordan and the availability of specialised manpower, in

addition to Jordan's strategic geographic location, encouraged the company to endorse the plan, top executives from the company said. The announcement was made during a Jordanian-South Korean Business Forum held yesterday in Seoul, bringing about 200 businesspeople and key economic figures from Jordan and South Korea. ***The factory will be created under a partnership agreement signed between Daewoo and the National Integrated Industrial Complex, one of the companies affiliated to the Mid***dle East Complex for Engineering, Electrical and Heavy Industries (MECE). MECE CEO Osama Khalili noted that training is under way for Jordanians to benefit from the jobs created under an agreement signed with the Ministry of Labour.

Social front:

'Long Eid holiday has adverse impact on productivity'

Religious holidays are an opportunity for individuals to foster ties with relatives, friends and neighbours, but "too long" holidays are unfavourable because they have a negative impact on the community's productivity, economists and clerics said. Although the government announced that the Kingdom will observe a public holiday on the occasion of Eid Al Adha as of Sunday, December 7, until Thursday, December 11, the dates announced are preceded and followed by weekends, stretching the no-work period to nine days. Mohammad Qudah, an Islamist MP, said ***religious holidays should not be an "excuse for laziness", adding that there is no evidence in Islamic sharia prohibit***ing anyone from working during these occasions, regardless of their sacredness. Meanwhile, economic sectors usually take precautionary steps on such occasions in order to ensure the work flow, according to Adli Kandah, director general of the Association of Banks in Jordan (ABJ). Although he did not argue over the negative impact of ***long holidays on the*** banking sector, Kandah stressed that the ABJ does not have comprehensive studies covering the local banking sector to assess the magnitude of damage to the banking industry in the Kingdom, where 23 banks operate through 600 branches.

RJ first airline to land in Bangkok

Royal Jordanian (RJ) was the first foreign airline to land at the Bangkok international airport since the November 26 closure of the facility. A statement from the company said an RJ flight landed after having an "exceptional permission" from the airport authorities. RJ President/CEO Samer Majali said that the airline operated its first flight from Amman to Bangkok on December 3, at 2:00am, announcing the resumption of flights between the two countries. He indicated that the company operates seven weekly flights to Bangkok and called on people to check with the airline for information regarding reservations. Also, a Thai Airways flight to Sydney left Suvarnabhumi, Bangkok's main international airport, ***the first international departure since protesters ended an eight-day blockade, Agence France-Presse reported.*** Protesters gave up their siege of the key airport and Don Mueang domestic airport after a court on Tuesday

dissolved the ruling party and forced out the prime minister, one of the key demands of demonstrators.

Students tackle global issues through robotics competition

A total of 360 students convened on the shores of the Dead Sea to engage in an engineering challenge by executing tasks that rely on science, team building and problem solving. ***The 59 teams of Jordanian students across the county, and one team from Lebanon*** are taking part in the fourth national robotics competition, launched by HRH Prince Hamzah Ben Al Hussein yesterday at the King Hussein Convention Centre. Organised by the King Hussein Foundation's (KHF) Jubilee Centre for Excellence in Education (JCEE) and the National Educational Centre for Robotics, this year's competition is themed, "Climate Connections". It is an anticipated annual engineering feat for students to tackle global issues through research and showcase innovative robotic applications, according to a KHF statement.

In line with the JCEE mandate to develop and promote innovative educational applications and curricula among private and public schools in Jordan and the Arab world, the centre will hold the First FLL Arabia and the second Arab robotic competition in March 2009 in the Kingdom. More than 12 Arab countries will take part, according to the statement.

Deputies endorse law regulating drug trials on humans

Prime Minister Nader Dahabi asserted that Prince Hamzah Hospital would not be privatized; adding that treatment costs would be revised. During Lower House session, the premier explained that the hospital was given administrative independence to develop the quality of services provided, responding to lawmakers who expressed concern that the hospital might be privatized. The MPs said fees charged by the facility are higher than in the country's private hospitals, which is discouraging patients from seeking its services, thus placed additional pressure on Al Bashir Hospital. Meanwhile, responding to a remark made by Deputy Rasmi Mallah regarding the employment of people with disabilities (PWD) in the public and private sectors, the premier announced that the government would follow up on the issue with the Civil Service Bureau and the Ministry of Labour to provide the Lower House with annual statistics on employed PWD.

E-journalism growing but hard to rule - experts

Despite its rapid rise to prominence as a major source for citizens' news, electronic media cannot be fully governed under the Kingdom's current laws and regulations, experts said. To debate over the role of the electronic media and discuss potential regulations for the sector, media and

legal experts gathered yesterday for a two-day conference on "New Media Law and Policy" hosted by USAID's Jordan Media Strengthening Programme (IREX). Internet websites have developed rapidly in the Kingdom, according to Jordan web expert Ahmad Humeid, who noted what had started as a handful of blogs in English some five years ago has now evolved into a collective effort to provide the latest news across the country in Arabic. Despite concerns over the medium's accuracy and accountability, the demand for traditional news, according to Humeid, will continue to decrease.

Palestine and Israel:

Security issues:

Israel Approves Release of 250 Palestinian Prisoners

The Israeli cabinet approved the release of 250 Palestinian prisoners as a goodwill gesture to Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas amid persistent violence around the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. The move followed a pledge by acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert during talks with Abbas on November 17, their first such meeting in two months. Trade and Industry Minister Eli Yishai from the ultra-Orthdox Shas party told reporters before the meeting that he would vote against the release.***"This gesture is very dangerous, strange and dubious."*** The names of those to be freed will now be drawn up by a special committee according to criteria which rule out the release of prisoners "with Jewish blood on their hands". Israelis will also be able to lodge objections to any candidates identified for release. He added that the Palestinian Authority "praised the Israeli decision and hopes it will one day apply to all the Palestinian prisoners."
A senior Israeli official has said that none of the prisoners to be freed belongs to radical Palestinian groups such as Hamas, the Islamist movement which seized power in the Gaza Strip in June 2007. In a similar move in August, Israel freed ***198 Palestinian*** prisoners. More than 11,000 Palestinians are still held in Israeli prisons. Hamas welcomed the approval of the prisoner release but criticized Abbas for maintaining normal relations with Israel despite its crippling blockade of Gaza.

Israel Eases Blockade on Gaza

Israel lifted a four-week ban on international journalists entering Gaza and temporarily eased a blockade on shipments of goods to the coastal strip. Israeli military spokesman Peter Lerner said an entry ban on international aid workers was also lifted. The announcement followed weeks of pressure from foreign

governments and the leaders of major news organizations urging Israel to reopen Gaza to the media. The Foreign Press Association in Israel had condemned the ban as a violation of press freedoms. Crossings between Israel and the Gaza Strip had been closed for more than four weeks since a shaky truce between Israel and Gaza's violent Hamas rulers began to unravel in a series of cross-border rocket attacks from Gaza and Israeli raids into the territory. ***For the fifth time since the closure began, Israeli authorities temporarily opened the crossings to goods traffic. They allowed in 40 truckloads of medicines and essential foodstuffs and permitted 400,000 liters (105,700 gallons) of diesel fuel for the Gaza power plant to be pumped through a trans-border pipeline, Palestinian trade ministry official Raed Fatt***ouh said. The blockade has created a cash crisis in Gaza banks, which closed for the day to count their dwindling stocks of bills. A monetary official said there was not enough cash to pay the wages of 77,000 civil servants in time for the four-day Eid al-Adha holiday, the holiest festival of the Muslim calendar, which begins Monday.

IOF Attacks Peaceful Demonstrations against the Wall

Six Palestinian citizens and two international Pacifists were injured; Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) attacked two peaceful demonstrations in Bil'in and Bethlehem. Five Palestinian citizens and two international pacifists were injured, in a peaceful demonstration against the Israeli Apartheid Wall. IOF shot rubber coated metal bullets, sound bombs and tear gas bombs against demonstrators, injuring seven of them; five Palestinians and two international pacifists. Luisa Morgantini, Vice-president of the European Parliament, who participated in the demonstration, expressed solidarity with Bil'in citizens and the Palestinian people in general, affirming the Palestinian people's right to struggle against building such an apartheid wall. Israeli troops aggressed, Friday, participants in another peaceful demonstration against the Israeli Apartheid Wall in Al-Ma'sara village near Bethlehem. Israeli soldiers harshly beat a Palestinian young boy, and physically assaulted other participants who raised the Palestinian flag demanding the international community to intervene to stop the apartheid policies represented by the Israeli Wall.

IOF Arrests Palestinian from Bethlehem, Attacks Nablus

Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) arrested a Palestinian citizen 22 in Tqoua' village south of Bethlehem, after breaking into his family house and searching it. In the meaning time, IOF units backed with military vehicles attacked the city of Nablus and the neighboring village of Assira Al-Shamaleya for the second time in 24 hours. Israeli troops conducted police canine supported search operations inside citizens houses.

PCHR: IOF Continues Aggressions against Palestinians

Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) continue systematic attacks against Palestinians in the Palestinian Territory, according to the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR). IOF killed an old Palestinian in Al-Yamoun village near Jenin north of the West Bank while four Palestinian citizens, including 2 children, were injured by Israeli gunfire in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Israeli troops committed 35 attacks against different cities in the West Bank; they forcefully entered houses, conducted search operations and arrested 26 Palestinian citizens, including five children. IOF razed areas of land in Al-'Amra natural reserve near Jenin, as they continued to prevent Palestinian farmers from reaching their land to harvest olives. IOF have continued to impose a total siege on the Palestinian Territory and have isolated the Gaza Strip from the outside world. Israeli Occupation Authorities have continued colonization activities in the West Bank, while Jewish colonizers continued to attack Palestinian citizens and their property.

Colonizers Attack Palestinians, International Activists after Eviction of Illegal Outpost

Jewish Colonizers attacked, Monday, Palestinians and international activists in Hebron, near Kharsina Colony after the eviction of colonizers from the nearby illegal outpost known as Federman's Farm. Masked colonizers attacked, twice, Palestinian houses. They came from neighboring vineyards and started throwing stones at Palestinian residents and international activists. Israeli police was called, but only arrived after colonizers had left the scene.

Colonizers Rebuild Illegal Migron Outpost in West Bank

Jewish colonizers restarted, the reconstruction of Illegal Outpost of Migron, near Ramallah in the West Bank. Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) had destroyed this outpost few months ago. During Annapolis Peace Conference, the Israeli Government pledged to destroy all illegal outposts and to stop its colonization activities, considered illegal by the whole international community. There are over 300,000 colonizers residing illegally in the West Bank. The Israeli Government had declared, Sunday, that it will take strict measures against colonizers who violate the law in the West Bank and threatened to stop, direct and indirect financial support to those illegal outposts and to their infrastructures.

Hammad denounces deviation of Senator Obama's statements in Meeting with President Abbas

Nimer Hammad, President Abbas Political Advisor, declared that Senator Barak Obama did not say any of the statements referred to him, in his meeting with President Mahmoud Abbas, last summer. It was said that Senator Obama had promised to work on returning East Jerusalem as a whole to the Palestinians if he was elected for the American Presidency, and that he asked to keep this promise unrevealed. Mr. Hammad affirmed that the Senator Obama had promised President Abbas, in their meeting in Ramallah last summer, that he will work, from the first day of his election on activating the Peace Process based on the Road Map, and the previously signed agreements between the Palestinians and the Israelis, he stated, 'we denounce the deviation of Senator Obama's words, and condemn any attempt to mislead the public opinion by referring any false statements to him.'

Barak to right-wing leaders: Avoid clashes over Hebron house

Defense Minister Ehud Barak met with representatives of right-wing groups and settlers in a meeting initiated by Knesset Member Uri Ariel (National Union-NRP), Ynet discovered Sunday evening. Barak asked the settlers to refrain from clashing with security forces and, instead, to leave the disputed house in Hebron as per a recent Israel High Court of Justice decision. The ruling increased tensions in the city in recent days, as additional families moved into the house. The defense minister promised that the IDF would protect the house in order to prevent Palestinians from squatting there until the debated issue of the home's ownership is established by a court of law. At the meeting, , settler representatives asked Barak to advance the issue of delaying the eviction of the house until a new government is established.

Israeli leaders call for war in Gaza, Likud MK calls for using detainees as human shields

Several Israeli right wing leaders called for a full invasion into the Gaza Strip especially after eight soldiers were wounded by Palestinian homemade shells. A Likud member of Knesset called for establishing an open air prison in the Negev area in order to imprison Hamas and Islamic Jihad members in it as use them as human shields against Qassam shells. The eight Israeli soldiers were wounded after Palestinian fighters struck the Nahal Oz military base with several homemade shells. Two of the soldiers are in serious conditions. Palestinian armed groups said that the shelling comes in retaliation to the Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip and the ongoing siege which led to the death of hundreds of patients. Likud member of Knesset, Gilad Ardan, said that Israel must establish an open air, unprotected detention camp in the western Negev in order to use the Palestinian detainees who would be confined in it as human shields against Qassam and mortar shells. Ardan added that using Hamas and Islamic Jihad detainees as human shields would deter the Palestinian armed groups from firing homemade shells at adjacent areas.

Economic front:

Palestinian Companies Start EXPOTEC 2008 Exhibition Tomorrow

Palestine 5th annual exhibition for the Information Technology and telecommunications EXPOTEC 2008 is to be inaugurated, Tuesday in the city of Ramallah in the West Bank. The exhibition is expected to be attended by a number of officials, and representatives of the public and private sectors, in addition to a number of businessmen. Sixty specialized companies, from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, will exhibit the latest in the Information Technology. The three days exhibition is organized by Palestinian Information Technology Association BITA and Palestine Trade Center PALTRADE. It will be held in Saleem Afandy Hall in Al-Bireh and Rashad Al-Shawa Hall in Gaza city. The exhibition is sponsored by Palestinian telecommunication group PALTEL and the Arab-Islamic bank. It will include massive products, special technical programs that might be showed for the first time.

Norway Donates $447,000 to UNRWA for Nahr Al-Bared Operations

The Government of Norway has announced a contribution of $447,000 in response to UNRWA's appeal to provide humanitarian relief work for 27,000 Palestinian refugees displaced from Nahr Al-Bared camp in Lebanon. UNRWA's Commissioner General, Ms Karen AbuZayd, thanked the Government of Norway for its support saying, 'this contribution helps ensure that the basic needs of the most vulnerable refugees continue to be met pending reconstruction of the camp.' The reconstruction of Nahr Al-Bared camp is the largest single project UNRWA has ever undertaken. In June 2008, UNRWA and the Lebanese government jointly appealed for $445 million for the reconstruction and recovery of the camp and its environs, $282 million of which is for UNRWA's part of the operation. In September 2008, UNRWA launched its Relief and Early Recovery Appeal for Nahr Al-Bared appeal for $42.7 million to maintain temporary services, up to December 2009, for the displaced pending reconstruction. Interventions include temporary shelter for 16,000 refugees and emergency food rations to all of the 27,000 displaced as well as other essential services such as temporary education, health care, water and sanitation. The contribution from the Government of Norway follows the United States Government contribution of $4.3 million pledged in September. The first stages of a major reconstruction and recovery effort of Nahr Al-Bared camp, to rebuild the camp and allow displaced refugees to return to the camp, are now underway. A phased approach to reconstruction is planned, through which families will begin to return to their homes inside the camp by the end of 2009.

Africa-Israel loss reaches over NIS 2.1 billion

The firm lowered the valuation of its properties in line with the global economic crisis.

Africa-Israel Investments Ltd. (TASE:AFIL; Pink Sheets:AFIVY.PK) today published its consolidated financial report for the third quarter of 2008. The holding company controlled by chairman Lev Leviev reported a third quarter loss of NIS 2.16 billion. The loss is mainly from the NIS 1.9 billion write-off in value of its real estate investments, as well as a sharp rise in financing expenses, which totaled NIS 419 million, primarily due to the rise this quarter in Consumer Price Index (CPI) figures. The loss is bigger than the NIS 2 billion loss the company recently warned about. The firm reported that its equity as of the end of the quarter was NIS 3.7 billion, compared with NIS 6.7 billion at the end of 2007. Africa-Israel CEO Izzy Cohen said, "Against the background of the worsening global economy, we examined the valuations of real estate assets and recorded a write-down in their fair value, at a level that in our opinion correctly reflects the situation in the global real estate market".

Netanyahu presents Likud economic plan

The Likud chairman made it clear that his plan would also form the basis for the 2009 budget. Tax breaks, reform of the Israel Land Administration (ILA), and the expansion of Israel's highway and railway infrastructure - these are the key measures in the economic plan of Likud chairman Benjamin Netanyahu, which he intends to put into effect, should he become prime minister following the upcoming elections on February 10. "These are three immediate measures which we will put into effect a few weeks after forming the government," he said today at a Deloitte Brightman Almagor conference on "End of the tax year in the shadow of economic crisis". Netanyahu made it clear that the plan would form the Likud's basis for the 2009 budget. The plan would, he said, include additional measures such as the opening of R&D centers, and reform in the higher education system. "It won't take days or weeks, but we can get these reforms moving within a few quarters," Netanyahu said. "We will emerge from the crisis stronger. We will create new jobs. To prevent unemployment from rising, we must create thousands of jobs. If we want to prevent unemployment from rising again, and maintain it at this level, we have to maintain growth and safeguard jobs," he added. Netanyahu gave details of his plan. ***The key measure in the tax breaks***, he said, would be the lowering of income tax for the middle classes. "It makes a lot of sense to lower taxes, since these will energize consumers, investors and banks. They make credit more liquid, investments more attractive, and give people the feeling that they have more free income."

As to investment, Netanyahu said it was on the verge of grinding to a standstill. "Investors always barricade themselves in when a crisis is at its peak, but the moment there is a government policy in place that starts the wheels of growth rolling, they will come out again. We need just a drop of the international ocean of credit. For us this is everything," he added.

Al Marwa, the first of several Arab ship to break the Gaza Siege

Palestinian Legislator, head of the Popular committee Against the Siege, Jamal El Khodary, stated that the Lybian ship “Al Marwa” will reach the Gaza port, and added that this ship is one of several Arab ship which will challenge the Israeli siege and deliver humanitarian supplies to the residents of the Gaza Strip. El Khodary phoned the Lybian Health Minister, Dr. Mohammad Rashed, and thanked him, the Lybian resident and the Lybian people for their efforts to break the Israeli siege. The independent legislator added that this ship is the first Arab ship challenging the siege but will be followed by additional ship that would sail in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

He added that the the Popular Committee Against the Siege will continue the preparations for the arrival of A Marwa in order to deliver the aid and medicine to the residents of the coastal region. The Lybian Health Minister said that the government and the people of Libya are determined to act in solidarity with the Palestinian people, and added that Lybian hospitals are open for the Palestinian patients at any given time. Dr. Rashed saluted the Palestinian people and their steadfastness in the Gaza Strip while Israel continues its siege and military offensives against them.

Geo strategic front:

Libya Complains of Israeli High Sea 'Piracy' to Security Council

Libya protested in vain before the U.N. Security Council over Israel's interception of one of its cargo ships attempting to offload aid in Gaza. Ambassador Giadalla Ettalhi told an emergency council session that Israel was guilty of "piracy in the high seas," and called for "effective action that will ensure compliance of Israel with international humanitarian law and the law of the seas." His complaints, however, failed to elicit a formal condemnation of Monday's actions by Israel, which needed unanimous consensus by the council's 14 members -- Libya is one of the 15-strong council's 10 rotating members. Israeli warships on Monday prevented a Libyan cargo vessel, the Al-Marwa, from reaching the Gaza Strip with 3,000 tons of humanitarian aid for the impoverished Palestinian territory, which has been under a crippling Israeli blockade since June 2007.

Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations Gabriela Shalev, invited to speak at the council meeting even though her country is not a member, rejected Libya's accusations, especially the piracy contention, and in turn charged Tripoli with provocation.

The Libyan aid shipment is the first effort by an Arab state to circumvent the blockade of Gaza, which Israel has sealed off since the Islamist movement Hamas violently seized power there in June 2007. Israel has repeatedly come under rocket attack from Gaza since then.

UAE Urges Donors to Fund UNRWA Programs

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) urged all international donors to contribute to the activities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) so it meets the growing humanitarian needs of Palestinian refugees. In a press release issued, Monday, Sheikh Rahma Al-Shamsi, member of the UAE delegation to the Quartet said "the UAE would continue to provide unlimited financial support to the humanitarian activities aimed at improving the plight of the affected Palestinians." He reiterated his delegation's support for financing programs aiming at rehabilitating the infrastructures destroyed by Israeli aggressions stating, "financial institutions, such as the World Bank, must step up their contributions to UNRWA, in order for the Agency to overcome the obstacles and make up its financial crisis." ***The UAE also called on Israel to end its ongoing aggression*** towards Palestinian refugee camps and to lift the siege, as well as to end the restriction on UNRWA staff movement so they provide the urgent humanitarian assistance to the neediest refugees.

President Abbas Meets with Romanian President

President Mahmoud Abbas met with the Romanian President Trajan Basescu in Bucharest, where they discussed the latest developments in the Middle East and the bilateral relations. The Romanian President confirmed his country's support for the peace process in the Middle East, stressing on the close ties bonding Romania and Palestine. He added that his country is willing to provide all that it takes for the Peace Process to succeed and reach a fair comprehensive peace in the region. He said that Romania is making every effort to enhance the bilateral relations in terms of culture, education, economy and technology. He stated, "we will continue the educational preparation for Palestinian Youth Program, starting next year." It is expected that President Abbas met Monday afternoon, with the Speakers of the Romanian Parliament and Senate, as well as the Ambassadors of Arab countries, and a delegation of Palestinian businessmen.

EU Condemns Colonizers' Violence against Palestinians

The European Union (EU) firmly condemned the acts of violence and brutality committed by Jewish colonizers against Palestinian citizens in the West Bank. In a declaration published, the EU presidency insisted that, it is unacceptable that the olive harvest, vital to the economy of the Palestinian Territory and the Palestinians' other activities should be disrupted by this upsurge in violent and illegal acts. The European Union pointed out that, "it is up to the Israeli Government, which has itself condemned these acts, to take the necessary measures to stop them immediately, in accordance with its international obligations."

Egyptian War Games Cause For Concern In Israel, Lawmaker Says

Israel is upset over Egyptian military exercises in which the simulated "enemy" is Israel, and some are calling on the U.S. to reconsider its aid to Egypt because of it. Israel and Egypt – two U.S. regional allies – signed a U.S.-sponsored peace treaty in 1979 – Israel's first with an Arab nation. The Egyptian navy reportedly carried out the largest exercise in its history last week. Dubbed Victory 41, the military maneuvers marked the Egyptian sinking of the Israeli Naval vessel Eilat 41 years ago, in which 47 Israeli sailors were killed and 91 wounded. The paper also quoted the Egyptian Navy commander in chief Vice Admiral Mohad Mamish in an interview with the Arabic newspaper Al Ahram, saying that the Egyptian Naval vessels were outfitted with advanced missiles and the Navy had supply contracts with Germany, Russia and the U.S.

Indirect prisoner-swap talks resume under Egyptian mediation

Palestinian sources reported that a Hamas delegate will be heading to Cairo soon in order to resume the Egyptian mediated indirect prisoner-swap talks between Hamas and Israel. Israel recently proposed the release of 220 detainees from a list of 450 detainees resented by Hamas. The list of detainees suggested by Hamas includes detainees who are sentenced to very high terms and leaders of resistance groups. Hamas officials said that the Israeli offer is insufficient while Israel rejected the list presented by Hamas and decided to increase pressures on the Gaza Strip by carrying invasions and intensifying the siege. Meanwhile, Israeli sources reported that Israel's outgoing, scandal burdened, Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, and his defense minister, Ehud Barak, will practice "exceptional efforts" in order to achieve a prisoner-swap deal with Hamas before the general elections in Israel.

Social front:

UNRWA Appeals for Funding Its Program in Nahr Al-Bared

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), urgently appealed for funding of the Agency's program in northern Lebanon Camp of Nahr Al-Bared for the coming 15 months, describing its financial situation as being in 'quite desperate straits'. In a press conference held, at the United Nations headquarters in New York, UNRWA's Commissioner-General, Karen AbuZayd said the Agency was 'deeply concerned' that its activities in northern Lebanon were at risk, due to lack of funds. UNRWA had launched the appeal last month for some $42.7 million to help meet the needs of the 27,000 persons displaced from Nahr Al-Bared Camp, including rent and food subsidies for the next 15 months until they could be moved back into the camp again. The Agency had finally begun to remove the mounds of rubble from the fairly self-sufficient multi-storey building camp

where people had fairly decent housing with most of them employed. The effort began on October 17, when UNRWA had been able to get clearance from the Lebanese Government to go into the camp to begin removing the debris.

Islamic-Christian Front: Israel Expands Attacks on Jerusalem

The Islamic-Christian Front for Defending Jerusalem and its Holy Sites affirmed that the Israeli Occupation Authorities began a dangerous series of aggressions against the Holy City of Jerusalem. They explained that IOF expanded their aggressions against the historic and sacred places in the City, as the celebrations of Jerusalem, Capital of Arab Culture 2009, approach. Dr. Hassan Khater, Secretary General of the Islamic-Christian Front said: “Israel demolishing and burying Islamic cemeteries in Jerusalem is an aggressive attempt to disfigure the truth and to rub out the Arab identity of the City.” He added that the Israeli Occupation Authorities announcing the discovery of Jewish remains, is not coincidental with the beginning of the Celebrations. He pointed that the aggression against the Church of the Holy Sepulture, as well as the attacks against worshippers and religious figures committed by extreme Jews, integrates within the policy aimed at violating the figures of the Holy City.

UNHRC: Human Rights Violations in Palestinian Territory Stem from Israeli Attacks

United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) dedicated its sixth special session to human rights violations emanating from Israeli military attacks in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, according to the Human Rights Council report. According to the report, published on October 31, the Council had been seized with global events that constituted serious human rights violations. As such, it had dedicated numerous special sessions to some of those situations, including “the human rights violations emanating from Israeli military attacks in the Occupied Palestinian Territory”. President of the Council, Martin Ihoeghian Uhomoibhi asked that the United Nations General Assembly to pay special attention to a resolution on human rights violations emanating from Israeli military attacks in the occupied Palestinian Territory, and a decision to strengthen the Human Rights Council.

Treasury chiefs: PMO exceeding authority on pensions

In response, National Economics Council chairman Prof. Manuel Trajtenberg and Prime Minister's Office director-general Raanan Dinur stress the need for urgent action on pension savings. "It appears that negotiations are taking place between officials of the Prime Minister's Office and representatives of the

Histadrut and the employers, and perhaps with other parties, over what is being called 'a safety net for pensions savings'" Thus begins a letter sent by senior officials at the Ministry of Finance to the Prime Minister's Office this evening. The letter, signed by Ministry of Finance director-general Yarom Ariav, Budgets Commissioner Ram Belinkov, Accountant General Shuki Oren, and Supervisor of Capital Markets, Insurance and Savings Yadin Antebi, warns the Prime Minister's Office that aid plans for the economy have not passed through their hands, and are not within the areas of authority of those dealing with them. The letter continues, "Unfortunately, a link has been formed between approval of the economic stimulus plan and the financial plan, and what the public calls 'the safety net.' This is a link that is liable to lead to economic ruin, for it means linkage between matters that require immediate, focused attention and something on which there is no special need for urgent action… it is vitally necessary that the link should be severed in order to enable the plans that have been formulated at the professional level and have received the blessings of the prime minister, the Ministry of Finance, and the government, to go forward."

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

Madiha Kaukab

Weekly Report: from 29th November 2008 to 5th December 2008

Presentation Date: 10th December 2008

Following news monitoring report is based on the important political, social, economic and International events occurred in Gulf Cooperation Council States.

GCC

Social Desk

- Gulf States urged to create health awareness

Nuclear Desk

- Iran proposes joint nuclear plants with Gulf States

UAE

Human Rights Desk

- UAE to discuss periodic report on human rights in Geneva
- National Human Rights Commission planned in UAE

Social Desk

- UAE Federal National Council' speaker welcomes media criticism
- Abu Dhabi govt plans to become one of world's top five: official
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- Russia, Bahrain to cooperate in peaceful nuclear energy: Medvedev

DETAILED REPORT

GCC

Social Desk

Gulf States urged to create health awareness

Arab Gulf states need to invest more in health systems than in merely building large hospitals, says a healthcare finance specialist from Austria who knows the region too well.

“I think the focus in these countries should be on preventing diseases, training medicos and paramedical staff and creating health awareness among their people than just building huge healthcare infrastructure,” said Leonard Lerer. The region needs to rope in more and more of its people in the healthcare system and ensure that its citizens have confidence in the medical services, Lerer, who is an MD and MBA, told The Peninsula yesterday.

Nuclear Desk

Iran proposes joint nuclear plants with Gulf states

Iran on Sunday proposed developing nuclear power plants jointly with neighbouring Arab states in the Gulf, amid international pressure on Tehran to halt its sensitive atomic work.

"I suggest that countries in the region put on their agenda the creation of a consortium to build and develop light-water nuclear plants," said Gholam Reza Aghazadeh, the head of Iran's atomic energy organisation. "Iran is ready to present a comprehensive proposal if the Persian Gulf countries agree to it in principal," he told an energy conference in Tehran. However, he did not give any specifics about the proposal, or its feasibility. Iran has long defied UN demands to halt uranium enrichment and it is under sanctions targetting individuals and institutions involved in its nuclear programme. The light-water reactor market is dominated by Western countries and Russia, which is currently building Iran's first nuclear power plant in the southern city of Bushehr on the Gulf. However, completion of the plant has been repeatedly delayed. Officials say Iran's first home-built nuclear plant using domestic technology is at the basic design stage and is scheduled to come on line in around nine years. The Islamic republic is also building a 40-megawatt heavy water research reactor in Arak, in central Iran. Uranium enrichment lies at the centre of fears about Iran's nuclear programme as the process can be used to make the fissile core of an atom bomb. Iran, OPEC's second largest oil exporter, insists it only wants to enrich uranium to make nuclear fuel to meet the growing energy demands of its population. Tehran has not responded to a proposal by world powers offering Iran incentives including help with peaceful nuclear technology and a light water reactor in return for suspending enrichment.

UAE

Human Rights Desk

UAE to discuss periodic report on human rights in Geneva

His Excellency Dr Anwar Gargash, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs will chair the UAE delegation to the Human Rights Council, Geneva, to discuss the Periodic Report on Human Rights in the UAE on the 4th of December.

Dr Gargash met the UAE delegation and reviewed the preparations and readiness of the team for the discussion. He reviewed the major topics to be highlighted at the Human Rights Council, and lauded the

efforts of UAE government institutions and civil society organizations for their contribution to the preparation process of the discussion session.

National Human Rights Commission planned in UAE

The UAE is in the process of setting up a National Human Rights Commission, and introducing HR education at the primary level, said Dr Anwar Gargash, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and FNC Affairs.

Listing plans to tackle human rights issues during his speech at the United Nation's Human Rights Council in Geneva, he said: "The UAE government is also working on a new law to protect domestic workers which will give them greater protection." The new initiative will particularly benefit women who form a major component of the workforce.

Social Desk

UAE Federal National Council' speaker welcomes media criticism

Speaker of the Federal National Council (FNC) Abdul Aziz Abdullah Al Ghurair underscored the importance of the role the local media plays in keeping a close watch on the general state of affairs in the country. He also commented on the media interest in the FNC activities, saying that it emanates from the social responsibility of the press.

Al Ghurair welcomed the constructive criticism of the functioning of FNC by the media, and said that those criticisms will fortify the legislative and supervisory roles the FNC assumes.

Abu Dhabi govt plans to become one of world's top five: official

The local government of Abu Dhabi Emirate, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has developed a vision for ranking as one of the world best five city governments in terms of government performance, a local official said here on Saturday.

The emirate's government worked out its strategy for improving its services in various domains particularly in the educational and economic and management affairs in the light of the world's most successful experiments," he pointed out. Abu Dhabi government started the first stage of its strategic

restructuring program in 2007 with 27 different bodies participating. The project targets a total of 31 government institutions.

Constitutional amendments in UAE to help serve society

Minister of Health Humaid Mohammed Obaid Al Quttami said on Wednesday that the new amendments to the constitution approved by the Federal Supreme Council (FNC) are aimed at enabling the Council of Ministers as well as the members of the FNC to work vigorously to serve the society and address its major development issues.

The amendment to an article forbidding ministers from engaging in any professional or commercial activities during their tenure is to help ministers do their best for the public good, he said.

National Day

UAE wins the race against time, stays the course of progress: VP

Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai H.H. Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum today pledged to President H.H. Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan to keep and sustain the UAE stature as a source of giving, good, charity, development, a symbol of pride and glory as well as an oasis of security, stability, building and progress.

”Our dreams for our beloved nation and people are great and evolving and our goals to propel our country to the leading rank among comity of most advanced nations and lead our people to the first slot among the most civilised and comfortable peoples will remain firm and unequivocal,’ Shaikh Mohammed emphasised in a statement to Dira al Watan magazine on the UAE’s 37th national day.

Khalifa calls for preservation of natural wealth and biodiversity

In an address to the nation on the occasion of the 37th National Day of UAE, President His Highness Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan called on the citizens to continue their selfless work to entrench the achievements of the country.

IR Desk

Tunisia backs UAE approach to resolve its occupied islands issue

Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelwahab Abdallah has reiterated his country's support for the UAE's peaceful efforts and approaches to resolve the issue of its three islands occupied by Iran, either through bilateral talks or by referring the issue to the International Court of Justice.

US State Department praises religious freedom in UAE

The US Department of State has lauded the religious tolerance and cultural coexistence found in United Arab Emirates.

The International Religious Freedom Report 2008 released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour affiliated to the Department of State, surveyed the life in the UAE to establish that the country keenly protects freedom of faith and encourages tolerance among the followers of various religions.

UAE NGOs look forward to UN meeting

When Dr. Anwar Gargash discusses the state of human rights in the UAE at the UN on Thursday, members from local NGOs will be looking for this meeting to set the tone for future changes.

Last year, His Highness Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai decreed that journalists can no longer receive jail time for their articles.

We must all fight terrorism: Lubna

It was an emotional Wednesday evening for the many who lit candles at the Shaikh Rashid Auditorium at the Indian High School (IHS), Dubai, to mourn for those who died in the recent Mumbai terror attacks.

Foreign Labor Desk

UAE labor ministry keen to protect rights of workers

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) is keen to protect the rights of workers in the UAE, said Humaid bin Deemas, acting general manager at MoL.

On the occasion of the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery and the National Day, Deemas while speaking to Khaleej Times said: "We moved in many directions as the first thing is to sign many MoUs with Asian countries to protect the workers." The MoL in the UAE has fully cooperated with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) following the Abu Dhabi Declaration in January. Proper coordination work was carried with twenty one countries for the protection of workers' rights. So far, the UAE has signed MoUs with India, Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China and Thailand.

Measures to improve lot of workers: UAE labour ministry

The UAE's Ministry of Labour (MoL) has been working to improve the living and working conditions of its estimated 2.7 million migrant work force.

One of the several measures taken by the government is the mid-day break rule, which prohibits employers from making workers do any outdoor work during the midday hours in the summer months. The rule was implemented four years ago.

Saudi Arab

Social Desk

Saudi Arabia joins hand in fight against AIDS

The Kingdom will join the member nations of the World Health Organization (WHO) to observe World AIDS Day tomorrow.

World AIDS Day is being celebrated this year under the theme of leadership, with the global campaign slogan "Leaders! Keep The Promise — Stop AIDS" and the regional slogan "Women! Take The Lead." The contribution of women leaders has been considerable.

Govt plans minimum wage for Saudi workers

Saudi Arabia plans to set minimum wage guidelines for Saudi nationals, the labor ministry said on Tuesday.

A ministry spokesman said a plan was in the works to set minimum salary targets for Saudis such as teachers or store cashiers as a part of a program to create more jobs for citizens.

IR Desk

Rights row over Saudi detainee

Saudi Arabia has been accused of breaching UN laws on human rights over its treatment of a Bahraini currently in police custody there. Former Guantanamo Bay detainee, Abdulla Majid Al Nuaimi, 27, was arrested at a checkpoint on the King Fahad Causeway on October 29.

The father-of-two has been held at an unknown location ever since. It is understood his name was included on a list of nearly 1,000 Al Qaeda suspects accused of carrying out "acts of war" against Saudi Arabia. But president of the now-dissolved Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), Nabeel Rajab, said Mr Al Nuaimi had not been allowed to hire a lawyer or see any of his family. He claimed the electrical contractor also had no idea of the charges against him, violating numerous articles in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. "While we fully respect and appreciate our brothers in Saudi Arabia, we do not accept any of our citizens to be arrested in this arbitrary manner, which violates the simplest international norms," said Mr Rajab. "Today, there are international standards and charters that should be respected as part of every country's role in the international community." Mr Rajab called on Saudi authorities to immediately allow Mr Al Nuaimi to hire an attorney, meet his family and to reveal the reason for his arrest. He also demanded all of Bahraini's former Guantanamo Bay prisoners be provided with financial and emotional support to help them lead a normal life. Mr Al Nuaimi was arrested on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan in November 2001 on suspicion of having links with terrorist groups. He spent almost four years at the Cuba-based prison camp, along with five other

Bahrainis, before returning home in November 2005. Human rights activists said police questioned Mr Al Nuaimi several times after his release from Guantanamo Bay and until recently had a travel ban imposed on him. Guantanamo Bay legal team head Joshua Colangelo-Bryan, who represented all of the Bahraini detainees held in the Cuba-based prison camp, also demanded action on Mr Al Nuaimi. "Abdulla spent years in Guantanamo without any due process," he said. "As such, I can only hope that he is treated fairly by Saudi authorities and released immediately if - as news reports suggest - he was arrested simply because he drove from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia." Another Bahraini, Abdulrahim Al Murbati, 27, is also being held in Saudi Arabia without charge or trial after his arrest in Riyadh in June 2003. The GDN reported yesterday that a third man, Khalil Janahi, detained in April this year had been transferred to a prison in Dubai on Monday.

Saudi govt sets up team to assist its citizens in India

The Saudi embassy in New Delhi and the consulate in Mumbai have set up a team to follow up the condition of Saudis in India in the wake of terrorist attacks in Mumbai, according to the foreign ministry.

“The team will provide necessary assistance including accommodation as well as evacuation for those who want to return to Saudi Arabia,” said an official statement. It said the Saudi embassy and consulate were following up developments in Mumbai and receiving calls from Saudi citizens to provide them with necessary guidance. It said they were also coordinating with the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs which assured them all assistance.

Sarkozy due in Saudi Arabia today

French President Nicolas Sarkozy is scheduled to visit the Kingdom today. He will meet Custodian of Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah and discuss bilateral relations besides regional and international issues of mutual concern, according to the Saudi Press Agency.

On his first trip to the region since taking office, Sarkozy visited Saudi Arabia at the beginning of a three-nation Gulf tour early this year. The French president, who described the Kingdom as a “strategic partner in the region” and a “bridge between the East and the West” during an interview with an Arabic newspaper before his first visit, seeks to take the strategic ties between the two countries to new heights. “My relationship with King Abdullah is based on trust and confidence,” Sarkozy said in the interview.

Saudi Arabia is France’s No. 2 trading partner in the region and trade between the two countries is rapidly increasing. France is the Kingdom’s eighth ranking supplier. More than 60 French companies are

already established in Saudi Arabia and are contributing to the Saudi economic boom. These companies are benefiting from the open economic policy introduced by the Saudi authorities.

Saudi, French leaders urge efforts to protect shipping

French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Saudi King Abdullah on Saturday called for international efforts to protect shipping in the Gulf of Aden amid a spate of attacks by Somali pirates.

The two leaders also discussed the global financial crisis and Middle East peace, during a brief visit by Sarkozy to Saudi Arabia, the official SPA news agency reported. Sarkozy and the Saudi king underscored "the need to reinforce international efforts to preserve shipping security in the Gulf of Aden," the agency said.

Sarkozy paid a brief visit to the oil-rich Saudi kingdom after addressing a UN aid conference in Qatar, where he said EU assistance to poorer countries -- pledged at 61 billion dollars this year -- would not be sacrificed. "While we are all facing these growing deficits and rising unemployment, we have decided not to sacrifice the Millennium objectives but to fulfil the promises made to you regarding public aid for development," he said.

Muslims urged to settle disputes, forge unity

The imam at the Grand Mosque in Makkah, Sheikh Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais, called on the Muslims yesterday to settle their disputes and forge unity.

Delivering his Friday sermon to a gathering of more than one and a half million pilgrims at the Grand Mosque, Al-Sudais said, “This is the sacred place and time to settle disputes that have caused the Ummah untold miseries. We should not disunite. One of our major problems is the issue of Palestine. Our Palestinian brothers are suffering due to injustice and Israeli siege and also because of infighting and division among themselves.”

EU, Muslim world need to come closer: Ewa

It is necessary to improve and deepen the dialogue between the European Union (EU) and Muslim countries, Swedish Trade Minister Dr. Ewa Bjorling said here yesterday.

“The image created in Europe of the Muslim world as conflict filled and stagnating lacks nuance and often does not at all correspond to reality. Saudi Arabia is clearly a testimony of the opposite. We need more dialogue, not less. More exchange, not less. More cooperation, not less,” she told a meeting at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry yesterday.

Earlier in the day, Ewa held talks with Minister of Trade Abdullah Zainal Alireza. They discussed matters related to bilateral trade and how best it could further be expanded. Right now, the trade balance stands in favor of Sweden. Ewa is due to visit the new King Abdullah Economic City in Rabigh and meet Minister of Finance Ibrahim Al-Assaf today.

Hamas slams Saudi over visas for pilgrims from Gaza

A senior official in the Islamist Hamas movement on Saturday slammed what he called a decision by Saudi Arabia not to grant visas to Palestinians from the Gaza Strip who want to go on the hajj pilgrimage.

Saudi Arabia says it aspires to more effective European role in Mideast

Saudi Arabia expressed hope on Monday that France and the other European Union states would play a more effective role for resolving issues of the region namely the Palestinian cause.

The cabinet, in a statement after today's session, said the kingdom aspires to witness a leading role for the EU for facing the global financial slowdown for sake of limiting its negative impacts.

Saudi foreign ministry issues 1.75 million pilgrim visas

Saudi missions abroad have issued more than 1.75 million visas for those who want to perform Haj this year, said Mohammed Al-Salloum, undersecretary at the Foreign Ministry for consular affairs.

Saudi Arabia, US sign technology deal

Saudi and US officials have signed a science and technology cooperation agreement that includes nuclear energy technology.

Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans, Environment, and Science Claudia McMurray says the agreement will allow greater agency-to-agency cooperation in a range of scientific and technological fields. The agreement was signed Tuesday.

Egypt lifts ban on doctors working in Saudi

Egypt has lifted a ban imposed last month on its doctors taking up jobs in Saudi Arabia after two doctors were ordered jailed and flogged in the conservative kingdom, local media reported on Wednesday.

"Manpower and Immigration Minister Aisha Abdel Hadi announced the lifting of the ban on Egyptian doctors going to take up jobs in the private sector" in Saudi Arabia, the state-owned Al-Ahram daily reported.

Saudis find melamine in Chinese milk powder

Food inspectors in Saudi Arabia have discovered the potentially dangerous chemical melamine in Chinese-made milk powder distributed by Nestle in the kingdom, the Saudi Food and Drug Authority said in a statement.

Terrorism Desk

Zawahiri lauds Bali three, slams Saudis

Al-Qaeda number two Ayman Zawahiri paid tribute to three Indonesian Islamists executed last month for the deadly Bali bombings in 2002, in an Internet audio message released yesterday.

Zawahiri also slammed the Saudi royal family, accusing it of working with the United States and Israel against jihadists in the Palestinian territories, Afghanistan and Iraq. He praised the three Bali bombers, saying "they knew the price of their action and they paid it with satisfaction.

Establish international anti-terror center, urges Saudi Cabinet

Saudi Arabia yesterday emphasized the need to establish an international counterterrorism center as quickly as possible in order to strengthen global cooperation and coordination to combat terrorism. The Cabinet meeting, chaired by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah, expressed the need while discussing the terrorist rampage in Mumbai, India's financial capital, which killed and injured hundreds of innocent people."The Council denounced the terrorist attacks in Mumbai and conveyed its condolences to the victims' families as well as to the government and people of India," the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) said.

Qatar

Social Desk

Qatar has low rate of Aids cases: Report

Despite an alarming increase of cases of Human Immunodeficiency Virus/ Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) in the Arab world, Qatar has still a relatively low incidence with 235 cases, according to a report released yesterday by the Qatar National Committee for AIDS Prevention.

Dr Abddul Latif Al Khal, media spokesman of Qatar National Committee for AIDS Prevention, has issued this HIV cases update in Qatar as the international community celebrates today the World AIDS Day.

IR Desk

Qatar's efforts to resolve Darfur crisis lauded

President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso praised Qatar's efforts to resolve the Darfur crisis and reiterated the EU support to the initiative for solving the crisis.

"We support all initiatives that aim to resolve humanitarian crises expressing the hope that this initiative would solve the problem," Barroso said in a press conference held at the Sheraton Hotel on the sidelines of the UN International Conference on Financing for Development.

Global peace cannot be achieved by major powers only: Qatari official

Global peace and stability cannot be achieved by major powers only, just like what it used to be post World War II and the Cold War, Chairman of the Qatari Shoura Council Mohammad Al-Khlaifi said Friday.

His remarks came during an opening speech of a session dedicated for parliamentarians within the framework of the five-day International Business Forum on Development Financing to be officially kicking off tomorrow (Saturday). The forum is titled "Impact of the Financial Crisis: Leveraging Government and Private Sector Resources for Development".

Qatar, in its endeavors to establish a global partnership to finance development, had committed, since 2005, to allocating 0.07 percent of its GDP (Gross Domestic Product) for developmental aid for developing countries and 0.15 percent more for poor countries Al-Khlaifi noted.

Qatari charity seeks to defy Gaza blockade

A Qatari charity said on Monday it plans to ship one tonne of medical aid to the Gaza Strip this week in a bid to defy an Israeli blockade on the tiny Palestinian territory.

International Conference on Financing for Development, Doha

Qatar Emir calls for 'broader' policy

Qatar yesterday said financial sector reforms alone would not be a panacea for the ongoing global financial crisis, calling for a broader and inclusive approach.

Ahead of the UN Doha Conference on Financing and Development, HH the Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani suggested a multilateral approach as the global trade is expected to shrink by 50% in the

coming year, limiting employment and economic growth worldwide. “The solutions to the crisis will not be found in financial reform alone”, but will require an integrated process that recognised the mutual interaction of several interconnected issues in the globalised world,” the Emir told a meeting at the Four Seasons Hotel.

Doha conference outcome to send positive signals to the world

A strong outcome at the Doha conference would send a signal to the global community that leaders will stand together to fight common problems, and take advantage of shared opportunities, a group of committed leaders agreed during a recent meeting here.

The conference was held to discuss how a globally coordinated response to the financial crisis can protect developing countries, underpin drive to a green economy, and stimulate a commitment to a renewed multilateralism on the eve of the Doha Conference to Review the Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus. Leaders agreed to instruct their delegations at Doha to do everything possible to support the final stages of the negotiations on the outcome document.

Iran president urges resistance to 'greedy' capitalism

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Saturday urged the world to resist the "greed" of capitalism and to prevent the rebuilding of the shattered global financial system.

"Capitalism has reached the end and current efforts will not save it, just as the socialist economy came to an end," Ahmadinejad said in a speech to a UN development conference in Doha broadcast on Iranian state television.” We need to resist the greed of global capitalism... and try not to allow the current damaged system to rebuild itself," he told the conference, which is seeking ways to limit the impact on developing countries of the global financial crisis. The outspoken Iranian president, one of only a small number of national leaders at the Qatar gathering, accused Western leaders of seeking to present their own economic crisis as a global problem.

Financial crisis could trigger social unrest, warns UN chief

The global financial crisis has brought an abrupt end to a long era of economic growth, and if not handled properly it could result in social unrest and political instability, according to the United Nations.

Seeking additional emergency financing from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the central banks of the advanced countries, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon suggested a six-point agenda to set the world economy in order. “If not handled, today’s financial crisis will become tomorrow’s human crisis. Social unrest and political instability will grow, exacerbating all other problems,” he said, declaring open the Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development.

Successful development depends mainly on increasing sclaes among partners: Qatar Amir

Successful development depends mainly on increasing its scales among partners in domains of trade and finance, Qatar Amir said on Tuesday.

Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani said in a speech on the occasion of conclusion of the international business forum on financing for development uttered on his behalf by Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Ahmed al Mahmoud that economic peace and security rely on the success of the multi-parties negotiations, proposals and resolutions that would benefit everyone. He urged all participants to consider this matter. The Minister noted that Qatar has fulfilled its commitments by providing 0.07 percent of its national income as development aid, referring to the initiative of Amir Sheikh Hamad for funding development projects in the countries of the South, where he had declared a donation of USD 20 million.

Oman

Human Trafficking

Sharifa stresses Oman role in combating human trafficking

Dr Sharifa bint Khalfan al Yahya'eeya, Minister of Social Development, stressed the Sultanate's continued cooperation with the international community in combating human trafficking and sexual exploitation of children.

Dr Sharifa, who addressed participants attending the opening of the World Congress Against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents, here yesterday referred to Royal Decree No 124/2008 on establishing the Human Rights Committee. The decree was supported further by Royal Decree No 126/2008 on promulgating the Human Trafficking Law.

Oman issues law to fight human trafficking

Oman's sultan has created a law against human trafficking, an official at the royal court said on Wednesday, five months after a U.S. report said the Gulf Arab state was failing to stop 'modern day slavery'.

Under Sultan Qaboos bin Said’s new law, people convicted of human trafficking can now face up to 15 years in prison and a fine of up to 100,000 rials ($ 260,000), the official told Reuters. There was previously no law against human trafficking. Earlier this year, Oman formally protested against a U.S.

State Department report that ranked the sultanate, along with fellow Gulf states Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait, among the worst in failing to combat human trafficking.

IR Desk

Russian official hails Sultan Qaboos meeting outcome

Sergey Mironov, Chairman of the Federation Council of Russia, hailed the outcome of his meeting with His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. He said the meeting was very positive and frank. Sergey Mironov added that he was honoured to meet with His Majesty the Sultan and discuss with him bilateral co-operation.

He said that the Sultanate and Russia have wide and promising opportunities in a number of domains, especially in modern technology and oil and gas exploration. Mironov was addressing the media at Grand Hyatt Hotel yesterday. The Russian official said parliamentary co-operation between the Sultanate and Russia has witnessed remarkable progress. “We have agreed to co-ordinate parliamentary activities between the two countries. Russia is currently finalising an agreement on the avoidance of double taxation with the Sultanate. It started working on a draft agreement for the protection of mutual investments,” he added.

Kuwait

Social Desk

500 Kuwaitis suffer from thalasemia

Kuwait has 500 thalasemia patients who contracted the hereditary disease due to marriages among relatives, press spokesperson of Kuwait Thalassemia Society Lamya' Al-Qabandi said here yesterday.

Kuwaiti bloc presents bill on 'naturalization’

Popular Labor Bloc members MPs Musallam Al-Barrak, Dr Hassan Jowhar, Marzouq Faleh Al-Hubaini, Ali Al-Deqbasi and Abdullah Al-Barghash have presented a draft bill on granting citizenship to Bedouns

(stateless persons), particularly those who sacrificed for the nation, in recognition of their heroic deeds and loyalty to Kuwait.

The first article of the proposed bill stipulates granting citizenship to Bedouns included in the 1965 Census without any security records and with valid DNA test results; those granted nationality by the Naturalization Committee in accordance with the specified naturalization procedures but refused to take on the citizenship due to their belief that they should obtain the Kuwaiti nationality based on origin; those who participated in the Arab wars against Israel in 1967 and 1973, wars of attrition and Liberation War in 1991; prisoners of war (POWs), the injured or children of martyrs; and those involved in special assignments, especially those deployed outside Kuwait through the directive of a military official. Granting citizenship to these categories will be through a decree from the interior minister.

The second article states that the minister of interior shall issue a directive to execute the rules of this law while the third article stipulates that the prime minister and ministers should execute this law. Meanwhile, Al-Barrak has accused the government of delaying procedures to find a radical solution to the problems of Bedouns in Kuwait, confirming the parliamentary Committee for the Affairs of Stateless Persons will submit a comprehensive plan to solve this issue.

IR Desk

S.Korea and Kuwait enjoy strong relations, with emphasis on economy: PM

South Korean Prime Minister Han Seung-soo said Saturday his country and Kuwait had maintained a close cooperative relationship since diplomatic ties were established in 1979, with a strong emphasis on the economic sector.

The Republic of Korea and the State of Kuwait have maintained a close cooperative relationship with a strong emphasis on the economic sector since diplomatic ties were established in 1979," he said in an interview with KUNA, ahead of his Sunday visit to Kuwait.

'Indonesian, Kuwaiti ties deep-rooted, progressing'

Indonesian-Kuwaiti relations are deep-rooted as well as progressing, under leaderships' keenness to bolster ties and exchange of visits to this end, Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia Agung Laksono told KUNA Thursday.

The remark was on the sidelines of the third Conference of the Asian Parliamentary Association meetings which kicked off last night and will last for four days.

Political Desk

Political deadlock puts Kuwait's reforms at risk

A rift between the Kuwaiti Parliament and the government of this oil-rich country over the visit of a controversial Iranian cleric has escalated into yet another political crisis.

On Tuesday, the Kuwaiti cabinet announced its resignation as three legislators prepared to question His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah for allowing the cleric, Sayyid Mohammed Al-Fali, whom they accused of offending Sunnis, to enter the country a few weeks ago. The cleric was previously accused of making derogatory remarks about the Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) companions, whom Sunnis revere.

'MPs have no authority to name next PM or endorse nominees

MPs have no authority to name the next prime minister or endorse nominees for this post but they have the power to hold any official accountable for the errors in his ministry or the government as a whole, MP Ali Al-Deqbasi told the Arab Times Sunday.

'Govt, Parliament to be blamed for current political imbroglio in Kuwait'

Participants of a seminar 'Reading Kuwaiti Political Scenario,' organized by Umbrella for Kuwait Action, Sunday unanimously agreed that both the government and the Parliament are to blame for the current political imbroglio "since neither of them meet the expectations of citizens," reports Al-Seyassah daily.

On the other hand, National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Secretary General Abdulrahman Al-Anjeri said the state's Constitution and democracy are the major problems of Kuwait. He observed that Kuwait has failed to fully practice the presidential or parliamentary system of democracy, adding the Parliament has no solid political parties or blocs. He pointed out all parliamentary blocs have three or four members only, indicating that the Salafists, who claimed to have 18 seats in the National Assembly after the elections, are divided into sub-groups with five or less members each. "Since the Parliament is full of divergent groups, the government is the only coordinated authority, so it should have a clear set of development programs," Al-Anjeri concluded.

Kuwaiti MPs target Dow deal

Opposition MPs yesterday turned their eyes to the $ 7.5-billion deal Kuwait signed with US petrochemicals giant Dow Chemicals, calling on the government to dump the deal. Officials from the state-owned Petrochemicals Industries Co (PIC) a few days ago signed the deal with Dow in London. The deal stipulates that PIC pays $ 7.5 billion to become a 50-percent holder of assets held by the US firm. The initial amount was $ 9.5 billion.

IR Desk

Malaysian Sultan begins Kuwait visit

Malaysia's Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin Ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Mahmud Al-Muktafi Billah Shah arrived in Kuwait yesterday on a three-day official visit, during which he will hold talks with His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah concerning bilateral relations and means of enhancing them in various

fields. Relations between the two countries date as far back as 1974, when Malaysia officially inaugurated its embassy in Kuwait. The Gulf state opened its embassy in Kuala Lumpur in 1981.

Kuwait, Yemen due to sign 10 cooperation accords

The first session of the Yemeni-Kuwaiti committee will be held in Aden on Wednesday, a local official said on Monday. The foreign ministry undersecretary for Arab, African and Asian affairs, Ali Al-Ayashi, said in remarks to KUNA the session would witness the signing of up to 10 cooperation accords.

The accords to be signed stipulate forming the common ministerial commission, coordination between the two foreign ministers, in addition to the signing of protocols for cooperation in the sectors of health, teaching, vocational training and commercial exchange.

Kuwait, Iraq ink marine protocol

Iraq and Kuwait have signed a protocol outlining how their vessels patrol and interact in a joint waterway between their shores in the Arabian Gulf, the US Navy said yesterday. A statement from the 5th Fleet said the document was signed Nov 11 in a Kuwaiti naval base. US Vice Adm Bill Gortney attended the ceremony. Gortney said it was the "first military-to-military protocol" between Iraq and a neighboring country, and a "historic day" for both navies.

Kuwait, Cambodia sign diplomatic agreement

The State of Kuwait and the Kingdom of Cambodia on Thursday signed a bilateral agreement to establish diplomatic missions at both countries.

Defense and Strategy Desk

Kuwait eyes boost in France defense ties

Kuwaiti Army Chief of Staff Air Marshal Fahad Al-Amir said Monday that his visit to Paris was to keep up with the latest field technologies manufactured here, within the framework of the bilateral defense cooperation agreement. Speaking to KUNA, Al-Amir said that accordingly, the two sides “continuously pursue cooperation horizons, especially all that is relevant to the future strategic vision and the exchange of viewpoints over the latest global developments.”

He added that during the visit, which comes in response to an invitation from the French military authorities, he said the Kuwaiti delegation met with the French chief of joint staff and the army, land, air and naval commanders. They also held talks with the military advisor of the French president, as well as officials at the office of the defense minister.

Terrorism Desk

Global, regional collective action vital to fight terror: Kuwaiti MP

A Kuwaiti parliamentary figure urged Asian nations on Saturday to dedicate special attention to deadly hazards of terrorism and affirmed anew necessity of regional-international co-ordination to uproot this peril.

Raja Hujailan Al-Mutairi, the head of the Kuwaiti delegation taking part in the third conference of the Asian Parliamentary Assembly (APA), due to conclude here later today, said in his statement to the conference that terrorist acts in the region warranted well-orchestrated regional and international cooperation to uproot this menace. He criticized some media for repeatedly linking terrorism with Islam, this heavenly religion that calls for peaceful co-existene, tolerance, renunciation of violence and prohibits terrorizing civilians and innocent people.

Crime against humanity, Islam: Kuwait's Deputy PM

Kuwait's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah condemned Friday the attacks in the Indian commercial city, Mumbai, and said they were “crimes against humanity and Islam.” “If those (who carried out the attacks) **claim they did what they do in the name of Islam then Islam is better without them, We as Muslims strongly condemn this act and we have expressed our sympathies to the Indian authorities**,” Sheikh Mohammad told reporters after receiving Kuwaitis who returned home after they were released from a hostage-taking ordeal in a hotel in Mumbai.

Bahrain

Social Desk

Bahrain grants citizenship to 7,102 people

Bahrain has naturalised 7,012 persons in the last five years, according to latest information released by the government. Asians topped the list with 3,599 individuals being given Bahraini passport, followed with 2,240 Arabs, 1,095 GCC citizens and 78 from various countries.

Only 4,828 now jobless in Bahrain

The rate of unemployment in Bahrain stood at 3.3 per cent last month, Labour Minister Dr Majeed Al Alawi said yesterday. Figures released yesterday show 4,828 jobless Bahrainis out of a workforce of 145,000.

Unemployed Bahraini women make up a major bulk of 85.1pc, at 4,110, compared to 718 men. The number of jobseekers receiving unemployment aid under the National Insurance Scheme fell to 2,222, down from 2,656 in last October.

Bahrain dismisses SMS warning as baseless

The ministry of interior has dismissed as baseless a mobile SMS message being circulated in Bahrain asking people to avoid visiting certain places in the kingdom in the next three days. The areas included shopping malls and villages that are crowded with people, especially during holidays.

IR Desk

King Hamad historic visit to bolster Russia ties

His Majesty King Hamad's forthcoming visit to Russia has been hailed as a significant move to further improve bilateral trade, investment opportunities and cultural exchange.

Bahrain and Russia have much in common, based on the keenness of the leadership of both countries to further upgrade the lives of their citizens, said Russian Ambassador Victor Smirnov. "It is not by chance that the strategic ideas for development in both countries were formulated in similar documents - Agenda 2020 for Russia and Vision 2030 for Bahrain," he said. " Several key memorandums of understanding will be signed during the two-day visit to bolster co-operation in the finance, economy and trade sectors, among others. Mr Smirnov said that meetings in Moscow would also exchange views on the consequences of the world financial economic crisis. "It will also be very interesting to co-ordinate positions in the participation of our countries in the United Nations' activities, the role of the cultural and religious dialogue in today's world, human rights situations, arms control and peaceful use of nuclear energy. Talks will also cover efforts to combat terrorism, developments in the Middle East and regional security in the Gulf, he added.

King Hamad hails Russia ties

His Majesty King Hamad yesterday received Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry president Yevgeny Primakov at his residence in the Russia capital.

He lauded the strength of Bahraini-Russian ties and efforts by the chamber to boost trade and open up new avenues of bilateral investment.

Japan push to strengthen ties with Bahrain

Bi lateral relations between Bahrain and Japan could be set to reach record levels, it was revealed yesterday.

Japanese Ambassador Takeshi Kondo said the landmark visit of Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa to Tokyo in October was a significant factor in improving relations between both countries.

Manama Dialogue to discuss security issues

Top regional and international security issues will top the agenda of the 5th Regional Security Summit, the Manama Dialogue, to be held on December 12-14 in Bahrain.

Organised by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the summit will bring together 23 government delegations led by more than 24 prime ministers, defence ministers, national security advisers, chiefs of intelligence and other senior officials from the Gulf region and the wider security community.

Human Rights Desk

Bahrain set to join rights council group

Bahrain was yesterday nominated for membership to the Human Rights Council's working group on situations.

The nomination comes with the active support of Asian countries on the council, Bahrain's Ambassador and permanent representative to the UN Office in Geneva, Abdulla Abdullatif Abdulla, said. "The Asian

group has endorsed Bahrain as its representative to the group after both China and the Korea withdrew their candidatures," he told the GDN, speaking from Geneva.

Human rights vow by Bahrain

Bahrain affirmed its commitment to and respect for the UN Declaration of Human Rights and its efforts towards its implementation yesterday.

The country, under the guidance of its leadership, will continue in its path to respect human rights in line with its constitution, legislation and political will, said Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr Nazar Al Baharna on the occasion of International Human Rights Day.

Nuclear Energy Desk

Russia, Bahrain to cooperate in peaceful nuclear energy: Medvedev

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said Tuesday Moscow and Manama would initiate energy cooperation and noted that both sides signed a joint declaration to boost bilateral relations.

Medvedev, at a joint news conference with visiting King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, said they discussed the execution of mega projects and development of infrastructure in Bahrain. He said there were wide horizons to develop peaceful nuclear energy cooperation. Medvedev and King Hamad discussed ways of finding peaceful solutions for the conflicts in the Middle East and maintaining stability in the Gulf region, he said.

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

SOUTH EAST ASIA

Tatheer Zahra Sherazi

Monitoring Report

From 28 Nov to 5 December

Presentation: December 10, 2008

Indonesia
Political Front

- Thousands of Papuans rally for independence from Indonesia
- Indonesia offers to host Asean meetings

Strategic Front
Economic Front

- Secluded Indonesian Tribe Unaffected By Global Crisis
- Indonesian vice president calls for rate cuts
- Indonesian, Kuwaiti ties deep-rooted, progressing'

Social Front.

- Al-Qaeda's Zawahri praises executed Bali bombers.
- UN Reports Increase in HIV Infection Among Indonesians
- Potential for another large earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, say scientists
- Indonesia Muslim leader plays down radical threat
- Indonesia conducts study on yoga before issuing fatwa

Environmental Front

- Indonesia eyes regional role with tsunami warning system
- *Climate Change Could Destroy Vast Forests, Report Warns*

- Malaysia

Political front:

- *Malaysia's government faces critical by-election test*
- *Parliament in Brief: 'Illegals to stay illegal'*

Economic Front

- *Economic growth in hands of all Malaysians, says PM*
- *PM warns of threat to energy supply*
- EU ends biofuel battle, nears green energy deal
- Racial discord continues to bite in Malaysia

Social Front

- *Thai unrest: Last 80 Malaysians to return today*
- *ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR: In Sarawak, Anwar sees a chance for redemption*
- Syed Hamid: No Malaysian link in attack(social,pol)
- HIV cases on the rise in Malaysia, says UN coordinator

Environmental Front

- Philippine

Political front:

- Filipino rebels say talks unlikely under Arroyo
- Army chief tells soldiers to remain loyal to Arroyo
- Mindanao fears peace monitor exit
- Manila can resist crisis, says Arroyo
- Manila seeks to resume talks with insurgents
- Obama May Pick First Black U.S. Envoy to the Philippines

Economic Front

- Economists agreed that the Philippines was bearing up relatively well to global financial turmoil but did not necessarily credit the government.

Social Front

- WFP to strengthen its food security program in Mindanao

- Filipino rebel leader arrested
- Government agencies, NGOs to provide 'pabaon' to displaced families returning home in Lanao del Norte
- 71 days at the mercy of Somali pirates
- *Flood round-up: Numbers drop despite heavy rains*

Environmental Front

- Thailand

Political Social Front

- An intractable crisis in Thailand
- Thai airports to reopen after prime minister ousted by court
- Thai PM declares state of emergency
- Bangkok is watching nervously. The streets are deserted and people are exchanging coup rumours

- Tension grows over Thai blockade
- Thai PM says he will keep his job

Economic Front

Environmental Front

- Singapore

Political front:

Economic Front

- Oil and gas sector remains promising despite economic slowdown
- SMEs say strong branding can help firms during tough times
- MM Lee confident US can revive economy
- Asia is still a dynamic region, says PM Lee
- Flights between Bangkok and Singapore resume
- Six foreign law firms to be issued licences to practise in Singapore

Social Front

- MOH expects total number of HIV cases in 2008 to exceed 2007 figure
- Public advised to remain vigilant against crime during festive season
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- PM Lee says S'pore, Johor can be one centre of vitality and growth

Environmental Front

- Vietnam

Political front:

Bilateral

- Vietnam, Laos intensify legal cooperation
- Vietnam, Cambodia sign agreement on culture
- Vietnam, Japan move towards strategic partnership

Economic Front

- 'Perfect storm' challenges for Vietnam
- Vietnam, Laos enhance cross-border trade
- Vietnam in global top ten of disaster-hit nations in 2007

Social Front

Environmental Front

- Massive investments in climate change-proof irrigation
- Laos

Political front

- PM proposes raising more money to National Assembly
- This draft law is likely to be passed by the cabinet and it will then be debated by the National Assembly next year. NA debates law on plant quarantine

Economic Front

- Vietnam-Laos rapport improves over time
- Global Logistic donates 16 transport trucks to Lao government

Social Front

- Malaysia gives donation to aid flood victims
- RoK company funds road construction in Laos
- PRP to spend 1.7 billion kip on infrastructure construction

Environmental Front

- Laos and Sweden better environment manage
- Cambodia

Political Front

- Govt critics question use of donor aid at annual meeting(eco)

Economic Front

- Fears of instability leading Thais to hoard Cambodian farm products
- New Chinese delegation arrives for economic talks
- China pledges $215m in loans and grants at public-private talks
- Underpowered energy sector shifts up a gear

Summary

In this week situation of whole region was same like the previous week. Same matters are going on with little new changes. At political front Situation of Thailand is same but with a little progress that protesters have left the blockade of air port.PM of Thailand is holding the same belief to not leave the job .There is no progress in talks between Thailand and Cambodia this week. At economic front Vietnam is still attractive many countries of not only its own region but also for other regions. There is a lot of progress among the bilateral relations on indo china.

Attacks in India again giving an opportunity to foster war against terrorism and it is been said that there is possibility of linkage of Bali bombers (members of Al-Qaeda) with these bombers. Also execution of Bali bombers is condemned by Zarkawi in a video tape statement.

In Malaysia many political and racial issues are going on like the previous weeks. An important news regarding ASEAN is that its meeting venue has been changed from Thailand to Indonesia.

There is also progress in Mindanao case that government is ready to resume the peace talks with Muslims of southern Area.

The summary of news item is as follows:

Indonesia

Political Front

- **Thousands of Papuans rally for independence from Indonesia**

Protesters hold Papua's provincial flag during a rally at Papua province yesterday SENTANI,

- **Indonesia offers to host Asean meetings**

Indonesia has offered to step in to host some Southeast Asian ministerial meetings due to be held next month in Thailand because of the political crisis in its neighbor, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said yesterday.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **Secluded Indonesian Tribe Unaffected By Global Crisis**

An animistic tribe dwelling high in the abundant hills of western Java lives oblivious to the world economic crisis. Estimated to include somewhere between 5,000-8,000 people, the Baduy are an anomaly. While their tribal lands are located only 75 miles from the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, the Baduy live in almost total seclusion from the modern world, observing customs that forbid soap, wearing shoes and driving vehicles.

- **Indonesian vice president calls for rate cuts**

Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla said on Friday he hoped the country's central bank would cut interest rates to help stimulate the economy. Bank Indonesia, the country's central bank, is due to review its rate policy next Thursday.

- **Indonesian, Kuwaiti ties deep-rooted, progressing'**

Indonesian-Kuwaiti relations are deep-rooted as well as progressing, under leaderships' keenness to bolster ties and exchange of visits to this end, Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia Agung Laksono told KUNA Thursday.

Social Front.

- **Al-Qaeda's Zawahri praises executed Bali bombers**

Al-Qaeda's No. 2 leader has praised the three Bali bombers recently executed in Indonesia and criticized Saudi and other Arab leaders for participating in a UN interfaith conference. The 22-minute recording is al-Zawahri's third in less than two weeks.

Ayman al-Zawahri says in an audio recording posted Monday on an Islamic Web site that Indonesia and other governments in the Islamic world are protecting the interests of the Crusaders and the Jews and preventing Muslims from joining the jihad against them.

- **UN Reports Increase in HIV Infection Among Indonesians**

While some Asian nations have managed to slow or even arrest the rate of new HIV infections, Indonesia is struggling to contain an epidemic. The United Nations estimates that as many as 270,000 Indonesians are living with the disease and most do not know it. Katie Hamann reports from Jakarta.

Jacky Maharja and his friends have retreated to the hills above the Jakarta for a weekend away from traffic jams, pollution and their very private battles with HIV.

- **Potential for another large earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, say scientists**

Recent large Sumatran earthquakes have not relieved all the tectonic strain that has accumulated in the past two centuriesThree great earthquakes and destructive tsunamis over the past four years is not enough to spare the region of another large earthquake, warns an international group of earthquake researchers in their paper published in the 4 December issue of the journal Nature.

- **Indonesia Muslim leader plays down radical threat**

The head of Indonesia's second-biggest Muslim group said on Wednesday he did not think radical Islam was gaining ground in the Southeast Asian nation, but warned factors such as poverty could help it spread.

- **Indonesia conducts study on yoga before issuing fatwa**

Indonesia's top Islamic body is conducting a two-month study on yoga to determine if it is permissible for Indonesian Muslims to practise it. The study came about after Malaysia's religious authority issued a fatwa banning Muslims from practising yoga. But she needs to convince the country's top Islamic authority, who suspects the ancient practise may have elements not permissible in Islam.

Environmental Front

- **Indonesia eyes regional role with tsunami warning system**

Indian Ocean earthquakes off the country's coast occur along the Sunda Arc — a subduction zone where one tectonic plate slips under another — which extends from Sumatra in the west to Flores in the east.

- ***Climate Change Could Destroy Vast Forests, Report Warns***

Without immediate concerted action by governments, climate change could have a devastating effect on the world's forests and the nearly one billion people who depend on them for their

livelihoods, warned forest scientists in a report to be released next week at the UN climate conference in Poland.

• Malaysia

Political front:

- ***Malaysia's government faces critical by-election test***

Malaysia's coalition government faces a by-election in January which analysts say will be a critical test of public reaction to its reform promises after disastrous polls in March.

- ***Parliament in Brief: 'Illegals to stay illegal'***

THE government will not change the status of illegal immigrants, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Chor Chee Heung said yesterday. "Foreign workers must enter the country legally," he said when replying to a question by Mohd Nor Othman (BN-Hulu Terengganu).

- **Umno and Pas to decide on their candidates soon (Task work)**

Umno and Pas are expected to submit names of shortlisted candidates for the Kuala Terengganu by-election to their respective party heads by the end of next week.

Sources said the Umno management committee, chaired by party deputy president Datuk Seri Najib Razak, is expected to meet soon to discuss the selection before getting the endorsement from party president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Economic Front

- ***Economic growth in hands of all Malaysians, says PM***

Maintaining economic growth is the responsibility of all, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said yesterday.

- ***PM warns of threat to energy supply***

The world could be in for another oil price shock in the future as a result of under-investment in the oil and gas industry, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

- **EU ends biofuel battle, nears green energy deal**

The European Union is on the verge of a deal to boost renewable energy after resolving a battle over the controversial issue of biofuels on Thursday, but Italy's demand for a review in 2014 prevented a final agreement.

- **Racial discord continues to bite in Malaysia**

I'm currently in the sleepy river-side city of Kuching in Malaysian Borneo, enjoying a much-needed escape from the ardours of life in Singapore. But, while on the face of it, all seems well in the state of Sarawak, which is one of the most ethnically diverse parts of Malaysia, underneath the surface, the racial tensions are all too evident.

Social Front

- ***Thai unrest: Last 80 Malaysians to return today***

Almost all stranded Malaysians have returned home safely a week after Thailand's two major airports were closed down by anti-government protesters.

- ***ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR: In Sarawak, Anwar sees a chance for redemption***

With Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim setting his sights on exploiting an apparently growing dissatisfaction with Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud's leadership, the possibility of ending Barisan National rule in the Land of the Hornbill cannot be dismissed.

- **Syed Hamid: No Malaysian link in attack(social,pol)**

Malaysia has no link with the militants who attacked Mumbai and left at least 150 people dead, said Home Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

- **HIV cases on the rise in Malaysia, says UN coordinator**

Malaysia is suffering a setback in achieving the United Nations (UN) Millenium Development Goal (MDG) to eradicate the HIV/AIDS virus.UN resident coordinator (Malaysia) Kamal Malhotra said the number of HIV infected people was increasing with the case reported since 1986 reaching 82,704 as of June.

Environmental Front

• Philippine

Political front:

- **Filipino rebels say talks unlikely under Arroyo**

Communist guerrillas said Tuesday they are highly unlikely to resume peace talks with the Philippine government after the latest attempt to break a negotiating impasse failed.

- **Army chief tells soldiers to remain loyal to Arroyo**

An inspection of troops in Fort Bonifacio, Taguig city, Metro Manila, yesterday. The Philippines assembled hundreds of soldiers and dozens of armoured vehicles in five key military bases in the capital yesterday, assessing preparedness of troops against attacks and protest similar to Mumbai and Bangkok

- **Mindanao fears peace monitor exit**

Both fighters and civilians in the Philippines have expressed concern about the withdrawal of international peace monitors from the restive south.

Peace talks collapsed, and fighting resumed, after the Supreme Court blocked a peace deal in August.

- **Manila can resist crisis, says Arroyo**

The Philippines is weathering the global financial crisis better than many economies, but the government is monitoring the effect of inflation and falling growth on the country's poor to see what further poverty-alleviation measures might be needed, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, the president, said.

- **Manila seeks to resume talks with insurgents**

The Philippines yesterday began to rebuild a peace panel it dissolved nearly three months ago, naming its chief negotiator, and officials said they hope to resume talks with the country's largest Muslim rebel group soon.

- **Obama May Pick First Black U.S. Envoy to the Philippines**

Diplomatic sources recently stated that President-elect Obama has picked career diplomat Harry K. Thomas Jr. as the next ambassador to Manila. Thomas is set to replace current U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines, Kristie Kenney, who also made history as its first female ambassador.

Economic Front

- **Economists agreed that the Philippines was bearing up relatively well to global financial turmoil but did not necessarily credit the government.**

Economists agreed that the Philippines was bearing up relatively well to global financial turmoil but did not necessarily credit the government. "The Philippine economic ship is safe from the storm because it never left the port in the first place," said Felipe Medalla, an economics professor at the University of the Philippines and a former government planning chief.

Social Front

- **WFP to strengthen its food security program in Mindanao**

The World Food Program (WFP) of the United Nations (UN) has committed to strengthen its food security program in areas in Mindanao that have been affected by the recent armed skirmishes between the military and Moro rebels.

- **Filipino rebel leader arrested**

POLICE said on Thursday they have arrested a wanted senior communist guerrilla leader who operated in the northern Philippines.

- **Government agencies, NGOs to provide 'pabaon' to displaced families returning home in Lanao del Norte**

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Region 10 will be giving away food packs or "pabaon" good for a month of consumption consisting of kilos of rice, noodles, canned goods and milk to the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Munai town, Lanao del Norte province who are returning to their homes beginning December 4.

- **71 days at the mercy of Somali pirates**

The crew of a Philippines ship released by Somali pirates knelt down and prayed, then told of their two months of torment.MV Centauri, with 26 crew members, docked in Mombasa on Tuesday night and was immediately surrounded by Kenyan security agents who took over investigations.

- ***Flood round-up: Numbers drop despite heavy rains***

Despite experiencing heavy rain yesterday, the number of evacuees at flood relief centres in the state's five districts dropped from 2,190 to 1,446.

Environmental Front

• Thailand

Political Social Front

- **An intractable crisis in Thailand**

Thailand was on Thursday night waiting on the word of its 81-year-old king to discover how it could extricate itself from an increasingly farcical political impasse. But King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who had been expected to speak on the occasion of his birthday, was silent.

- **Thai airports to reopen after prime minister ousted by court**

Anti-government demonstrators in Thailand declared victory Tuesday and said they will end their occupation of the country's two main airports after a court decision forced the country's prime minister from office.

- **Thai PM declares state of emergency**

Thailand's prime minister has declared a state of emergency in the areas surrounding two airports in Bangkok, clearing the way for security forces to move in and eject thousands of anti-government protesters who have taken over the facilities.

- **Bangkok is watching nervously. The streets are deserted and people are exchanging coup rumours**

General Anupong Paojinda, head of the army, has repeatedly said he does not want to mount a coup because he believes that it would do little to solve the underlying problems that gave rise to the current stand-off.

- **Tension grows over Thai blockade**

Tension is growing in the Thai capital Bangkok as thousands of anti-government protesters occupy the city's two main airports for a seventh day.

Police said they were negotiating with the group as experts warned of soaring economic losses from the blockade. Some 100,000 passengers remain stranded in Bangkok while efforts are being made to find alternative airports.

- **Thai PM says he will keep his job**

Somchai Wongsawat says he will remain as Thailand's prime minister and that he will use gentle measures against protesters.

Economic Front

Environmental Front

• Singapore

Political front:

Economic Front

- **Oil and gas sector remains promising despite economic slowdown**

The oil and gas industry remains promising in the long run despite the current global economic slowdown, according to Singapore's Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry S Iswaran.

- **SMEs say strong branding can help firms during tough times**

Small- and medium-sized businesses in Singapore have said that they do not plan to cut their budget for branding, despite the current downturn. That is because they believe their brand name will go some way in helping them during these tough times.

- **MM Lee confident US can revive economy**

Former US president Bill Clinton kicked off his first charitable conference abroad in Hong Kong on Tuesday.

- **Asia is still a dynamic region, says PM Lee**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said it is crucial to look beyond the financial storm as it will pass. Speaking to members of Singapore's Foreign Correspondents Association in a wide-ranging discussion on Friday, he said the Depression of the 1930s is not on the cards and Asia is still dynamic.

- **Flights between Bangkok and Singapore resume**

Flights out of Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International airport have resumed. Passengers who flew in from the Thai capital said the situation there is stable. But for some, it was an experience they would not want to repeat.

- **Six foreign law firms to be issued licences to practise in Singapore**

Singapore is issuing licences to six foreign law firms to set up offices and practise law here. The move is part of the government's plan to liberalise the legal sector through the Qualifying Foreign Law Practice scheme.

Social Front

- **MOH expects total number of HIV cases in 2008 to exceed 2007 figure**

The Health Ministry (MOH) said the total number of HIV cases for the whole of this year will exceed that of last year. In the first ten months of 2008, there were 382 new HIV cases reported among Singapore residents. In comparison, 423 HIV cases were recorded for the whole of 2007.

- **Public advised to remain vigilant against crime during festive season**

With the festive season just round the corner, the police are advising the public to remain vigilant against crime.

- **Public advised to remain vigilant against crime during festive season**

With the festive season just round the corner, the police are advising the public to remain vigilant against crime. The police say shoppers should avoid exposing cash, valuables and jewellery when shopping in crowded areas.

- **PM Lee says S'pore, Johor can be one centre of vitality and growth**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the Iskandar Development Region (IDR) in the southern Malaysian state of Johor may pose a challenge to Singapore, but there is always room to work together.

Environmental Front

• Vietnam

Political front:

Bilateral

- **Vietnam, Laos intensify legal cooperation**

Minister of Justice Ha Hung Cuong held talks with his Lao counterpart Chaleuan Yapaoher in Hanoi on Nov. 29 to discuss legal and judicial cooperation between the two ministries.Legal and judicial reform was also high on agenda of the visit. The two sides exchanged views on issues such as training, nationality, verdict execution and exchanges of experts and legal documents.

- **Vietnam, Cambodia sign agreement on culture**

Vietnam and Cambodia will step up high-ranking delegation exchanges and organise cultural days in both countries.

- **Vietnam, Japan move towards strategic partnership**

The Japanese Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City Ikuo Mizuki said he is optimistic

about the prospects for his country's ties with Vietnam , which have moved comprehensively towards the establishment of a strategic partnership.

Economic Front

- **'Perfect storm' challenges for Vietnam**

Worried foreign business groups warned yesterday that Vietnam, a darling of foreign investors until a year ago, now faces 'a perfect storm' of challenges amid the global economic turmoil.

- **Vietnam, Laos enhance cross-border trade**

Vietnamese and Lao trade officials have discussed measures to promote trade in the two countries' border areas, thus contributing to meeting their target of 1 billion USD in two-way trade turnover by 2010.

- **Vietnam in global top ten of disaster-hit nations in 2007**

Vietnam ranks eighth out of the world's top ten countries that suffered the most from natural disasters in 2007, according to a report announced during the 14 th UN meeting on climate change in Pozan, Poland.

Social Front

Environmental Front

- **Massive investments in climate change-proof irrigation**

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) has estimated a budget of 1 trillion VND (roughly 58.8 million USD) up to 2010 to develop an irrigation system adaptable to global climate change. MARD said from now to 2015, almost one-third of the amount or 300 billion VND will be located for research on possible impact of global climate change upon national agriculture and the countryside.

• Laos

Political front

- **PM proposes raising more money to National Assembly**

Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh proposed that the National Assembly approves the budget expense plan of the government to enable her to carry out various works during the new fiscal year, 2008-2009.

- **This draft law is likely to be passed by the cabinet and it will then be debated by the National Assembly next year. NA debates law on plant quarantine**

Law makers shared points of views on the newly drafted law on plant quarantine yesterday.

Economic Front

- **Vietnam-Laos rapport improves over time**

History proves that the exemplary Vietnam-Laos relations fostered throughout unique historical challenges have laid a firm foundation for the two countries' continued solidarity and mutual assistance. This was quoted by Vietnam News Agency on 28 November.

- **Global Logistic donates 16 transport trucks to Lao government**

The Global Logistic of Japan donated 16 transport trucks to the Ministry of Public Works and Transport and this is part of its contribution to the socio-economic development of Laos.

Social Front

- **Malaysia gives donation to aid flood victims**

The Government of Malaysia has agreed to contribute USD50,000 to the Government of the Lao PDR to assist in overcoming the problems and needs arising from the massive flood in August

2008, according to a press release from Malaysian Embassy on 28 November.

RoK company funds road construction in Laos

A company from the Republic of Korea has pledged to fund the construction of a road in Sanasomboun district, Champassak province.

- **PRP to spend 1.7 billion kip on infrastructure construction**

The Poverty Reduction Programme is planning to spend 1.7 billion kip on the construction of infrastructure and organizing vocational training courses for local authorities in community of Champassak province. .

Environmental Front

- **Laos and Sweden better environment manage**

The Water Resource and Environment Administration held its annual review meeting on Strengthening Environment Management Project (Phase II) in 2007-2008 in Vientiane yesterday.

• Cambodia

Political Front

- **Govt critics question use of donor aid at annual meeting(eco)**

With Cambodia expected to reap a windfall in foreign assistance, the opposition says 'beggar mentality' will persist

Economic Front

- **Fears of instability leading Thais to hoard Cambodian farm products**

Despite surging Thai demand for agricultural goods, Cambodian farmers are still struggling with low prices for produce like corn

THAI businesses are clamoring to buy up Cambodia's agricultural stocks as civil unrest in Bangkok threatens to disrupt their ability to import in the future, business people on

- **New Chinese delegation arrives for economic talks**

200-strong government-business delegation an indication of increasing Chinese involvement in the Cambodian economy

- **China pledges $215m in loans and grants at public-private talks**

Fund package offered by Chinese officials in Beijing last month to boost construction, education, health and tourism sectors

- **Underpowered energy sector shifts up a gear**

After suffering heavy damage during decades of civil strife, Cambodia's power supply facilities have been significantly improved since the war years, with support from international aid and foreign-funded private sector projects.

Detailed Monitoring Report

Indonesia

Political Front

- **Thousands of Papuans rally for independence from Indonesia**

Protesters hold Papua's provincial flag during a rally at Papua province yesterday SENTANI,

Thousands of people rallied in Indonesia's far eastern Papua province yesterday calling for independence from Jakarta and control over the region's rich natural resources. The protests in several Papua districts mark the anniversary of a declaration of independence 47 years ago, before the area was incorporated into Indonesia in a disputed referendum.

The crowd, some wearing traditional dress and their faces painted with separatist flags, shouted independence slogans in Sentani, an area near the provincial capital of Jayapura.

In the western district of Nabire in Papua, a bigger crowd of several thousand also gathered, while a few hundred protesters rallied in the Indonesian capital Jakarta. Separatist groups have stepped up protests in Papua in recent months. There have also been several small bomb blasts, including at an airport in Papua and near a copper mine run by US mining firm Freeport Mcmoran Copper and Gold Inc.

Papua, which occupies the western half of New Guinea island, was under Dutch colonial rule until 1963, when Indonesia took over. Jakarta formalised its rule in 1969 in a vote by community leaders which was widely criticised as flawed.

- **Indonesia offers to host Asean meetings**

Indonesia has offered to step in to host some Southeast Asian ministerial meetings due to be held next month in Thailand because of the political crisis in its neighbor, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said yesterday.

Thailand has said a final decision on the December 13-17 Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean) and East Asian meetings is due today, a week after anti-government protesters first blockaded Bangkok's international airport.

Indonesia and Asean Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan were offering to hold the foreign ministers' meeting of the 10-member Southeast Asian bloc and three East Asian dialogue partners in the Asean Secretariat offices in Jakarta, Yudhoyono said.

There are concerns that delays could complicate bringing the Asean Charter, which aims to set up a political, economic and social bloc of half a billion people, into force in mid December. Asean comprises the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. The venue for the Asean summit was moved to the northern city of Chiang Mai, far away from the PAD's Bangkok base, well before this week's protests. But the chaos in Bangkok has put pressure on Asean to seek a postponement

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **Secluded Indonesian Tribe Unaffected By Global Crisis**

An animistic tribe dwelling high in the abundant hills of western Java lives oblivious to the world economic crisis. Estimated to include somewhere between 5,000-8,000 people, the Baduy are an anomaly. While their tribal lands are located only 75 miles from the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, the Baduy live in almost total seclusion from the modern world, observing customs that forbid soap, wearing shoes and driving vehicles.

Within a 20 square mile area in the shadow of Mt. Kendeng, the Baduy people cling to their reclusive lifestyle despite the temptations of the modern world that so closely surrounds them.Although their origin is unknown, some anthropologists believe the Baduy are descendents

of the West Java Hindu kingdom of Pajajaran, and fled to the limestone hills where they now live after resisting conversion to Islam in the 16th century.

While their way of life appears primitive, experts who have studied the tribe's farming methods say they are well adjusted to their environment. For instance, metal hoes are forbidden when cultivating rice in order to prevent soil erosion.

Those who break the rules are banished to the outer region and must wear black, while the roughly 40 families in the sacred inner zone dress in white and follow the Baduy traditions much more strictly. Historically, the Baduy have been left to their own devices by colonizers from the Dutch to the Japanese, although authorities have at times tried to include the tribe in mainstream society.When Indonesia's long-time powerful president Suharto tried to impose development on the Baduy during the 1980s, the tribe sent an emissary to plead to be left alone.

- **Indonesian vice president calls for rate cuts**

Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla said on Friday he hoped the country's central bank would cut interest rates to help stimulate the economy. Bank Indonesia, the country's central bank, is due to review its rate policy next Thursday.

- **Indonesian, Kuwaiti ties deep-rooted, progressing'**

Indonesian-Kuwaiti relations are deep-rooted as well as progressing, under leaderships' keenness to bolster ties and exchange of visits to this end, Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia Agung Laksono told KUNA Thursday.

The remark was on the sidelines of the third Conference of the Asian Parliamentary Association meetings which kicked off last night and will last for four days.

The speaker praised Kuwait's keenness on attending the venue, represented by MPs Rija Al-Mutairi and Ahmad Ashour. The state is always seen most active at such venues and wherever action was needed to support Asian cooperation, he noted.

On the economic dossier, the official remarked there is need for more consolidated and coordinated action to counter increasing challenge, most recently the global financial crisis.The speaker stressed Asian economies are gaining prominence on the global scene, marking out China, India, and Indonesia which are by now influential players in the market. These economies, he added, could play a role in forging a new global economic order. Their presence at the G-20 meetings recently is "most telling," he stressed.

As for the Jakarta Declaration, the speaker said he hopes it would yield practical and flexible recommendations to counter the current financial crisis. Most sessions and discussions, he added, were allocated for review of impact of the global crisis.

Back to Kuwait, the Indonesia speaker praised the state's humanitarian support and its rush to join relief efforts at times of need, citing the 2004 tsunami disaster as an example.

Social Front.

- **Al-Qaeda's Zawahri praises executed Bali bombers**

Al-Qaeda's No. 2 leader has praised the three Bali bombers recently executed in Indonesia and criticized Saudi and other Arab leaders for participating in a UN interfaith conference. The 22-minute recording is al-Zawahri's third in less than two weeks.

Ayman al-Zawahri says in an audio recording posted Monday on an Islamic Web site that Indonesia and other governments in the Islamic world are protecting the interests of the Crusaders and the Jews and preventing Muslims from joining the jihad against them.

- **UN Reports Increase in HIV Infection Among Indonesians**

While some Asian nations have managed to slow or even arrest the rate of new HIV infections, Indonesia is struggling to contain an epidemic. The United Nations estimates that as many as 270,000 Indonesians are living with the disease and most do not know it. Katie Hamann reports from Jakarta.

Jacky Maharja and his friends have retreated to the hills above the Jakarta for a weekend away from traffic jams, pollution and their very private battles with HIV.

The government's response has improved since a presidential decree in 2006 established the National AIDS Commission and focused efforts on prevention. But AIDS activists say a lack of money and political will as well as the challenge of reaching communities across the archipelago hamper prevention and treatment programs.Supplies of anti-retroviral drugs used to treat HIV patients regularly dry up because of distribution problems and limited funding.

International health experts say condoms remain the single most effective means of preventing the spread of HIV. However, Indonesia's religious leaders resist efforts to get people to use condoms, exacerbating an existing culture of disdain for their use.

Todd Callahan is the country director for DKT, a nonprofit organization that works on HIV and AIDS prevention and is a major condom distributor. He says funding must be directed toward public education about condom use.In Papua, the HIV prevalence rate is 20 times the national average, with as many as 75,000 victims, out of a population of 2.5 million.

A thriving prostitution industry there patronized by migrant workers means the virus is being carried to their home villages, where women and babies are being infected. AIDS activists say educating those migrant workers about the disease and condom use could reduce those new infections

- **Potential for another large earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, say scientists**

Recent large Sumatran earthquakes have not relieved all the tectonic strain that has accumulated in the past two centuriesThree great earthquakes and destructive tsunamis over the past four years is not enough to spare the region of another large earthquake, warns an international group of earthquake researchers in their paper published in the 4 December issue of the journal Nature.

The first of the recent great earthquakes, a magnitude 9.2 in December 2004, produced the most widespread and destructive tsunami in living memory. The cause of that calamity was the rupture of a 1600-km-long piece of the Sunda megathrust, a 6,000-km-long active fault that dives gently landward from the seafloor a couple hundred kilometers offshore of Myanmar, Sumatra, Java,

and Bali. The section that broke in 2004 is a northern portion, between southernmost Myanmar and Aceh province in Sumatra.

Only three months later, the next section to the south, offshore Aceh and North Sumatra, also ruptured suddenly. That 350-km portion, just north of the Equator, produced a magnitude 8.7 earthquake and a more modest tsunami.

- **Indonesia Muslim leader plays down radical threat**

The head of Indonesia's second-biggest Muslim group said on Wednesday he did not think radical Islam was gaining ground in the Southeast Asian nation, but warned factors such as poverty could help it spread.Most Muslims in Indonesia are moderate, although there is a vocal radical fringe and the country has also suffered deadly bomb attacks blamed on the militant Jemaah Islamiah group.

Muhammadiyah claims a membership of 35 million and Syamsuddin said he had been approached by a number of parties to be a possible candidate in presidential elections next year.The 50-year-old said his candidacy would depend on getting the backing of the other leaders in Muhammadiyah, adding he would consider standing as either a vice president or presidential candidate with a like-minded running mate.

He declined to say what political party he might consider tying up with, although media reports have linked him with the PDI-P party of former president Megawati Sukarnoputri.Megawati is seen as one of the main threats to current President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono winning a second term.Referring to the recent passage of a controversial anti-pornography law, he said some hardline groups had incorrectly associated the bill just with Islamic teachings..

- **Indonesia conducts study on yoga before issuing fatwa**

Indonesia's top Islamic body is conducting a two-month study on yoga to determine if it is permissible for Indonesian Muslims to practise it. The study came about after Malaysia's religious authority issued a fatwa banning Muslims from practising yoga. But she needs to convince the country's top Islamic authority, who suspects the ancient practise may have elements not permissible in Islam.

'For example, they have to do certain movements as a form of praying to something. Or maybe in its meditation they have to free their mind from Allah. As Muslims we are not allowed to do that. We will find out if these happen," said the head of Fatwa Commission at Indonesia's Ulama Council, M.Anwar Ibrahim. Yoga has been practised in Indonesia for years, but this is the first time the religious body is carrying out such an extensive study.
Dr Anwar said: "Queries have surfaced only recently. Maybe they were influenced by (the) development in Malaysia where we heard that it has issued a fatwa banning yoga." The move has received mixed reactions from the yoga fraternity in Indonesia -- Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Another yoga enthusiast, Tonny Sufami, said: "I can accept the ban if there are negative effects. But there is no problem the past one year since I took up yoga." Indonesian Muslims will know early next year if they can still continue practising yoga -- if only as a form of exercise and to relieve stress.

Environmental Front

- **Indonesia eyes regional role with tsunami warning system**

Indian Ocean earthquakes off the country's coast occur along the Sunda Arc — a subduction zone where one tectonic plate slips under another — which extends from Sumatra in the west to Flores in the east.

Should a tsunami occur in this zone the waves could, in an extreme case, reach the coast within 20 minutes, leaving little warning time.

To tackle this, scientists have found new ways to improve the speed and reliability of the detection of strong earthquakes, and to effectively model tsunamis. In particular, InaTEWS makes direct use of a wide variety of different sensors, such as seismographs and buoys to But achieving this internationally recognised position requires further work. Its technical capability, sustainability, information systems and training for recipient countries will need improving before it can fulfil this role, says Sopaheluwakan.

Indonesia is the natural host for such a system, he says, because of its position on the 'Ring of Fire' — a region of high earthquake activity encircling the Pacific Ocean — and thus close to the sources of tsunamis.The system was developed at a cost of 1.4 trillion Indonesian rupiahs

(US$130 million), with technical and financial contributions from China, France, Germany, Japan and the United States.

- ***Climate Change Could Destroy Vast Forests, Report Warns***

Without immediate concerted action by governments, climate change could have a devastating effect on the world's forests and the nearly one billion people who depend on them for their livelihoods, warned forest scientists in a report to be released next week at the UN climate conference in Poland.

Scientists from the Center for International Forestry Research, CIFOR, in Bogor say adaptation measures to reduce the vulnerability of forests and forest-dependent communities are urgently needed. Forests will experience an unprecedented combination of flooding, drought, wildfire, and other effects of a warming climate over at least the next 100 years.

"The first is to buffer ecosystems against climate-related disturbances like improving fire management to reduce the risk of uncontrolled wildfires or the control of invasive species," Locatelli explained. "In plantations, we can select species that are better suited to coping with the predicted changes in climate."

"The second would help forests to evolve towards new states better suited to the altered climate," he said. "In this way we evolve with the changing climate rather than resist it."A second adaptive response is to help the people who are managing, living in or conserving forests to adapt to future changes.

Forests provide millions of people with income, food, medicines and building materials and deliver many vital ecosystem services like flood or drought regulation and water purification, the CIFOR report points out. They are critical to the ability of human societies to adapt to climate change.

After reviewing the scientific literature on the effects of climate change on forests, the CIFOR scientists conclude that by the end of the 21st century, tropical regions in Africa, South Asia, and Central America are likely or very likely to be warming at a faster rate than the global annual mean warming.

Scientists have already found examples of biodiversity loss due to climate change. In the highland cloud forests of Costa Rica, the lifting of the cloud base associated with increased ocean temperatures has been linked to the disappearance of 20 species of frogs.

The report advises that adaptation policies must be multi-sectoral, because deforestation affects many economic sectors such as transportation, water management, and energy.

• Malaysia

Political front:

- Malaysia's government faces critical by-election test

Malaysia's coalition government faces a by-election in January which analysts say will be a critical test of public reaction to its reform promises after disastrous polls in March.

The by-election in northern Terengganu state, a battleground between the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Islamic opposition party Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malayan Islamic Party), nicknamed PAS, was triggered by the death of a deputy minister.

Election Commission deputy chairman Wan Ahmad Wan Omar announced Friday that the vote would be held on January 17, with parties to declare their candidates on January 6. After wrangles in the past over allegations of fraud and vote buying, Wan Ahmad said that Mafrel (Malaysians for Free Elections) would be allowed to monitor the process.

Since then the UMNO-led National Front it has been in a state of disarray that is unlikely to be resolved until its annual assembly next March, when deputy prime minister Najib Razak is expected to replace unpopular premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Infighting and rivalries helped the ruling coalition lose an August by-election that allowed opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim to return to parliament—a decade after he was sacked as deputy premier and jailed on sex and corruption charges. Before Anwar was prosecuted by then UMNO chief and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, he was the deputy premier whom everyone saw as Mahathir's political heir apparent.

Analysts said the United Malays faces a tough fight against the PAS, which along with Anwar's Keadilan party and the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party, makes up the opposition alliance. Najib, who as deputy premier will direct the ruling party's election campaign, has

promised to make good on Abdullah's promises of change, which were never realized after he came to power in 2003. But there are doubts whether the United Malays, which has become plagued by corruption in the half-century it has dominated Malaysian politics, is capable of undergoing the changes that voters are demanding.

It said that a major factor would be the 11 percent of Chinese voters among the more than 80,000 eligible to vote. Malaysia's ethnic Chinese and Indian communities abandoned the coalition in the March polls. A victory would be a major boost for the PAS, which lost control of Terengganu state in 2004, after having held it for just one term and alienating voters with extreme measures such as enacting Islamic "hudud" laws.

- **Parliament in Brief: 'Illegals to stay illegal'**

THE government will not change the status of illegal immigrants, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Chor Chee Heung said yesterday. "Foreign workers must enter the country legally," he said when replying to a question by Mohd Nor Othman (BN-Hulu Terengganu).

Nor had asked whether the government was willing to change the status of illegal immigrants to make it easier to control them. He said the more illegal immigrants there were in the country, social problems would get worse. Chor said up to September, 55,618 illegal immigrants were detaine.

- ***Umno and Pas to decide on their candidates soon (Task work)***

Umno and Pas are expected to submit names of shortlisted candidates for the Kuala Terengganu by-election to their respective party heads by the end of next week.

Sources said the Umno management committee, chaired by party deputy president Datuk Seri Najib Razak, is expected to meet soon to discuss the selection before getting the endorsement from party president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Pas Terengganu commissioner Datuk Mustapha Ali met with his liaison committee members yesterday to discuss the early preparations for the by-election following the death of Kuala Terengganu MP and Deputy Education Minister Datuk Razali Ismail last Friday.

The notice of the seat falling vacant was submitted by the Dewan Rakyat speaker to the Election Commission on Tuesday and the by-election must be held within 60 days.

The EC is expected to meet tomorrow to announce the dates for nomination and polling in the event of a contest.

On talks that he was among those considered as potential candidate, Mustapha said: "I don't have anything to say on that."It is too early now. Let the party leadership decide on that." Umno sources said two popular names that were being considered were Kuala Terengganu Umno head and Deputy Home Minister Senator Datuk Wan Ahmad Farid Wan Salleh and the division's number two Mohd Sabri Alwi, who is also state Umno Youth head.The others are state Umno information head Datuk Zuber Embong and treasurer Senator Datuk Roslan Awang Chik. If selected, it would be an election debut for either Wan Ahmad Farid or Sabri. Wan Ahmad Farid was appointed a senator in January 2006 and his first term ends in January.

Zuber lost his fight in the Kuala Terengganu parliamentary election in 1990 to Semangat 46 candidate Datuk Abdul Manan Othman while Roslan was the Ladang assemblyman in 1995 before losing in 1999 to Dr Sulaiman Abdullah from Pas.

Abdullah had on Tuesday night, after chairing the Umno supreme council meeting, said that the management committee would submit the names.He said there was no need for an Umno supreme council meeting to decide on the candidate.As for Pas, the possible candidates other than Mustapha are said to include Datuk Abdul Wan Muttalib Embong, Mohamad Sabu and Dr Syed Azman Syed Ahmad Nawawi, who was the Kuala Terengganu MP from 1999 to 2004.Wan Muttalib did not seek re-election in the March general election. Syed Azman is now Batu Burok assemblyman while Mohamad Sabu lost to Razali in the March general election.The Kuala Terengganu seat was won by BN through Datuk Abu Bakar Daud in 1995 when he defeated Semangat 46 candidate but subsequently lost to Pas in 1999.However, BN made a comeback in the 2004 election through Razali who defeated Syed Azman with a 1,933 majority.In the March general election, Razali's majority was reduced to 628 against Pas candidate Mohamad Sabu and independent 83-year-old Maimun Yusof.

US Corner

Economic Front

- ***Economic growth in hands of all Malaysians, says PM***

Maintaining economic growth is the responsibility of all, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said yesterday.

The prime minister said the government projected that the economy would grow by at least 3.5 per cent in the fourth quarter, to register a figure of 5.5 per cent for the year as a whole.The growth rate for the third quarter was 4.7 per cent.Abdullah said at a time of global economic uncertainty following the American financial crisis, Malaysia's economy had recorded positive growth, especially in the past month.At last month's assembly, Abdullah had said the people should have confidence in the country's administration and not fear the worst.

He said the economy would be able to cushion the impact of the crisis as the banking system was solid enough to keep lending to sustain economic development. The country's savings rate and foreign exchange reserves were also high.A day later, Najib, who is also finance minister, announced a RM7 billion stimulus package to pump-prime the economy.Abdullah, in cautioning civil servants against resting on their laurels, called on them to keep pushing to increase the efficiency of the public sector.

- ***PM warns of threat to energy supply***

The world could be in for another oil price shock in the future as a result of under-investment in the oil and gas industry, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

"In the current environment of sharply reduced liquidity, lower demand and lower prices, companies have far less incentives to invest in new energy supplies," he said at the opening of the three-day International Petroleum Technology Conference yesterday.
The most recent oil shock ended in July this year, after the price of oil traded in New York touched a record US$147 (RM535) a barrel.

Surging oil prices had driven oil companies to boost exploration, leading to a boom in the sector. It has since fallen to about US$49 now.

Abdullah outlined three key challenges facing Malaysia, which must be undertaken to secure a sustainable future for the oil and gas industry. He added that national oil companies and their international counterparts like Exxon Mobil or Shell must find new ways to work together. The industry must also continuously invest in technology and work with learning institutions to produce the necessary workforce.

- **EU ends biofuel battle, nears green energy deal**

The European Union is on the verge of a deal to boost renewable energy after resolving a battle over the controversial issue of biofuels on Thursday, but Italy's demand for a review in 2014 prevented a final agreement.

The European Commission, which originates EU law, proposed in January that 10 percent of all road transport fuel should come from renewable sources by 2020, mindful of climate change and the violent storms and rising sea levels it is expected to bring.

Much of that 10 percent would come from biofuels, creating a huge potential market that is coveted by exporters such as Brazil and Indonesia, as well as EU farming nations.

But environmentalists charged that biofuels made from grains and oilseeds were pushing up food prices and forcing subsistence farmers to expand agricultural land by hacking into rainforests and draining wetlands -- known as "indirect land-use change".The stand-off over biofuels ended with an agreement that up to almost a third of the EU's 10 percent goal would be met through electric cars and trains.

The European Commission will come forward with proposals in 2010 to limit indirect land-use change, and biofuels from non-food sources will be promoted with a "double bonus" scheme.The provisional deal will need approval by the European Parliament and all 27 European Union nations before becoming law, but is not expected to change much.

- **Racial discord continues to bite in Malaysia**

I'm currently in the sleepy river-side city of Kuching in Malaysian Borneo, enjoying a much-needed escape from the ardours of life in Singapore. But, while on the face of it, all seems well in the state of Sarawak, which is one of the most ethnically diverse parts of Malaysia, underneath the surface, the racial tensions are all too evident.

Malaysia is currently facing a deepening political crisis, with the resurgent opposition alliance led by Anwar Ibrahim determined to unseat the ruling coalition, which has controlled Malaysia since independence from the British. One of the key points of dispute between the two groups is the government's long-standing policy of positive discrimination for the Malay majority.

Once he was comfortable that there were no Malays (or police) listening in, he soon dispensed with the pleasantries and launched into a tirade against the government and the ruling Malay class. He told me one of his close relatives had been detained for six years without trial under the much-despised Internal Security Act for daring to suggest that Sarawak may be better off as an independent state.

The ISA, which is one of the least positive legacies of British colonial rule, allows the police to lock up anyone who they deem a threat to national security. In recent years, that has meant bloggers, MPs and opposition activists rather than terrorists or insurgents (for whom the ISA was originally intended).

Although Anwar has damaged his reputation with empty boasts about his ability to seize power, he is determined to oust the current government, as you might expect from someone who was imprisoned for five years on charges of corruption and sodomy that many think were trumped-up.

But the government has shown itself more than willing to stand its ground and the political and social tensions will only increase if the Malaysian economy continues to slow down.

Social Front

- ***Thai unrest: Last 80 Malaysians to return today***

Almost all stranded Malaysians have returned home safely a week after Thailand's two major airports were closed down by anti-government protesters.

A Malaysian embassy official said only 80 more people, whose flights were cancelled in the past few days, were still in the capital and were expected to come home by today."We have about 200 people still registered with us, but not all are stranded as their flights are for the coming days

The official said unlike many other nationalities who were badly affected by the airport closures, Malaysians were lucky as they could still travel overland by train, bus and van to the Thailand-Malaysia border.

Malaysia Airlines (MAS) had organised six rescue flights since Friday, and AirAsia had organised three, to fly back hundreds of their stranded passengers from the temporary gateway at the U-Tapao Airport near Pattaya. MAS has scheduled two more flights, and AirAsia one, to Kuala Lumpur yesterday as the Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang airports remained closed.The embassy had also arranged two buses on Saturday and Sunday to ferry 68 Malaysians home. Malaysia also became a destination for other nationalities to flee Thailand after hundreds of flights were cancelled since Nov 24. Since Friday, the embassy had processed about 300 visa applications from citizens of India, China, Taiwan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and many more who were travelling to Malaysia to get connecting flights.

- ***ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR: In Sarawak, Anwar sees a chance for redemption***

With Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim setting his sights on exploiting an apparently growing dissatisfaction with Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud's leadership, the possibility of ending Barisan National rule in the Land of the Hornbill cannot be dismissed. Why Sarawak? Winning the state means improving Anwar's chances of fulfilling his dream of becoming prime minister in the next general election. It will also redeem his injured pride and credibility after the botched Sept 16 deadline he had confidently set for taking over the government by defections.

Anwar is probably inspired by the show of support to PKR during the "Friends of PKR" dinner in Sibu two weeks ago, at which independent assemblyman Ngemah Gabriel Adit and a couple of thousand of his supporters joined PKR.

The new members think PKR can oust the BN state government and Taib, who they feel have overstayed their welcome.The support comes from festering land issues and claims of marginalisation by Dayaks, Chinese, Malays and Melanaus.

PKR, with a claimed membership of half a million, is set to mobilise for the sparsely-populated state after the middle of next month. Sarawak has 106 delegates at the party congress.Its hopes could be premature since Sarawak held its state elections in 2006 and its next elections are due only in 2011.

Since the party campaigners have to brave the jungle logistics to reach the longhouses in the interior, there arises the question of funding to reach voters in some 50 rural and semi-rural constituencies.Anwar's aides say it is not a big problem. Behind closed doors, they claim that PKR has the resources to mount a massive campaign in a state as big as Sarawak.A major hurdle for PKR is that Sarawak, especially in the rural constituencies, is steeped in money politics.Poor rural voters are known to demand cash for their votes, which Sarawak BN politicians adroitly manage to record repeated successes in parliamentary and state elections.

- **Syed Hamid: No Malaysian link in attack(social,pol)**

Malaysia has no link with the militants who attacked Mumbai and left at least 150 people dead, said Home Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

He was commenting on *The Times of India's* report that nine of the gunmen had claimed to be Malaysian students when they visited Mumbai several months ago for reconnaissance work.He said the militants had no link to any Malaysian group and Malaysia was monitoring the situation closely.He also confirmed that India had not contacted Malaysia over the attack.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia condemned all terrorist activities and Indian authorities should be left to conduct their investigations.He said Malaysia did not suffer from terrorism or extremism

activities as it had preventive laws in place to ensure law and public safety.“That is why we take action against any group that promotes extremism, whether through .

- **HIV cases on the rise in Malaysia, says UN coordinator**

Malaysia is suffering a setback in achieving the United Nations (UN) Millenium Development Goal (MDG) to eradicate the HIV/AIDS virus.UN resident coordinator (Malaysia) Kamal Malhotra said the number of HIV infected people was increasing with the case reported since 1986 reaching 82,704 as of June.He said the country faced a concentrated epidemic with 1% to 5% of certain categories having contracted the virus, adding that in line with UN guidelines, it needed to focus its resources on five high-risk categories.These are drug users, sex workers, transsexuals, male homosexuals and migrant workers, he told a press conference after launching the Red Carnival organised by the PT Foundation at Sungei Wang Plaza here yesterday.

According to the United Nations Development Programme Malaysia website, the year 2000 saw 5% of the total population infected with HIV/AIDS. In 2006, the number had increased to 8%.The Red Carnival, sponsored by CIMB and UN Malaysia and supported by the Health Ministry and Malaysian AIDS Council, is aimed at galvanising the Malaysian youth to create awareness of the disease and reduce the stigma and discrimination against HIV-positives.

Environmental Front

• Philippine

Political front:

- **Filipino rebels say talks unlikely under Arroyo**

Communist guerrillas said Tuesday they are highly unlikely to resume peace talks with the Philippine government after the latest attempt to break a negotiating impasse failed.

New People's Army guerrillas should instead intensify attacks and take advantage of "crisis conditions" battering President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's administration to advance their decades-old rebellion, rebel spokesman Fidel Agcaoili said in an e-mail statement.Arroyo's

turbulent term ends in 2010. She has faced accusations of corruption and condoning massive human rights violations by the military, but has steadfastly denied any wrongdoing.

The Maoist rebels backed out of talks, brokered by Norway, in 2004, saying the Philippine government instigated their inclusion on U.S. and European terrorist blacklists. Norway has been trying to revive the process by arranging "exploratory talks."

- **Army chief tells soldiers to remain loyal to Arroyo**

An inspection of troops in Fort Bonifacio, Taguig city, Metro Manila, yesterday. The Philippines assembled hundreds of

soldiers and dozens of armoured vehicles in five key military bases in the capital yesterday, assessing preparedness of troops against attacks and protest similar to Mumbai and Bangkok The head of the Philippine military yesterday urged soldiers to remain loyal to President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo amid renewed calls for street protests against possible attempts to extend her term.

Opposition politicians and some Catholic bishops have called for demonstrations this weekend, incensed by a proposal by Arroyo's supporters to change the constitution and extend her six-year term beyond 2010. The church is a powerful force in Philippine politics — it has been at the vanguard of 'people power' revolutions that have removed two presidents in the last three decades.

While many of the country's bishops are not in favour of amending the constitution, they have provided valuable support to Arroyo.

She also has the support of the military despite coup attempts by a handful of rogue soldiers. While she is deeply unpopular, she has held on to power because the jaded middle class is sick of political instability and she has a huge majority in the lower house.

Yano also said the country faced a security threat, especially from the Islamic militant group Abu Sayyaf with suspected ties to Jemaah Islamiah.

The group is behind several kidnappings in the south and bomb attacks at commuter trains and buses in the capital in recent years. It was blamed for a ferry disaster near Manila Bay in 2004 that killed 100 people, the worst militant attack in the country.

- **Mindanao fears peace monitor exit**

Both fighters and civilians in the Philippines have expressed concern about the withdrawal of international peace monitors from the restive south.

Peace talks collapsed, and fighting resumed, after the Supreme Court blocked a peace deal in August.

The Philippine government has just begun appointing a new panel for peace talks with Moro rebels. But this was too late to prevent the departure of the last 12 Malaysian peace monitors over the weekend. The Malaysian peacekeepers had led an international monitoring team in the region, aimed at safeguarding a ceasefire dating from 2003. A statement from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) said it regretted the withdrawal, but stressed that Malaysia must not be blamed. .

No talks

For the monitors to stay in Mindanao, an extension of their mandate was required under the auspices of new peace talks.

The government said on Monday it was beginning to appoint a new peace negotiating panel, after the dissolution of the previous panel in September.

The new panel will be led by foreign undersecretary Rafael Seguis, and its composition will be complete by mid-December, the government said. But it remains unclear when renewed peace discussions will begin. Foreign governments, including the British, US and EU, have said in recent weeks that they hope a return to talks can be managed soon.

A Memorandum on Ancestral Domain, a first step toward a comprehensive peace deal, was due for signing in August but was rejected by the Supreme Court after protests by Christian communities in areas likely to be affected.

Violence erupted again, displacing at least half a million people in the area, and leaving several hundred people dead.

- **Manila can resist crisis, says Arroyo**

The Philippines is weathering the global financial crisis better than many economies, but the government is monitoring the effect of inflation and falling growth on the country's poor to see what further poverty-alleviation measures might be needed, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, the president, said.

In an interview with the Financial Times, the head of the world's 12th most populous nation argued that revenue-raising reforms earlier in her administration, specifically increasing value added tax, had stood the country in good stead.

- **Manila seeks to resume talks with insurgents**

The Philippines yesterday began to rebuild a peace panel it dissolved nearly three months ago, naming its chief negotiator, and officials said they hope to resume talks with the country's largest Muslim rebel group soon.

But the chief peace negotiator of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which has been in on-off talks with Manila for more than a decade, dismissed the appointment of Rafael Seguis, as "nothing substansive".

The talks are aimed at ending nearly 40 years of conflict that has killed 120,000 people, displaced 2mn and stunted growth in a region rich in oil, gas and mineral resources.

Iqbal said Seguis' appointment was aimed mainly at keeping an international monitoring team in the country. The appointment was announced a day after Malaysia pulled out its remaining 12 unarmed peace monitors in the Philippines troubled south. The other 17 members of the monitoring team from Brunei, Libya and Japan are also preparing to leave the conflict areas.

Philippines Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita told reporters four other members of the peace panel would be named before December 15 as Manila winds up consultations with affected areas in southern Philippines aimed at ending conflict in the region.

He said Seguis' first task would be to convince the MILF to agree to extend the mandate of peace monitors on the restive Mindanao island.

More than 300 people have died in nearly four months of fighting in six provinces on Mindanao, displacing about 700,000 people and costing the government over 1bn pesos in humanitarian assistance and military operations.

Negotiations between Manila and the MILF, brokered by Kuala Lumpur since March 2001, bogged down in August after a deal to expand an existing Muslim autonomous region on Mindanao was stopped by the Supreme Court. Rogue elements of the MILF reacted by attacking largely Catholic communities, burning homes and farms, and killing civilians, forcing the army to launch punitive offensives. The government then decided to end peace talks with the MILF.

- **Obama May Pick First Black U.S. Envoy to the Philippines**

Diplomatic sources recently stated that President-elect Obama has picked career diplomat Harry K. Thomas Jr. as the next ambassador to Manila. Thomas is set to replace current U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines, Kristie Kenney, who also made history as its first female ambassador. At present, the 52-year-old Thomas is Director General of the State Department's Foreign Service, a post he has held since last year. When he circulated an order requiring diplomats to serve in Iraq, it grabbed headlines all over and drew the ire of the diplomats' union in Washington, whose members eventually confronted him in late October last year. A graduate of the Holy Cross and Columbia University, Thomas is a veteran of the diplomatic service, having had experience since 1984. He also served as ambassador to Bangladesh from 2003 to 2005 before becoming the executive secretary at the U.S. Department of State. Thomas, who speaks fluent Spanish, Bangla and Hindi, has also served in New Delhi, Harare, Kaduna and Lima. For his service, he has received several awards from the State Department, including the Arnold Raphel Award for leadership, motivation andmentoring of colleagues.

Malaysia, Japan to withdraw ceasefire monitors from Philippine south

Philippines, Nov 28, 2008 - Malaysia and Japan announced this week that they will remove their members of the four-nation International Monitoring Team (IMT) credited with helping to uphold a ceasefire between Muslim rebels and government soldiers in the southern Philippines

since 2004. The team's mandate expires Sunday (November 30) and although both Philippine officials and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have urged the team to extend its stay in light of three months of renewed fighting, Malaysia announced the departure of its remaining 12 IMT members on Thursday (November 27). Japan said Friday (November 28) that its members would be withdrawn, as well. Leaders from both nations said if the MILF and Manila are serious about extending the IMT's presence, they should agree to return to peace negotiations that have been stalled since early August, when the Philippine Supreme Court stopped the signing of an agreement to create a homeland for Muslims in the south, saying it was unconstitutional. The MILF has been fighting for a homeland for decades, but began negotiating with the government in 2001 and signed a ceasefire in 2003 that largely held until August. When the agreement was suspended, break-away MILF rebels began occupying southern villages, leading soldiers to launch operations to push them out. Nearly 300 people have been killed in fighting since then, and some 650,000 have been displaced. Responding to the news Friday, a spokesperson for the MILF said rebel and government representatives were planning to meet in the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, soon to discuss a return to negotiations and a subsequent extension of the IMT mandate, but he declined to give the date for the talks, the Inquirer reported. In addition to leading the IMT, Malaysia has been the broker of peace talks between the two parties. The IMT, which was created by the Organization of the Islamic Conference, originally had about 60 members, but Malaysia pulled out 31 of its monitors in May, citing stalls in negotiations. The remaining members were due to leave by August, but Kuala Lumpur extended the mandate for three months when the fighting broke out. Brunei and Libya are the other nations that contribute to the IMT and neither has said it will withdraw monitors.

Economic Front

- **Economists agreed that the Philippines was bearing up relatively well to global financial turmoil but did not necessarily credit the government.**

Economists agreed that the Philippines was bearing up relatively well to global financial turmoil but did not necessarily credit the government. “The Philippine economic ship is safe from the storm because it never left the port in the first place,” said Felipe Medalla, an economics professor at the University of the Philippines and a former government planning chief.

The Philippines, said Mr Medalla, was not a big exporter, shielding its economy from the sharp downturn in external demand.

Amando Tetangco, central bank governor, said in a separate interview that headline inflation, though still running at double digits, had started to ease, giving us "monetary policy space". Inflation rose to a 14-year high in June of 11.4 per cent, damaging in a country where a third of the population is classified as poor.

The bank's policy board meets on December 18 amid speculation that, like other central banks, its emphasis might shift from inflation to supporting growth. Mr Tetangco acknowledged that these were "abnormal times" but said the bank had already eased policy by lowering bank reserve requirements by 2 percentage points last month.

Mrs Arroyo, who this week survived her fourth impeachment attempt, said she expected the Philippines, which vies with India as an outsourcing centre, to benefit from corporate cost-cutting. She had recently spoken to Ingram Micro, a distributor of computer products that wants to expand its Philippines operations, she said. The president acknowledged there were problems. The government, for example, was prepared to buy more rice from farmers in order to keep prices stable, she said.

Mrs Arroyo said there were advantages and disadvantages to a weak peso, which has depreciated 17 per cent against the dollar since the start of the year

Social Front

- **WFP to strengthen its food security program in Mindanao**

The World Food Program (WFP) of the United Nations (UN) has committed to strengthen its food security program in areas in Mindanao that have been affected by the recent armed skirmishes between the military and Moro rebels.

The commitment was relayed to President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo by WFP Regional Director for Asia Anthony Banburry. During the short meeting, the President and Banburry pledged to

work closely in bringing peace to Mindanao. The President also pushed for the Philippines' inclusion in the WFP supply chain that distributes fish, beans and other agricultural produce.

The UN agency has focused on providing assistance to areas affected by the conflict between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, where there are high rates of malnutrition and large numbers of internally displaced persons.

The WFP's commitment will contribute to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Mindanao by addressing the food security needs of the affected people in the area.

- **Filipino rebel leader arrested**

POLICE said on Thursday they have arrested a wanted senior communist guerrilla leader who operated in the northern Philippines.

Edgar Molina, who carried a one-million-peso (S$30,588) bounty on his head, was arrested near the mountain town of Lacub earlier this week, a police statement said. Molina is the alleged commander of a New People's Army (NPA) guerrilla front in the Ilocos region, according to a police report. Two alleged rebel aides, including a woman, were detained with him. Molina is to stand trial for murder and attempted murder, it said without giving details of the case. The NPA is the 5,000-member armed wing of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines, which has been waging a nearly 40-year insurgency. The rebels have said they turned down an offer last week by the Philippine government to restart stalled peace negotiations on condition that the communists agreed to a general ceasefire. The government also rejected a rebel demand to free some jailed guerrillas so they could help the insurgents' negotiating panel, according to a rebel statement issued to news agencies on Thursday.

The rebels also said on Thursday that they are holding a military officer and a policeman captive.

- **Government agencies, NGOs to provide 'pabaon' to displaced families returning home in Lanao del Norte**

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Region 10 will be giving away food packs or "pabaon" good for a month of consumption consisting of kilos of rice, noodles, canned goods and milk to the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Munai town, Lanao del Norte province who are returning to their homes beginning December 4.

Office of Civil Defense (OCD) Region 10 Director and Regional Disaster Coordinating Council (RDCC) Region 10 Chair Carmelito Lupo said the Ranaw Disaster Response and Rehabilitation Assistance Center, Inc. (RDRRAC), a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) also contributed to the pabaon, including some toiletries and other non-food items such as sleeping mats and blankets.

Meanwhile, Governor Mohammad Khalid Dimaporo of Lanao del Norte remarked that the 400million Rehabilitation plan for the province is already under way.

However, the fund will be released once the evacuation centers are closed and the families have gone tot heir respective homes. The Governor added that the province was heavily affected by the atrocities of the Lawless Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Group (LMG) last August 18 and it needs a full recovery program to bring normalcy to the area.

- **71 days at the mercy of Somali pirates**

The crew of a Philippines ship released by Somali pirates knelt down and prayed, then told of their two months of torment.MV Centauri, with 26 crew members, docked in Mombasa on Tuesday night and was immediately surrounded by Kenyan security agents who took over investigations. On the night of September 18, they said, they heard gunshots, with one bullet penetrating through the metal wall of the ship, one centimetre thick.

Seamen can spend years on board a vessel without seeing their family members.Chief cook Joland Besana, who left his wife expecting their now six-month-old daughter, said: “I could not imagine dying without seeing my daughter.” He left home on November 1, last year, and the girl was born months after he left. During his 13-year career, the 35-year-old had not fallen into the hands of pirates.

On Wednesday, police, led by port detective John Nyanzwii spent two hours talking to crew members and dusting for finger prints.It was not clear whether a ransom was paid. Neither the

captain of the ship nor the ship owner's representative spoke to the Press. He said the pirates had not terrorised the crew much, and would even share with them food rations. The vessel registered in Malta, has a dead weight tonnage of 19,555 tons and is carrying 15,500 metric tons of salt.

- ***Flood round-up: Numbers drop despite heavy rains***

Despite experiencing heavy rain yesterday, the number of evacuees at flood relief centres in the state's five districts dropped from 2,190 to 1,446.

State flood operation office controller Wan Mustapa Wan Abdul Hamid said many of them returned home when the water receded.

Those affected were from 345 families who were evacuated after their houses were inundated in up to 1.5m of water at the weekend.Another 20 students from neighbouring areas who are sitting for SPM and STPM were also taken to the same centre for fear of facing transportation problems due to the rising waters.

On Sunday it was reported that only 711 were left at relief centres. The figure however has since more than doubled with evacuees in 17 relief centres in Besut, Kuala Terengganu, Marang and Setiu as of 4pm.

A state Welfare Department operations centre spokesman said that in Besut, 69 people from 16 families were placed at multi-purpose halls in Kampung Sungai Panjang and Kampung Pantai Kuala Besut.

There were 1,147 people placed in relief centres, Marang had 759 victims while Setiu saw a family of seven evacuated. State public order and traffic chief Superintendent Farid Mahmud said three state roads were submerged in one metre of water. About 300 traders lost thousands of ringgit worth of food items when their stalls in Pasar Payang here were submerged in 0.5 metres of floodwater yesterday. Torrential rain in the early hours of the morning saw parts of a campus here struck by a flash flood.

Environmental Front

• Thailand

Political Social Front

- **An intractable crisis in Thailand**

Thailand was on Thursday night waiting on the word of its 81-year-old king to discover how it could extricate itself from an increasingly farcical political impasse. But King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who had been expected to speak on the occasion of his birthday, was silent.

That may be no bad thing. Thailand purports to be a democracy. As such it ought to be able to resolve political conflicts between competing groups of its citizenship without recourse to the words of a monarch, however revered. That, after all, is what democracies are for.

- **Thai airports to reopen after prime minister ousted by court**

Anti-government demonstrators in Thailand declared victory Tuesday and said they will end their occupation of the country's two main airports after a court decision forced the country's prime minister from office.

While an estimated 300,000 travelers stranded by last week's airport takeovers breathed a bit easier, the question of who will hold power in a democratic Thailand remained unanswered. The protesters -- who seek to eliminate the one-person, one-vote system -- left open the possibility of more unrest saying they will return to the streets if political change does not occur. At least six people have been killed and scores injured in clashes in recent months.

- **Thai PM declares state of emergency**

Thailand's prime minister has declared a state of emergency in the areas surrounding two airports in Bangkok, clearing the way for security forces to move in and eject thousands of anti-government protesters who have taken over the facilities.

But the declaration has left the bitterly divided country on a knife edge. Many people expect that if there is bloodshed when the police move in, the army will mount a coup to remove the government.The health ministry deployed extra ambulances into the vicinity of the airports last night.The People's Alliance for Democracy took over Suvarnabhumi Airport, the main international gateway, on Tuesday night, forcing a shutdown that stranded thousands of passengers.Demonstrators then took over Don Muang Airport, which handles domestic routes, yesterday morning, leaving the country's biggest city without a functioning civilian airport.

Closing the airports is part of the PAD's campaign to bring down the government of Mr Somchai. His administration has largely sidestepped the group's past protests, but it could not ignore the challenge of the airport takeover.

One minister has estimated that it could cost the country $2.8bn in lost revenue, a further blow to an economy already reeling from the fallout from the global economic crisis.Mr Somchai announced the move towards a limited state of emergency after a cabinet meeting held in the northern town of Chiang Mai to avoid disruption.

- **Bangkok is watching nervously. The streets are deserted and people are exchanging coup rumours**

General Anupong Paojinda, head of the army, has repeatedly said he does not want to mount a coup because he believes that it would do little to solve the underlying problems that gave rise to the current stand-off.

But he has come under increasing pressure from people who see the army as the only way to break the political deadlock, which has limited the government's ability to respond to challenges such as the global economic slowdown.A persistent strain of violence runs through Thailand's political history. There have been 18 military coup attempts - 11 of them successful - since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932. If there is any serious outbreak of violence, it is likely that Thais will see a man in a uniform once again running their country.

- **Tension grows over Thai blockade**

Tension is growing in the Thai capital Bangkok as thousands of anti-government protesters occupy the city's two main airports for a seventh day.

Police said they were negotiating with the group as experts warned of soaring economic losses from the blockade. Some 100,000 passengers remain stranded in Bangkok while efforts are being made to find alternative airports.

Meanwhile, thousands of government supporters held their first rally in the capital since the blockade began. The opposition want the government to resign, accusing it of being corrupt, hostile to the monarchy and in league with exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Fears of clashes between pro- and anti-government groups have grown since a new grenade attack on opposition supporters in Bangkok on Saturday night, which injured about 50 people, three of them seriously.

So far the two sides have not encountered each other but there are fears of serious violence if they do, the BBC's Jonathan Head reports from Bangkok.

- **Thai PM says he will keep his job**

Somchai Wongsawat says he will remain as Thailand's prime minister and that he will use gentle measures against protesters.

Protesters supporting the opposition People's Alliance for Democracy are continuing their blockade at two of Bangkok's main airports. The protests at Don Muang and Suvarnabhumi International Airport have cut the Thai capital's air links to the world, leaving thousands stranded and hurting the tourist-dependent economy. The PAD want to unseat the prime minister, who it accuses of being a puppet of former ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Shinawatra was ousted in a coup in 2006. Basmah Fahim reports.

• Singapore

Economic Front

- **Oil and gas sector remains promising despite economic slowdown**

The oil and gas industry remains promising in the long run despite the current global economic slowdown, according to Singapore's Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry S Iswaran.

Opening the four-day International Oil and Gas Exhibition and Conference on Tuesday, Mr Iswaran said this is a good time for the sector to learn how to cope with the short-term challenges ahead in order to position itself for future opportunities. The event attracts companies from about 50 countries worldwide, and it is Asia's largest for the sector.

The oil and gas industry is all fired up, especially for the prospects in Southeast Asia and Asia. And Singapore wants to tap into the growth. Despite the economic slowdown, this year's exhibition has attracted over 1,300 exhibitors, about 400 more compared to the last show in 2006. Mr Iswaran said this shows that the oil and gas sector is a long-term growth industry for this region. In fact, he added that many companies are already signing up to participate in the next show in 2010.

- **SMEs say strong branding can help firms during tough times**

Small- and medium-sized businesses in Singapore have said that they do not plan to cut their budget for branding, despite the current downturn. That is because they believe their brand name will go some way in helping them during these tough times. They were speaking to Channel NewsAsia on the sidelines of the Singapore Prestige Brand Award gala event on Wednesday night. For most people, it is just a slice of toasted bread and some jam. But for Ya Kun International, its kaya toast has become a money spinner, helping the company to expand into six countries with more than 50 outlets.

Its executive chairman, Adrin Loi, said that is because what Ya Kun sells is not just toast, but the history behind it. Through its overseas outlet, Ya Kun is bringing the same experience to countries like South Korea and Japan.

- **MM Lee confident US can revive economy**

Former US president Bill Clinton kicked off his first charitable conference abroad in Hong Kong on Tuesday.

More than 400 of Asia's elite attended the event, including Singapore's Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew who engaged in a dialogue at the conference on the challenges facing Asia. The two-day Clinton Global Initiative meeting focused on pressing issues facing Asia today – education, energy, climate change and public health – and the need to come up with an action plan to meet these challenges.

Foremost on the minds of participants is how long the global financial crisis will last. Mr Lee expressed confidence that the US Treasury would be able to revive the economy. Other issues discussed included weaning Asia off fossil fuel and energy & water conservation. This first charitable conference overseas will also be Mr Clinton's last. He has agreed to stop holding these meetings abroad and has refused donations from foreign governments, following his wife's appointment as US secretary of state for Barack Obama's administration next year.

Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said he is looking forward to better ties with the US, with Senator Hillary Clinton as the country's top envoy..China also urged rich countries to lead the fight against climate change and to provide expertise to the developing world in a bid to reduce emissions.

- **Asia is still a dynamic region, says PM Lee**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said it is crucial to look beyond the financial storm as it will pass. Speaking to members of Singapore's Foreign Correspondents Association in a wide-ranging discussion on Friday, he said the Depression of the 1930s is not on the cards and Asia is still dynamic.

He added that the priority of the Singapore government during a recession is to keep businesses afloat and to help people keep their jobs. He responded by saying that while foreign workers help Singapore's economy, most of the jobs lost in the 2001 recession were held by foreign workers and this is likely to happen again.

On the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai, he noted that while Singapore's neighborhood is unlike India's, the country needs to continue to be on the alert. When asked by an Indian journalist about Singapore's bilateral relations with India following the Mumbai attacks, he said

Singapore's engagement with India is driven by long-term considerations which are not changing. As for Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) leader Mas Selamat Kastari who escaped from detention in February, Mr Lee said his whereabouts are still unknown. Turning to ASEAN, Mr Lee said he hopes that the summit could be held next month in Indonesia under Thailand's chairmanship.

Mr Lee said the Chiang Mai Initiative is a very valuable regional initiative to pool resources to tackle problems, particularly liquidity problems. But it is not the final solution for the member countries. The prime minister also emphasized that ASEAN cooperation is vital and its member countries must press on and send a message to the world that ASEAN is still in business. Borrowing a Chinese saying, Mr Lee said Singapore must cross the river by feeling the stones. Without imitating any model blindly, it will transform, grow and remake itself to rethink strategies in this new environment.

- **Flights between Bangkok and Singapore resume**

Flights out of Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International airport have resumed. Passengers who flew in from the Thai capital said the situation there is stable. But for some, it was an experience they would not want to repeat. The last two weeks have been an agonising wait for 27-year-old Pearly Siah. Her mother, Madam Sim Sau Kam, who was holidaying in Bangkok , was supposed to return last Monday. But she was among the hundreds of travellers left stranded after anti-government protestors took over Bangkok's main airport. Travellers told Channel NewsAsia that the situation in Bangkok is more peaceful. But while some said the experience has left them shaken, others felt it was more like an extended holiday. One passenger said: "I was enjoying myself the whole time." AirAsia has also announced it will be resuming flights out of Bangkok. Bangkok may have reopened its airport but travellers are still sceptical. Some travel agents Channel NewsAsia spoke to said they have not seen an increase in the number of Singaporeans booking flights from Singapore to Bangkok. And they said they are not expecting the demand to go up until the beginning of next year. As one travel agent put it, Singaporeans are probably just waiting for the dust to settle.

- **Six foreign law firms to be issued licences to practise in Singapore**

Singapore is issuing licences to six foreign law firms to set up offices and practise law here. The move is part of the government's plan to liberalise the legal sector through the Qualifying Foreign Law Practice scheme.

Law Minister K Shanmugam said accepting foreign firms into Singapore's legal system represents a quantum change - the most significant one in the legal profession so far. They will go to American firms Latham & Watkins and White & Case, and UK firms Allen & Overy, Clifford Chance, Herbert Smith and Norton Rose.

All six firms are ranked among the Top 100 law firms globally and four of them are in the world's Top 10 list. The firms are likely to concentrate in areas such as arbitration, banking, corporate finance and the maritime industry. Foreign firms are not allowed to practise in areas like litigation, criminal law, conveyancing, administrative law and family law. The aim of the scheme is also to develop Singapore's legal system and use it as an engine of growth to attract talent to Singapore.

The Attorney-General's Chambers will formally issue the licences to the six foreign law firms soon. The firms will then have six months to start their operations here in Singapore, starting January next year. Each licence is valid for five years after which the firms will go through a separate licence renewal process to continue practising in Singapore.

Social Front

- **MOH expects total number of HIV cases in 2008 to exceed 2007 figure**

The Health Ministry (MOH) said the total number of HIV cases for the whole of this year will exceed that of last year. In the first ten months of 2008, there were 382 new HIV cases reported among Singapore residents. In comparison, 423 HIV cases were recorded for the whole of 2007.

MOH said the increase in the number of HIV-testing cases could have contributed to the increased number of reported HIV cases.n the first nine months of the year, 124,559 HIV tests were carried out – this is a 22 per cent jump compared to the same period in 2007 where 102,490 HIV tests were done.

There are also more individuals coming forward for anonymous HIV testing, with 6,983 anonymous HIV tests done in the first eight months of this year – a 4 per cent increase from the same period last year.

Meanwhile, four GP clinics which started offering anonymous HIV testing from November 1 have carried out 175 tests in the first half of the month. The Health Ministry said it is encouraged by the increased awareness and uptake of HIV testing. It is urging those at risk of HIV infection and those who engage in risky sexual behaviour to go for regular HIV testing.

- **Public advised to remain vigilant against crime during festive season**

With the festive season just round the corner, the police are advising the public to remain vigilant against crime.

The police say shoppers should avoid exposing cash, valuables and jewellery when shopping in crowded areas. They should ensure that bags and other personal belongings are secured and not left unattended. The public should also be wary of opportunists who may commit molest in crowds. When going on vacation, Singaporeans are encouraged to take precautionary measures to enhance the security of their homes during their absence. They should install good quality locks to secure gates, doors and windows.

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- **PM Lee says S'pore, Johor can be one centre of vitality and growth**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the Iskandar Development Region (IDR) in the southern Malaysian state of Johor may pose a challenge to Singapore, but there is always room to work together.

He was speaking on Friday to members of Singapore's Foreign Correspondents Association in a wide-ranging discussion. Financial markets may appear to have stabilized for now, but real economies have been affected and many have gone into recession. Mr Lee was also asked about European banks coming under pressure on banking secrecy and tax evasion issues. He said while some banking customers may look towards Singapore as an alternative, the country, too, can expect to come under pressure even though its banks are in good standing. On Singapore's integrated resorts, Mr Lee said the operators have every interest to make it succeed and not be white elephants.

In a discussion that lasted more than an hour, Mr Lee covered topics ranging from Singapore's monetary policy to the outlook for Temasek Holdings and the Government Investment Corporation of Singapore (GIC).

Environmental Front

• Vietnam

Political front:

Bilateral

- **Vietnam, Laos intensify legal cooperation**

Minister of Justice Ha Hung Cuong held talks with his Lao counterpart Chaleuan Yapaoher in Hanoi on Nov. 29 to discuss legal and judicial cooperation between the two ministries.Legal and judicial reform was also high on agenda of the visit. The two sides exchanged views on issues such as training, nationality, verdict execution and exchanges of experts and legal documents.

The visit by Lao Justice Minister Chaleuan Yapaoher, which last from Nov. 24-29, deepened the long lasting legal cooperation between the two countries. At the same time, it would help further boost the special friendship and comprehensive cooperation between the two Parties, States and people.-

- **Vietnam, Cambodia sign agreement on culture**

Vietnam and Cambodia will step up high-ranking delegation exchanges and organise cultural days in both countries.

This was in a cultural and fine arts cooperation plan for the 2009-2011 period signed in Phnom Penh on Nov. 29. The plan was signed by Minister of Culture and Fine Arts of Cambodia Him Chhem and Deputy Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam Tran Chien Thang on the occasion of the Vietnam culture week being held in Cambodia .

Under the plan, Vietnam will also help train Cambodian students at those schools under the management of Vietnam 's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism .

- **Vietnam, Japan move towards strategic partnership**

The Japanese Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City Ikuo Mizuki said he is optimistic

about the prospects for his country's ties with Vietnam , which have moved comprehensively towards the establishment of a strategic partnership. The diplomat made the statement at a meeting held in Ho Chi Minh City on Dec. 3 to mark Japan's National Day (Dec. 23) and the 75 th birthday of the Japanese Emperor.

According to the Chairman of the municipal Vietnam-Japan Friendship Association, Hoang Van Tuan, the relationship between the two countries has become increasingly positive and dynamic at multilateral forums. As an ASEAN-Japan relations coordinator , Vietnam has intensified its cooperation with Japan in all important regional issues.

Tuan also highlighted the booming trade ties between the two nations, with bilateral trade turnover at more than 10 billion USD in 2007, three times 1999's figure. The country was also Vietnam 's largest ODA donor last year, with 13 billion USD poured into the Southeast Asian country.-

Economic Front

- **'Perfect storm' challenges for Vietnam**

Worried foreign business groups warned yesterday that Vietnam, a darling of foreign investors until a year ago, now faces 'a perfect storm' of challenges amid the global economic turmoil.

The communist government must drive forward long-stalled reforms or risk dropping further behind its Asian competitors, major foreign chambers of commerce warned at the Vietnam Business Forum (VBF) conference here in Hanoi.

'Economic news across the world is almost uniformly bad,' said Michael Pease, chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam. 'The availability of debt and equity for investment into Vietnam has shrunk dramatically over the past few months. There is entrenched pessimism about the prospects of many announced projects moving forward to completion.'

Key threats for the developing economy, he said, included a drastic drop in demand in major export markets for manufactured goods and plummeting world prices of commodities and crude oil, which Vietnam exports. He warned of the risk of 'serious foreign exchange shortages' in coming months as foreign investment projects are delayed or cancelled, tourism drops off and overseas Vietnamese workers send home less money.

On their part, the Vietnam government announced yesterday that it may lower business taxes and cut interest rates on consumer loans to help companies weather the global financial crisis. Meanwhile, the State Bank of Vietnam, the country's central bank, will adjust the interest rate ceilings on consumer lending, now capped at 150 per cent of its base rate to make the loans viable, deputy governor Nguyen Van Binh said.

Hanoi has projected export growth to more than halve to 13 per cent next year from an expected 32 per cent rise in 2008. More than 80 foreign and Vietnamese banks are doing business in the country, a quarter of which are undercapitalised and may not be stable, said Stanchart's Mr Sud.

- **Vietnam, Laos enhance cross-border trade**

Vietnamese and Lao trade officials have discussed measures to promote trade in the two countries' border areas, thus contributing to meeting their target of 1 billion USD in two-way trade turnover by 2010.

They also agreed that cross-border economic and commercial exchanges between the two countries not only boosts trade activities in the border provinces, but also maximises the potential and strengths of each locality and forms active economic zones in the Vietnam-Lao border areas, contributing to raising two-way trade turnover in recent years from 246.6 million USD in 2006 to 460 million USD in 2008.

The meeting proposed that each country's authorities remove obstacles to policies, simplify commercial procedures at bordergates, improve infrastructure at border areas, and facilitate cross-border activities and the trade of goods.

The Vietnamese delegation attending the meeting was led by Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry Nguyen Cam Tu and the Lao delegation by Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry Khemmant Phonsena.-

- **Vietnam in global top ten of disaster-hit nations in 2007**

Vietnam ranks eighth out of the world's top ten countries that suffered the most from natural disasters in 2007, according to a report announced during the 14 th UN meeting on climate change in Pozan, Poland.

Natural disasters claimed 346 lives and caused losses of 1.639 billion USD in PPP (purchasing power parity) in Vietnam last year, according to the report, Global Climate Risk Index, published on December 4 by a German environmental and development group, German Watch. Bangladesh took first place in the list, the report said.

The nations with the highest frequency of extreme events were Bangladesh, India and Vietnam, the report added.The report said that extreme events during 2007 claimed more than 15,000 lives around the world, affected the lives of millions of people and caused losses estimated at 80 billion USD, the highest figures in recent years.

The report recommended that governments should promote initiatives and measures to help people to raise their disaster response capacity and work together in order to prevent and minimise the impacts of natural disasters.-

Social Front

Environmental Front

- **Massive investments in climate change-proof irrigation**

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) has estimated a budget of 1 trillion VND (roughly 58.8 million USD) up to 2010 to develop an irrigation system adaptable to global climate change. MARD said from now to 2015, almost one-third of the amount or 300 billion VND will be located for research on possible impact of global climate change upon national agriculture and the countryside.

In the period from 2016-2020, the remaining 700 billion VND will be invested in research on irrigation solutions to ensure safety for ordinary people's lives and agricultural, forestry and fisheriesdevelopment in areas hit by climate change in decades to 2100.

MARD Deputy Minister Dao Xuan Hoc said irrigation was considered the top solution for food security in the new era of climate change as it would help boost agricultural production, ensure safe water supply for people's daily life as well as industrial production and aquaculture and tourism.

Domestic and international studies have put Vietnam among the most vulnerable to sea water rise and water resource dry-up, especially in the Mekong and Red River Deltas

• Laos

Political front

- **PM proposes raising more money to National Assembly**

Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh proposed that the National Assembly approves the budget expense plan of the government to enable her to carry out various works during the new fiscal year, 2008-2009.

During the 6th ordinary session of the National Assembly's Sixth Legislature last Friday the Prime Minister said that the additional cash is 622 billion kip so that the increase is 6.2 per cent above that of the last budget. Mr. Bouasone said that part of the sum of 622 billion kip will be spent on rehabilitating the living conditions of the ethnic people who had suffered from the flood suffering (217 billion kip), for the National Defense Ministry (85 billion kip), for the Ministry of Public Security (68.5 billion kip), to increase the national monetary reserve (50 billion kip), to clear the debt of the government-invested projects (15 billion kip) and to give money to the provinces for their expenditures (186.3 billion kip).
The Prime Minister said the flood during the previous months caused damages and it is estimated that it would need 512 billion kip for rehabilitation work. He said this sum of money will be used for 1,012 projects, for public works, transport, agriculture-forestry, education, health, labor, social welfare, industry and mining.

- **This draft law is likely to be passed by the cabinet and it will then be debated by the National Assembly next year. NA debates law on plant quarantine**

Law makers shared points of views on the newly drafted law on plant quarantine yesterday. The draft was proposed for consideration by Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Mr. Sitaheng Lasapho, who pointed out that the law indicated the importance of agriculture which is fundamental for securing food in the country, protecting domestic agricultural production and promoting the export of agricultural produce of the country and it was also necessary for the government's preparation for accessing the World Trade Organization.
"To achieve the development goals of agriculture and forestry sector by 2010 in line with the direction of the Party, it is necessary for the government to have law on plant quarantine to use as legal measure, which has nationwide enforcement," added Mr. Sitaheng.
Mr. Thongsing Thammavong, President of the National Assembly, urged the members of the national assembly to ensure their sharing of point of views by focusing mainly on the determination of procedures on plant quarantine of relevant officials and businesses associated

with plant quarantine, the roles of officials and businesses in plant quarantine and the determination of organizations to manage and inspect plant quarantine activities.

Economic Front

- **Vietnam-Laos rapport improves over time**

History proves that the exemplary Vietnam-Laos relations fostered throughout unique historical challenges have laid a firm foundation for the two countries' continued solidarity and mutual assistance. This was quoted by Vietnam News Agency on 28 November.

This relationship has continued to thrive during their processes of national construction and development.

President of the Vietnam-Laos Friendship Association (VLFA) Phan Xuan Bien made these remarks during a ceremony to mark the 33 rd anniversary of Laos' National Day (Dec. 2) hosted by the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations and the VLFA in Ho Chi Minh City on 28 November.

Bien and the Lao General Consul Thetlakhone Douangsonthi shared a common view that the special rapport between the two countries reflects the common values, desires and interests of the two nations, infused with the spirit of exceptional solidarity, confidence and sympathy. The two officials agreed that the comprehensive cooperation between Vietnam and Laos has made important contributions to facilitating each country's renovation, open-door and integration policies, particularly the economic-trade relations that have been promoted to match their political-diplomatic ties. Over recent years, the two countries have expanded their cooperation in trade, agriculture, health care and education.

A programme to provide free eye operations, performed by doctors from HCM City, has helped almost 5,000 Lao blinds to regain their vision, and a voluntary youth programme has also brought a number of practical benefits to the people of Laos

- **Global Logistic donates 16 transport trucks to Lao government**

The Global Logistic of Japan donated 16 transport trucks to the Ministry of Public Works and Transport and this is part of its contribution to the socio-economic development of Laos. The hand-over ceremony took place in Vientiane Capital on 24 November. Minister of Public Works and Transport, Mr. Sommad Pholsena received the trucks from the President of Global Logistic Fund of Japan. The Deputy Mayor of Vientiane Capital, Mr. Bounchanh Sinthavong, the secretary of the ambassador of Japan to Laos and officials from both sides was at the fifth installment of the handover of the trucks. On this occasion, Mr. Sommad expressed his thanks to the Global Logistic Fund of Japan for the assistance. The trucks will be used to improve the transportation of goods in Vientiane Capital and the provinces of the country.

Social Front

- **Malaysia gives donation to aid flood victims**

The Government of Malaysia has agreed to contribute USD50,000 to the Government of the Lao PDR to assist in overcoming the problems and needs arising from the massive flood in August 2008, according to a press release from Malaysian Embassy on 28 November. Mr Zainal Abidin Ahmad, Ambassador of Malaysia to the Lao PDR handed over the USD50, 000 cheques to Dr. Thongloun Sisoulith, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs at a ceremony held in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Friday, 28 November.Mr Ahmad expressed that the Government and people of Malaysia sympathized and shared the suffering of the flood victims. The Government of Malaysia and its people will continue to assist Lao people to restore its nation and hope that this contribution would help lessen the burden faced by the victims and assist them during the recovery process. The contribution reflects the long established friendship and solidarity between the two countries. The said ceremony was attended by relevant officials of both sides.

- **RoK company funds road construction in Laos**

A company from the Republic of Korea has pledged to fund the construction of a road in Sanasomboun district, Champassak province. An agreement to this effect was signed in

Champassak province last week between the Director of the provincial Department of Public Works and Transport, Dr Koung Souk-aloun, and the Chairman of Khs Dragon mining company, Mr Kim Dong Man. The assistance provided by the Khs Dragon mining company is in line with the government's policy for rural development and poverty reduction to remove Laos from the UN's list of least developed countries by 2020.
The project will start this month and will be complete by June 2010. It is expected to boost commercial agriculture production and alleviate poverty in the area.
The Khs Dragon company is a foreign-owned firm under the parent companies of Seodong and Hyodong Development Company, which are conducting mining surveys in Dor village, Kham district, Xieng Khuang province.

- **PRP to spend 1.7 billion kip on infrastructure construction**

The Poverty Reduction Programme is planning to spend 1.7 billion kip on the construction of infrastructure and organizing vocational training courses for local authorities in community of Champassak province.

The plan was disclosed at recent month meeting held in Bachiengchaluensouk district, Champassak province. The meeting discussed how to divide budget for implementing infrastructure construction sub-projects and vocational training courses for each district. Next year, the Poverty Reduction Programme will conduct eight projects of infrastructure construction and 13 vocational training courses in Champassak province. The projects are carrying out the construction of gravity-fed water, a school construction, education equipment supply, training course on livestock raising, fish culture and garmenting.

Environmental Front

- **Laos and Sweden better environment manage**

The Water Resource and Environment Administration held its annual review meeting on Strengthening Environment Management Project (Phase II) in 2007-2008 in Vientiane yesterday. The meeting was officiated by the Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister's Office and Head of

the Water Resource and Environment Administration, Mr. Noulin Sinbandit, and other officials were also present.

The project is being supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). It began its assistance to Laos in environment management in February 2001 by providing funds to the Strengthening Environment Management Project for a five-year period. The second period commenced from October 2005-2010. According to the plan it covers six areas: law, policy and strategic plan on environment, assessment on environmental effects and environmental inspection, development of the Water Resource and Environment Administration body, education and awareness on environment, report and data dissemination on environment and assisting the provinces to better manage theirs finance.

- **Cambodia**

Political Front

- Govt critics question use of donor aid at annual meeting(eco)

With Cambodia expected to reap a windfall in foreign assistance, the opposition says 'beggar mentality' will persist

EARLY reports that Cambodia will receive nearly US$1 billion in foreign aid for this coming year add a new imperative to the annual debate on the real impact of donor contributions that typically make up half of the government budget. "Cambodia still needs aid, but they way it is used is the real problem," said political veteran Prince Sisowath Thomico."It should be used just to improve certain key sectors like education and health. So far, since 1993, I haven't seen it done this way. It has been given according to the requests of the government."

The government has used this week's donor forum as an opportunity to lay out a new vision for management of the country's resources and to defend itself from criticism from watchdogs and NGOs, releasing a report during the session rebutting a string of recent attacks on land rights and resource extraction.

Prime Minister Hun Sen said Thursday the government would not grant any new land concessions for logging, saying the government would instead focus on collecting revenue from taxes.

Economic Front

- **Fears of instability leading Thais to hoard Cambodian farm products**

Despite surging Thai demand for agricultural goods, Cambodian farmers are still struggling with low prices for produce like corn

THAI businesses are clamoring to buy up Cambodia's agricultural stocks as civil unrest in Bangkok threatens to disrupt their ability to import in the future, business people on the border say.

Ham Paihuot, who has a joint venture with a Thai partner, said demand for corn, cassava, sesame and beans has surged. "The amount of goods being transported is huge and it's been going on every day. They want all the goods to get into Thailand as soon as possible because they worry about the future." But with political tensions between Thailand and Cambodia running high, many importers on the Thai side fear that Cambodian goods shipments could be disrupted by protesters.

Ham Paihuot said trucks carrying the crops pass through checkpoints along the border in Pailin, Battambang, and Banteay Meanchey, and are vulnerable to being intercepted by protesters seeking to halt commercial activity. If the border checkpoints are closed by protestors, factories in Thailand will not be able to operate and will lose a lot of money, he said.

Low prices

Despite higher demand in Thailand, the price of corn remains lower than it was earlier this year. Three months ago, corn sold at 6.3 baht (US$0.17) per kilogram, and now it sells for 4.3 baht a kilogram, he said.

Cheam Chan Saphon, director of the Agriculture Department in Battambang province, said the price of corn and other crops was down because of the dispute over border territory with Thailand. He said Agriculture Minister Chan Sarun has ordered all provincial Agricultural

Departments to inventory local crop production in order to facilitate purchases from foreign buyers.Global corn prices have fallen sharply due to lower biofuel demand

- **New Chinese delegation arrives for economic talks**

200-strong government-business delegation an indication of increasing Chinese involvement in the Cambodian economy

Chinese government and private-sector delegation - the third to visit Cambodia in as many weeks - touched down in Phnom Penh Tuesday evening for talks that officials say will strengthen bilateral ties and mark five decades of diplomatic relations between the two countries."The purpose of the visit is to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the relationship between Cambodia and China," said Qian Hai, first secretary of the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh, adding that Beijing was hoping to sign agreements of cooperation in the fields of education, health and economics during the four-day visit.

The 200-strong delegation, headed by Jia Qingling, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), will hold talks Wednesday with Prime Minister Hun Sen and King Norodom Sihamoni, and take part in a Chaktomuk Theatre ceremony celebrating the continuing ties between the two allies.

According to local officials, the trip is part of a mutually beneficial series of exchanges between the two countries, which hope to strengthen economic ties in the years ahead.

- **China pledges $215m in loans and grants at public-private talks**

Fund package offered by Chinese officials in Beijing last month to boost construction, education, health and tourism sectors

Chinese government-business delegation signed an agreement Wednesday granting Cambodia US$215 million in loans and grants, which officials say will further bolster economic, trade and political links between the two countries.

The funds, pledged by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao during last month's Asia-Europe Meeting in Beijing, include $200 million in loans for infrastructure, health, education and tourism, and an additional $14.52 million in loans and grants, said Information Minister Khieu Kanharith.We have worked together for fruitful results and continue to strengthen ties. Khieu Kanharith added

that China's development would contribute to the peace and development of the region, and that Cambodia had again affirmed its support for the One-China Policy - a central pillar of Beijing's ideology.Sam Rainsy Party lawmaker Yim Sovann said that he welcomed all aid from the international community, but warned that the injection of large amounts of Chinese aid could create accountability concerns.

The Chinese delegation, headed by Jia Qingling, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, arrived in Phnom Penh Tuesday for a four-day visit that includes meetings with King Norodom Sihamoni, Prime Minister Hun Sen and other senior officials.

- **Underpowered energy sector shifts up a gear**

After suffering heavy damage during decades of civil strife, Cambodia's power supply facilities have been significantly improved since the war years, with support from international aid and foreign-funded private sector projects.

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

South Asia

Ghashia Kayani

Weekly Report: from 29 November to 5 December 2008

Presentation: 10 December2008

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Ganotantri Party President receives burn injuries, his son killed in a fire

Ganotantri Party President Nurul Islam received serious burn injuries and his son was killed on the spot in a devastating fire at his Lalmatia residence in the city on Tuesday night.Nurul Islam was given nomination by the Awami League-led grand alliance from the Noakhali-1 constituency. After receiving serious burn, he was rushed to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. When his condition started deteriorating, he was shifted to the Combined Military Hospital (CMH).According to party leaders and activists, when Nurul Islam along with his son Tamohar Islam was in deep sleep, the fire originated from

electric short circuit at about 3:30. Tamohar died on the spot and Nurul Islam received serious burn injuries. Meanwhile, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina yesterday went to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) to know about the condition of Nurul Islam. CPB Secretary Mujahidul Islam Selim, JSD President Hassanul Haque Inu and Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon also visited DMCH to see Nurul Islam.Talking to The Bangladesh Today leaders of Ganotantri Party expressing their grave concern said the incident of fire was not an accident. "It was a sabotage act in order to kill him. Nurul Islam had been issued death threat over cell phone soon after confirmation of his nomination from the Noakhali-1 constituency. On Tuesday when he was on the way to his own constituency, he received a phone call informing him that he was identified as a loan defaulter by the Bangladesh Bank. Later he returned to the capital and went to the Bangladesh Bank to know whether he was a loan defaulter or not. But the bank assured him that he was not a loan defaulter. Then he came to his Lalmatia residence at about midnight," they said.

BNP changes nominees in six seats

In the face of massive protests, BNP has replaced its originally nominated candidates by new ones for parliamentary election in six constituencies. These are Dhaka-19, Laxmipur-1, Laxmipur-2, Noakhali-2, Meherpur-1 and Faridpur-2.The changes were made as per the directive of BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia. Following staging of demonstrations by BNP leaders who were denied nomination, in front of party Chairperson's Gulshan Office, Begum Zia held a closed-door meeting with senior party leaders including Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain, Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Tanvir Ahmed Siddiqui, Moudud Ahmed and Nazrul Islam Khan to resolve the issue. Besides, they discussed overall political and election situation of the country. Abdul Hamid Dublow, son of BNP Secretary General Khandker Delwar Hossain, has been replaced by Dewan Salahuddin in the constituency of Dhaka-19, Nasimuddin Ahmed has been given final nomination for Laxmipur-1, Abul Khair Bhuiyan for Laxmipur-2, Mahfuzur Rahman for Noakhali-2, Masud Arun for Meherpur-1 and Shama Obayed for Faridpur-2. Meanwhile, relations between Begum Khaleda Zia and Khandaker Delwar Hossain have soured over nomination distribution among party leaders. The relations started deteriorating as Begum Khaleda Zia opted for nominating some reformists ignoring the opinion of Delwar Hossain.

McCain urges parties to accept poll results, work together

Visiting US senator and defeated republican presidential candidate John McCain yesterday urged the political parties to accept the election results and work together in the interest of the country.He said the US congress wants to see country's return to democracy through free, fair and credible elections and appreciated the role of Caretaker Government and Bangladesh Army for their efforts to strengthen the

foundation of Bangladesh's democracy. "United States congress has followed political devolvement in Bangladesh over the past two years very closely. The Caretaker Government and Bangladesh Army deserve credit for their efforts to strengthen the foundation of Bangladesh's democracy. The parliamentary election slated for later this month comes at a crucial time in Bangladesh's history," he told the press at Zia International after ending his 11-hours short visit to Bangladesh.Senator John McCain hoped that a elected successor would continue the reform process initiated by this caretaker government during its regime to build sustainable democracy to enhance prosperity for country's people.

State of emergency a negative factor to credible polls: Lambsdroff

Chief observer of EU election observation mission Alexander Graf Lambsdoff on Friday termed state of emergency a negative factor for a credible election and said the role of army in election process is non-existent."It is not ideal to begin an election process under state of emergency… We hope the emergency will be lifted at some point of the election process to ensure a clean environment for election," he told a crowded media conference at Hotel Sheraton.Lambsdroff said had there not been relaxation of emergency rules removing restrictions on freedom of assembly and freedom of expression recently, they would not be here for full observation of the elections scheduled on December 29. He repeatedly expressed the hope that the emergency would be lifted before the elections and referred to Foreign Adviser Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury's public remarks after a meeting with him.Lambsdroff, who also headed the previous EU election observation mission before January 11, 2007, said the situation now is better with flawless voters list and an independent election commission, which he described as positive factor. He, however, called the existence of the state of emergency as a negative factor. Asked about the outcome of his meetings with political parties, Lambsdroff, a Member of European Parliament (MEP), said he found consensus among the stakeholders that elections should take place.

2.4cr children getting polio vaccine: Adviser

About 2.4 crore children will get polio vaccine on the 17th National Immunisation Day on Friday, said Health Adviser AMM Shawkat Ali. During the upcoming couple of Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI) rounds today (Saturday) and January 3, kids aged 5 years and below will be given polio vaccine, those aged 1-5 years will have vitamin-A capsules and children aged 2-5 years will be given deworming pills. Ali launched the day's programme at the EPI building at Mohakhali. "Two million babies are born annually in this country. Hence vaccination programme will be continued until we may eventually declare Bangladesh 'polio-free'." As per health ministry statistics, Bangladesh was declared 'polio-free' when no polio cases were detected after 2002. But in August and Nov 2006, 18 polio cases were reported again. The health ministry announced that to achieve total coverage under the immunisation drive, intense and continuous searches would be carried out for four days following the

administration of each shot of vaccine.

UN wants lifting of emergency before Dec 11 to ensure fair polls

The United Nations (UN) wants lifting of emergency to hold the December 29 parliamentary poll in a meaningful manner."We hope that shortly after December 11, the state of emergency will be lifted and there will be no violence or intimidation during polls so that the minorities can cast their votes freely," said Francese Vendrell, head of UN Secretary General High Level Panel who was addressing the press after completion of a seven day visit to Bangladesh to asses the pre-election situation.He said the United Nation hopes that all political parties would take part in the upcoming general election to make it meaningful."We will talk to all of them afterwards; we want to make sure that there is a acceptable, free and fair election and United Nation wants to see that all parties will accept the election result and work together after poll," said the former UN assistant Secretary General Francesc Vendrell responding to a query as to what the UN expects from the upcoming poll.

Reducing REB electricity price under consideration of govt

Government is considering reducing the price of electricity supplied by Rural Electrification Board (REB) in order to adjust the rates between rural and urban areas."Discussion is on to keep electricity price at the same level in rural and urban areas. Although REB is not hiking price of electricity, the government is considering reducing the REB electricity price. Specially we will attach the highest importance to continuing supply to the rural areas during rice harvesting period so that the villagers do not face power crisis," talking to The Bangladesh Today PDB Chairman Shwakat Ali on Saturday said.Replying to a query that many power based small industries grown up in the remote areas are not able to run their industries, the PDB Chairman denied the allegation and said, "We did receive any complains. It is not correct information." Businessmen who setup small industries at their respective villages, alleged their industries are facing an uphill task to maintain required output level due to random power failure. "As we had been assured of smooth supplying of electricity, we had set up power based small industries but most of the time we can not run our industries due to serious power shortage. Now it is not possible for us to continue our business.

Call centres see better future of business in BD

The country's call centres see better future of the business as more banks and financial institutions are seeking their services for cheaper and faster delivery of their products."We are getting queries from

leading foreign banks and financial institutions to give outsourcing services. This is a good signal for our sector," Ahmadul Hoq, president of Bangladesh Call Centre Forum said. He said the financial institutions now need debt collection services, which the local call centres can provide efficiently. "My company is now in touch with two financial institutions to have a contract to provide debt collection services," he said.Sources at the call centres said debt collection services constitutes sending of electronic mails to the customers, especially those who have failed to repay loans. They said workforce at Bangladesh's around 350 call centres can easily do the job charging lower rates.

Govt asked to implement Tobacco Control Act

A large number of people of the country die every year due to tobacco related diseases and if this habit continues more people will be infected and die due to random use of tobacco, apprehended experts and physicians at discussion on 'Tobacco Control' held at the National Press Club on Sunday.National Professor and eminent Physician Professor Nurul Islam, Consumer Association of Bangladesh (CAB) President Kazi Faruque and physicians and experts from different organisations took part in the discussion. Around three crore people of the country are using tobacco. As a result a large number of people die in tobacco related diseases. In 2007 some 57 thousand people died due to the reason and this rate is increasing day by day, the experts said. They said some 37 per cent people who are above 15 years of age, are using various tobaccos. Tobacco, specially cigarettes and bidi worth taka 9.5 thousand crore are burnt in Bangladesh each year. If the government is able to control the use of tobacco, around one crore people suffering from malnutrition, will get sufficient food. Quoting World Bank Report, the experts said at least 1.1 billion people are cigarette smokers. If this trend is continuing, within 2025 the number of smokers will be stand at 1.6 billion. As a result around 5 crore people will die during this period for using tobacco.

Awami League agrees to give 50 seats to Jatiya Party

Resolving all crisis over seat sharing Awami League on Monday agreed to give 50 seats to its political partner Jatiya Party (Ershad) for contesting the ensuing parliamentary election. After holding a prolonged meeting between the two parties at AL President Sheikh Hasina's Sudhasadan residence, JP(Ershad) Acting President Anisul Islam Mahmud told reporters "At last we have come to a conclusion about seat sharing. Awami League has decided to give us 50 seats. Now there is no uncertainty and confusion among us to contest the coming poll jointly under grand alliance led by Awami League. " He added they are now busy taking preparation for coming election and all activities are concentrated on getting votes. "Our main objective is to form a truly democratic government through this election and we are hopeful that an expected change will come after this poll," he said. Meanwhile, a four member

team of the International Press Institute after a meeting with Awami League President Sheikh Hasina and members of the party on Monday demanded freedom of work of journalists during the coming parliamentary election.

President, CA greet Laotian counterparts

President Professor Dr Iajuddin Ahmed and Chief Adviser Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed have felicitated their Laotian counterparts on the occasion of National Day of Laos that falls today (Tuesday). In a message to Laotian President Choummaly Saya-sone, Prof Iajuddin said, "Bangladesh and Laos share excellent bilateral relations and I firmly believe that this strong bond of friendship and mutual cooperation will continue to grow in depth and dimension in the days ahead."Prof Iajuddin wished him good health, happiness and long life and for the continued peace, progress and prosperity of the friendly people of Laos.Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed in a separate message to Laotian Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh said, " I remain confident that the long standing bonds of friendship and cooperation that so happily existed between our two friendly countries will further widen and deepen in the days ahead."The CA wished good health, long life and happiness of Bouphavanh and for the continued peace, progress and prosperity of the friendly people of Laos.

Govt orders re-tenders for Bibiana, Sirajganj plants

The Power Division has ordered re-tenders for two proposed 450MW power plants at Bibiana and Sirajganj, a top official said on Tuesday. Power Division Secretary M Fouzul Kabir Khan told bdnews24.com that the government had instructed the department concerned to serve re-tender notice for the two power plants. He also said orders had been given to accelerate the implementation of the 150 megawatt power plant in the coastal district of Bhola. Power division officials have said Malaysia's Powertek Consortium was the only bidder for the 450MW power plant at Bibiana in Habiganj."The advisory committee on government purchase had to cancel the tender because of the overpriced quotation by Powertek and subsequently order the re-tender," a high official at the ministry of energy and mineral resources said. Powertek quoted 4.399 cents per kilowatt hour of sales against its previous offer of 4.53 cents, said the official, familiar with the matter. The Power Division primarily chose four bidders under technical selection but only Powertek Consortium, with its two associates Korean Electric Power Company (KEPCO) of South Korea and German Siemens, finally submitted the tender.

SRILANKA:

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- **Turkey and Sri Lanka to cooperate against terrorism**

Merchant Credit income up by 20 percent

The income for the last 10 months has grown by 20 percent compared to 2007, despite the difficult economic period. This was revealed at a press conference held to announce its 25th Anniversary, held at Cinnamon Grand Hotel. Janaka Ratnayake, Chairman, Merchant Credit said that their deposit base has grown to Rs 2.2 billion and the income derived from loans and advances have grown by 81 percent

compared to the corresponding period in 2007. He said that they expect to end the year on a positive note in terms of profitability.

US Government donates $100,000 for flood relief

The United States Government will provide $100,000 for emergency relief to assist people affected by the flooding in the North and the East. This action comes in response to a request for assistance to USAID from the Sri Lankan Disaster Management Centre. The US donation will be used for non-food relief items and targeted to victims in Jaffna and in the Vanni, where particularly serious flooding has occurred in recent days. UNICEF will administer the donation in coordination with local authorities. Ambassador Blake requested funds from the US government after Major General Hettiarachchi of the Disaster Management Centre asked for American assistance.

Pusa says any PAC should have broad consensus of all parties

NPCC president KV Pusa said any Political Affairs Committee working for the unity or reconciliation or any matter relating to the Naga issue should have broad consensus of all political parties. Because Naga issue does not belong to any party but belongs to the Naga people, he told the NEPS here at his Office Chamber, Congress Bhavan today. The NPCC president said the current PAC of ruling DAN government could not represent all the Naga people. Because it is restricted to certain political parties, he said. "If we are going to have such Political Affairs Committee to work for the oneness and unity among the various sections of the Naga society, it should have broad consensus of all political parties," he pointed out.

Recognising Sri Lankas' Strenghts

"Protect Lanka" believes that Sri Lanka has entered a critical milestone in the history of its war against terrorism. For the first time, there is a well focused, planned strategy with adequate resources to dilute and eventually eliminate the forces of terrorism which has maintained a stranglehold on our nation. We are able to exercise our right to protection from terrorism.

Tamil Nadu lawmakers renew pressure on Delhi for 'ceasefire' in 'Eelam War'

The Lanka Tamil issue is once again coming to the front pages in India with lawmakers from Tamil Nadu putting pressure on Delhi to ensure ceasefire in the Eelam War IV. Significantly, the Congress leaders from the state have closed ranks with the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Members of Indian Parliament of Congress, DMK, PMK, and the breakaway group of MDMK from Tamil Nadu and adjoining erstwhile French territory, Pondicherry MPs meet Prime Minister Manmohan Singh here and made out a case for India's intervention in Sri Lanka and immediate ceasefire.

Turkey and Sri Lanka to cooperate against terrorism

Ankara Guard of Honor"**Ankara Guard of Honor**Addressing the media after the signing of two bi-lateral agreements between Turkey and Sri Lanka President Abdullah Gul said Turkey and Sri Lanka share a common problem of terrorism and with new progress in the relationship between our two countries there is greater cooperation in facing the challenge of terrorism. Enhanced relationship in addition to facing the threat of terrorism would also help to greatly improve the strait between two countries, he said.

Sri Lanka, UN Agencies Continue Relief Efforts in Flood-Hit North

UN relief officials are continuing to assist authorities in the conflict-wracked north of Sri Lanka respond to flooding that has displaced more than 70,000 people and affected 300,000 others. A UN inter-agency assessment of civilian needs in Northern province's Jaffna district – the district hardest hit by the floods – has been carried out, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported today. In Jaffna alone, about 62,000 people have been forced to flee their homes because of the floods, which followed days of heavy rains, and are now living in nearly 250 separate camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). More than 5,900 houses have been badly damaged and another 13,300 are partially damaged.

"Sri Lanka Vanoli" to establish a link of friendship between India and Sri Lanka

"To establish a link of friendship between the two countries; India and Sri Lanka" said, the chairman of the SLBC Mr. Hudson Samarasinghe, clasping his hands in a gesture of unity, in reply to a question posed by the Asian Tribune. He is happy and full of gusto for, the new radio service; "Sri Lanka Vanoli" started only a little over a month ago is already gaining popularity. Looking at a senior employee of the Corporation he said, "can you remember how even Sri Nehru talked about our service those days, I want to bring it to that stage or to go beyond".

Sri Lanka President arrived in Turkey on a state visit

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa arrived in Ankara late on Monday on an official visit at the invitation of his Turkish counterpart, Abdullah Gül. Pres?dent Mah?nda Rajapaksa and Sh?ranth? Rajapaksa arr?ved were received by Kemal Onal Governor of Ankara at Ankara Esenboga Internat?onal A?rport when he arrived yesterday evening from Rome. Sri Lanka's President whilst in Turkey will hold talks with President Gul, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Speaker Koksal Toptan and several other top level Turkish representatives, today before traveling to ?stanbul tomorrow.

Acting FM elaborates on action taken to evacuate stranded Sri Lankans in Bangkok

Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hussein A. Bhaila has told Parliament that a scheduled SriLankan Airlines flight from Hong Kong to Colombo was diverted to a military airbase in Thailand yesterday to evacuate 110 Sri Lankans who had been stranded in Bangkok, following the closure of the main airports there, consequent to the current unrest in the Thai capital. Making a Statement on the floor of the House today (02nd December 2008), the Acting Minister disclosed that a second SriLankan Airlines flight

is also due to pick up more passengers from Bangkok today and bring them home.

Sri Lankan expatriates in Vienna express support to Ranaviru families

The Embassy of Sri Lanka in Vienna, Austria has launched a Ranaviru Assistance Programme on Sunday 30th November 2008 at the official residence of Ambassador to support the Ranaviru families. The event began with one minute silence for the fallen heroes and followed by religious observances from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Islamic religious faiths to invoke blessings on SLDF members and the country. The Buddhist religious event was presided by Ven. Dr. Wijayarajapura Seelawansa Thero of Austria Buddhist Vihara.

Sri Lanka: President calls for global action to fight terrorism

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa says the Mumbai terrorist attacks should remind everyone about the risk of terrorism and the need for international cooperation to stop it. Rajapaksa spoke to Adnkronos International (AKI) during an unofficial visit to the Italian capital Rome where he was to meet Pope Benedict XVI on Monday. "It is an eye opener to everybody in the international community because it targeted foreigners especially Americans, British and Israelis," Rajapaksa said. "It is like 9/11 (attacks) in India - an experience that everyone must take seriously."

Christians remembered soldiers martyred to safeguard the freedom of Sri Lanka

By this holy mass, Christians of the United kingdom remembered with gratitude – and gave thanks for the brave and determined soldiers, sailors and airmen and women who have sacrificed their lives to protect Sri Lanka against what is perhaps the most evil form of terrorism in the world said Rev. Tony de Alwis addressing a service of remembrance and thanksgiving holy mass at the Church of St. Mary Magdalen, Willesden Greeen, London.

Sri Lanka faces a daunting task in the midst of a global financial crisis - Dr. Palitha T.B. Kohona

Despite the undoubted uncertainty in the financial sector, Sri Lankla Government is committed to pursuing its policy goals of achieving economic and social progress, with special emphasis on bridging regional disparities through rural livelihood and infrastructure development. Rural development remains a priority for the government. The major infrastructure development projects which are already underway, are clearly demonstrative of this commitment to ensure that the fruits of prosperity are shared equitably. The Budget proposals of 2009 that were recently submitted to Parliament, are ample evidence of this policy approach of the government, emphasized Dr. Palitha T.B. Kohona.

President Mahinda Rajapakse in Rome to meet the Pope

Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapakse is expected to arrive in Rome this morning with a small delegation to meet Pope Benedict XVI on Monday and then to proceed to Ankara, Turkey on a two-day state visit. President Mahinda Rajapakse, First Lady Shiranthi Rajapakse, President's Secretary Lalith Weeratunga, Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama, Mrs. Bogollagama, Presidnt's Coordinating Secreatary Sajin Vas Gunawaednena left by the inaugural Sri Lanka airlines - national carrier, in its inaugural flight to Colombo – Rome yesterday evening from Colombo. Sri Lankan President is to meet

Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican on Monday. This will be Mahinda Rajapaksa's second audience with the Pope. He had his first audience in April this year when he visited Rome to participate in the FAO conference.

Sri Lanka Tamil Tigers swipes hard at United States alleging US favor Sinhalese in East development

The LTTE sniper attack that hit the air craft carrying American Ambassador Robert Blake in a Sri Lankan eastern district city last year was accidental according to a statement issued by the LTTE immediately after the incident. But, here is a direct attack on the United States' development assistance policy toward Sri Lanka by the Tamil Tigers clearly manifested in its web site TamilNet of 28 November using a TNA proxy parliamentarian to convey to the US that her development assistance policy toward Sri Lanka's east is only benefiting the Sinhalese.

UN Aid Agencies Bring Relief To Flood-Hit Northern Sri Lanka

Three United Nations agencies are offering relief to tens of thousands of Sri Lankans who have been displaced from their homes after floods struck at least five districts in the north of the island nation this week. Aid agencies held a coordination meeting in the town of Jaffna today to plan their response to the floods, which follow several days of heavy rains, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported. Sufficient stocks of relief items, including food and shelter materials, are available across the Jaffna peninsula to help affected families for the next few days. The region is already affected by the conflict between Government forces and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Sri Lanka Mission in Bangkok sets up an Emergency Coordinating Desk

The Sri Lanka Embassy in Bangkok has set up an emergency help desk to assist stranded Sri Lankans in Thailand as a result of the closure of two airports in Bangkok. Suvarnabhumi airport, the main international airport and Bangkok's main domestic airport, Don Muang, have been closed due to the escalation of anti-government protests. The Sri Lankan Mission in Bangkok has informed that the Emergency Coordinating Desk will operate daily including weekends from 0800 to 2200 hours and will remain open until the situation returns to normalcy.

LTTE's overtures to India will not find accommodation - Sri Lanka FM

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama has said that Velupillai Prabhakaran's overtures to India contained in his latest message yesterday will not find accommodation. The Minister made this observation in the course of a Statement in Parliament today (28 November 2008), on the terrorist attacks in Mumbai on 26 November 2008. Condemning this terrorist atrocity, Minister Bogollagama referred to President Mahinda Rajapaksa's statement issued yesterday, in which he had drawn attention to "the urgent need for concerted action by all countries to eradicate terrorism, wherever it is, and

whoever the leaders and manipulators of such violence may be."

Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister condemns terrorist outrage in Mumbai

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama has strongly condemned the multiple terrorist attacks on the Indian financial hub of Mumbai last night (26 November 2008), which claimed the lives of over a hundred civilians and left scores of others injured. In a message to his Indian counterpart, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister has stated that the savage terrorist attacks underscore the urgent need to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. He has also expressed Sri Lanka's readiness to stand shoulder to shoulder with India in the fight against this menace, with resolve, which poses a clear danger to international peace and security.

Tamil Tiger Terrorist Leader's Speech Unplugged in Toronto

The Tamil Tiger Terrorist front organizations' well kept secret of the special location where the faithful cadres and the intimidated Diaspora sheep had been herded to listen to the Mass Murderer cum Birthday Boy wanted by Interpol , Velupillai Prabhakaran, the Tiger Supremo and Sun God's (Surya Thevan) annual gripe and threats against those standing in the way of his mythical Tamil Eelam/Eezham Empire, had somehow leaked to the Canadian authorities prior to the first light of dawn from the Rising Sun's rays as the world turned to welcome the 27th day of November.

Indian politicians must mind their own business and not of Sri Lankan affairs

Dr.Madhuri S.Balaji, India's Consultant on Diabetes says that Sri Lankan government should end the terrorism menace once and for all and not provide any opportunity for its ugly head to rare again for ever. She said most of the Indian politicians are shedding crocodile tears on Sri Lankan Tamils but their aim is to grab more Tamil votes for political power. "Most Indians have no idea about Sri Lankan conflict and sufferings of Tamil in Sri Lanka. At present government forces have already 90 percent of the land area and near to close the terrorist activities in Sri Lanka," she said.

NEPAL:

POLITICAL:

- **Ruling coalition fails to court NC into special committee**
- **'No one has moral authority to ask for return of seized property'**
- **Top cop admits political intervention in police force is real**
- **Political committee announced, Gurung named acting chief**
- **PM discusses coalition strategy with UML gen secy**
- **Committee formed to probe scribe's killing**

- **UML asks Maoists to rope in NC in the special committee**

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- **Tourist inflow increases in Nepal despite global recession**
- **Terai armed group burns down passenger bus, one dead**
- **Govt forms panel to study its hydropower ambition**

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- **Govt to reward pro-active taxmen**
- **Petroleum prices go down again**
- **Allowance to save Bankariyas from going the Dodo way**

GEO-STRATEGIC:

- **PM gets invite for China visit**
- **Boucher's visit suspended**

UML asks Maoists to rope in NC in the special committee

The Unified Marxist Leninist (UML) has asked the Maoists to rope in Nepali Congress (NC) in the special committee on army integration.The UML is a major ally in the ruling coalition led by the Maoists while NC is the main opposition.A delegation of UML led by its general secretary Jhal Nath Khanal met with Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Wednesday, and made this request.The UML team told the PM that without the participation of NC, the committee will become meaningless.Although the government had formed the committee led by UML leader and Deputy Prime Minister Bamdev Gautam a month ago, the NC has stayed away from it demanding equal participation and implementation of past pacts.The committee has two members from the Maoists and the NC has also demanded two members from its side. The NC has also demanded that terms of reference of the committee be same as was agreed in earlier pacts.

Boucher's visit suspended

The visit by the United States Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Richard Boucher has been suspended.The US official was slated to come to Nepal Tuesday next week.The Ministry of Foreign Affairs sources have said that the US Embassy has notified that the visit has been suspended, reports Kantipur daily.

Committee formed to probe scribe’s killing

The government has formed a probe committee to investigate into the mysterious murder of

Dhangadhi-based journalist Jagat Prasad Joshi. A cabinet meeting held Wednesday constituted a three-member probe committee under advocate Umesh Prasad Gautam. Advocate Shailkram Sapkota and journalist Mahendra Bista are two other members of the committee. The meeting also decided to hand out “relief package” to the kin of the slain journalist.Meanwhile, the government is all set to form a judicial commission to look into the instances of violation of press freedom. The Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ) said that Minister of Information and Communication Krishna Bahadur Mahara has informed it that the soon-to-be formed commission will probe the murder of journalist Joshi and other instances of press freedom violation.

Allowance to save Bankariyas from going the Dodo way

Local administration in Hetauda has said it will hand out Rs 500 as ‘monthly allowance’ to each member of the near-extinct Bankariya ethnic community in Hetauda.
The Maoist led government had in its budget presented a few months back announced that a monthly allowance of Rs 500 will be given to Dalits and ethnic communities that are at the verge of extinction. Bankariyas feature in the list of ten ethnic communities of the country that are at the verge of extinction. Numbering around 77, they mostly live in and around Makwanpur district. They will get the monthly allowance meant to save them from possible extinction from mid-June 2009

Petroleum prices go down again

The Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) slashed the prices of petroleum products on Wednesday. The decision comes in the wake of constant decline in the price of crude oil in the international market.A meeting of the NOC board decided to lower the price of petrol, diesel, kerosene and aviation fuel each by Rs 5 per litre. Petrol will now cost Rs 85 per litre, aviation fuel Rs 90 and diesel and kerosene Rs 60 per litre respectively.However, the price of cooking gas remains same.Likewise, the NOC has levied 50 paise 'pollution tax' on per litre of petrol, kerosene and diesel for Kathmandu Valley.Earlier, the NOC had reduced petroleum prices twice within a couple of months.

PM discusses coalition strategy with UML gen secy

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and CPN (UML) general secretary Jhala Nath Khanal met today, discussing the contentious issue of army integration and other matters related to smooth functioning of the coalition government.Emerging from the meeting at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in Singha

Durbar, Khanal said that he asked the Prime Minister to adopt a liberal approach regarding the composition of the army integration special committee by 'considering' the demand of the Nepali Congress.Dispute over the number of representatives in the special committee should be resolved right away so as not to further complicate the integration issue, Khanal added, referring to the NC's demand that it should have two representatives should it join the panel.Khanal informed that he also asked the Prime Minister to start homework to set up committees and commissions on state restructuring and involuntary disappearances.The meeting between the Prime Minister and UML general secretary comes at a time when some UML leaders including K.P Sharma Oli are expressing dissatisfaction over the functioning of the coalition cabinet. Few days earlier, Oli went on to say that the UML should now rethink its participation in the Maoist-led government.

Political committee announced, Gurung named acting chief

The ruling parties have finally announced the formation of political committee that acts as the advisory body of the coalition government.The new committee has 12 members including two from each political party in the government as agreed earlier.The meeting of the committee, in absence of UML leader Madhav Kumar Nepal, named Maoist leader Dev Gurung as its chief for the time being. Nepal was expected to lead the political committee.According to the final decision, UML will be represented by Nepal and Surendra Pandey, CPN (Maoist) by Gurung and Barsha Man Pun, Madhesi Janadhikar Forum by Upendra Yadav and Sarat Singh Bhandari, Sadbhawana Party by Laxman Lal Karna and Ram Naresh Raya, Janamorcha by Lila Mani Pokhrel and Girijaraj Mani Pokhrel and CPN (United) by Chandra Dev Joshi. CPN (united) said it would send another name by Thursday.The next meeting of the committee has been rescheduled for Thursday to prepare its working strategy paper.

Govt forms panel to study its hydropower ambition

The cabinet meeting, Wednesday, has formed a 15-member taskforce to study the prospects of generating 10,000 MW power in ten years.The panel will be headed by Somnath Pokharel. According to government spokesperson and Minister for Information and Communication Krishna Bahadur Mahara, the government will proceed with its target of harnessing 10,000 MW hydropower in ten years after receiving recommendations from the taskforce.The cabinet has also formed a committee to probe the killing of journalist Jagat Joshi in far western Nepal. The three-member probe panel is headed by advocated Umesh Prasad Gautam.The meeting also decided to carry out programme to eradicate illiteracy within two years. The programme will take off on December 16.

Top cop admits political intervention in police force is real

Inspector General of Nepal Police Hem Bahadur Gurung today admitted, although cautiously, that political pressure on the police force is real.Speaking to media persons at the Police Headquarters, IGP Gurung said that as in the past the police force has had its share of political intervention at present, but its actions are not influenced by political interest. He said all concerned sides should cooperate in doing away with political intervention.Alluding to the quasi-policing activities of youth groups of political

parties like the Young Communist League of CPN-Maoist and CPN-UML's Youth Force, Gurung said his department "won't go after any particular political organisation, but criminals elements won't be spared".He also unveiled a 12-point work plan to improve the security situation in the country. The work plan includes beefing up the presence of the police in sensitive areas including highways, increased patrolling, and enhancing of the communication system of the police.

PM gets invite for China visit

A week after President Dr Ram Baran Yadav received invitation for a India visit, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal received a similar invitation from northern neighbour China for an official visit.The invitation to Dahal was handed over by visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi during a meeting held at Baluwatar Wednesday morning.During the meeting, the Chinese minister appreciated the initiatives taken by Nepal government to control the demonstrations against China during and after the Olympic games.The two leaders stressed on the need to establish peace in Nepal that will also benefit China in the long run with China expressing commitment to extend all possible support for restoring political stability and peace here.PM Dahal reiterated Nepal's longstanding one China policy and to ban all activities in Nepal aimed against the northern communist neighbour.Dahal further said Nepal expects further support from China that will help boost economic condition of the country.

'No one has moral authority to ask for return of seized property'

At a time when various political parties including the main opposition Nepali Congress have been arguing that the return of seized properties by Maoists is critical for the peace process, a senior Maoist leader has said no one including his own party has the "moral right" to ask for the return of the land "already distributed to poor farmers and peasants".C.P Gajurel, who is the central secretariat member of CPN (Maoist), said that only after the state makes alternative arrangement for the farmers will the [seized] land be returned to its rightful owners, clearly hinting that it will take some time for that to happen.This remark from a leader who belongs to a more radical coterie inside the Maoist party contradicts Prime Minister and Chairman of Maoist party Puspa Kamal Dahal's public avowal that his party will soon return the house and land property it seized during the insurgency period.Speaking to a select group of journalists in Chitwan, the Maoist leader said that landlord activists and leaders of NC and United Marxist Leninist may have also grabbed some houses and land property.On the issue of army integration, he said that it is getting very difficult to rope in NC into the Army Integration Special Committee because of the party's "unusual stance" and dismissed any possibility of "equal participation" of NC and Maoists in it.He also accused NC of violating past agreements by expressing dissatisfaction on the modalities for army integration.

Govt to reward pro-active taxmen

The cabinet has endorsed the proposal forwarded by the Finance Ministry for the upward revision of allowance of government employees working in customs and taxes. According to The Kathmandu Post, these staff members, as per the new policy, will be entitled to an extra payment of up to 200 percent of basic salary depending on their performance in collecting revenue. The cabinet meet decided to

implement the increment from November 16. The new policy will be implemented at all 22 custom offices under the Inland Revenue Department (IRD). Nevertheless, it is learnt that employees working at the central level of the IRD and the Department of Customs (DoC) will not be enjoying this performance-based incentive as they are nor directly engaged in collecting revenue.

Terai armed group burns down passenger bus, one dead

A man was burnt to death alive when gunmen belonging to little-known Madhesh Rastra Janatantrik Party (MRJP) set a passenger bus to fire in Saptari Tuesday night, reports Kantipur Daily.The gunmen burned the passenger bus (registration no 6455) heading to Eastern Nepal from Kathmandu near Birendra Bazaar section of the East-West Highway, saying that it had violated the strike imposed by them in the area.Eyewitnesses told the paper that the gunmen immediately doused the bus in petrol and set fire to it without even giving the night bus passengers enough time to get off from the bus.The report said that the passengers managed to come out from what could be their death trap by breaking open the bus door after the fire started to rapidly engulf the bus.Police said that a male passenger at the back of the bus was burnt to death alive. His identity has not been known yet.The gunmen had at first tried to stop the bus carrying about 40 passengers. But after it didn't stop the armed group fired at it and flattened its tires.Passengers said that the gunmen then robbed them off their mobile phones, cash and jewelleries at gun point, burnt the bus and fled from the scene.One of many rag-tag armed groups involved in low-intensity terrorist activities in Terai, MRJP had called the strike in protest of the killing of one of its members in police operation few weeks back.The outfit has already taken responsibility for the arson.

Ruling coalition fails to court NC into special committee

The opposition party Nepali Congress (NC) has reiterated its conditions before joining the special committee on army integration.Senior leaders of the major four parties including three of the ruling coalition – Maoists, UML and MJF – and main opposition Nepali Congress (NC) held talks, Tuesday morning in Baluwatar, focusing on expanding the special committee.Emerging out from the talks, NC vice president Ram Chandra Poudel said that his party reiterated its demand that the special committee on army integration be reconstituted by involving two members from it, among others, before the party can consider joining it.Poudel also demanded that the government first fulfill its nine-point memorandum before it can extend cooperation to the government.The process of initiating army integration has been in limbo since NC declined to be a part of the special committee.Currently, the committee consists of two members from Maoists and one each from UML and MJF.

Tourist inflow increases in Nepal despite global recession

Against the fear that the world economic crisis would affect Nepal's tourist industry, the tourist arrival by air in November increased by 6.6 percent compared to the same month last year, Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) said.Quoting figures released by the Immigration Office at the Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA), NTB said, in November, 36,851 visitors arrived in Nepal and the total number of visitors till

November 2008 has reached 344,599, an increase of 4.3 percent in comparison to the same period last year.The entire South Asian region has showed overall positive growth except for arrivals from India. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan have registered growth by 81.3 percent, 59.1 percent and 29.5 percent respectively while India witnessed negative growth of 9.5 percent.Thailand and Malaysia have maintained the upward trend with 45.7 percent and 34.5 percent of growth respectively. However, arrivals from Japan, South Korea, Singapore and China witnessed negative growth in the arrival figures by 2 percent, 15.5 percent, 14.3 percent, and 4.6 percent respectively.UK, France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and Sweden have also maintained the increasing trend in the arrival figures. Arrivals from the United States of America and Canada have also increased in November but Germany, Italy and Spain have registered negative growth.

MALDIVES:

POLITICAL:

- **Gasim Resigns as Home Minister; future of coalition threatened**
- **Majlis starts bills on new Majlis constituencies and elections**
- **Resources can be better used in decentralized administration – President**
- **Former President's Son Ahmed Nasir to join MDP and run for Parliament**

SOCIAL:

- **Gayyoom has called for the protection of small nation from environmental threats**
- **We do not want to live as environmental refugees – President**
- **HRC express concern over human rights violations in Reethi Rah**
- **Heavy rains cause flooding in Inguraidhoo**
- **Human Rights statement one sided: Gasim**

ECONOMIC:

- **MPs debate over 50 year resort lease and import duty**
- **Maldives formally accepts the ILO obligations**
- **Government submits bill on business tax**
- **MIFCO staff food allowances raised by 52%**

GEO-STRATEGIC:

- **Maldives President Nasheed meets British High Commissioner**
- **President urges World Bank to prioritize Maldives private sector**
- **President Rajapaksa invites President Nasheed to visit Sri Lanka**
- **President Nasheed condemns terror attacks in Mumbai**

Human Rights statement one sided: Gasim

Home Minister Gasim Ibrahim has said the decision to send police to One and Only Reethi Rah resort was not in violation of the right to strike, but in response to the concerns and requests which were received from the owners of the resort regarding the safety of property and other belongings of the resort. Gasim has also denied the accusations made by Human Rights Commission condemning the actions of the police in the resort and said Human Rights statement has not looked into the two sides of the incident. " I have performed my legal duty. When a certain people have requested for help from the police for safety, I have to take action. Police was not sent there to break a strike which is a right given by the constitution. Police was sent because the owners of the resort made repeated requests for police to come for their help in fear that the strike held by some staff of the resort whose services have been terminated, might cause damage to the staff and property." Gasim explained the reason for sending police to the resort. Home Minister further said it is difficult to accept the statement of the Human Rights Commission. The Ministe blamed the Commission for issuing a one-sided statement. He accused the Commission has not looked into the depth of the incident. The Minister stated it was not correct and responsible for such a Commission to make their judgement and issue a statement only after hearing the stories of strikers. Human Rights Commission officials were not there at the time of the happening, Gasim pointed out.

Former President's Son Ahmed Nasir to join MDP and run for Parliament

The former president and those close to him will not be excluded from the political arena or harmed in any manner under the MDP coalition government, President Mohamed Nasheed (Anni) has said. Unlike the previous regime - known for their persecution of former President Ibrahim Nasir's friends and family - Nasheed believes that they should be given the opportunity to remain an opposition party and participate in local politics. "I am referring to the manner in which the former government dealt with President Nasir and his family. We do not want our former leaders to suffer the way that Nasir was made to suffer. We do not want to force them into exile. They will always be welcome in the country. They will also be able to participate in local politics and be critical of the government." Nasheed said. President Nasheed also mentioned that he had received reports of President Ibrahim Nasir's son, Ahmed Nasir's intention to join the MDP and contend in the upcoming parliamentary elections as a token of his support for the present government and their policies.

President Nasheed condemns terror attacks in Mumbai

President Mohamed Nasheed has sent a message of sympathy to President of India, Prathiba Patil, on learning about the deadly explosions and gun fire that had occurred among high profile locations in Mumbai. President Nasheed in his message expressed that the Government and the people of the

Maldives were deeply shocked and horrified to learn about the deadly explosions and gun fire that had occurred among high profile locations in Mumbai killing large number of people and wounding scores more. President Nasheed on behalf of the government and people of Maldives strongly condemn the terrorist attacks and expressed firm resolve to stand together in the fight against terrorism.

Heavy rains cause flooding in Inguraidhoo

The recent heavy rains on Raa Atoll Inguraidhoo have caused major flooding of the island, according to Maldives Police Services. Police informed that at least 4 houses were affected by the rising water levels, which reached levels of 2ft in some areas. The worst hit areas were the school district where the island's main mosque is also located and that the 4 houses that were affected by the flooding were also located in this area. However, according to Police reports, no significant damage was caused by the flooding. Police informed that the flooding was finally brought under control by a collaborative effort between the citizens of the island and police officers stationed in the atoll. Many of the atoll islands are being affected by heavy rains this season.

HRC express concern over human rights violations in Reethi Rah

Human Rights Commission of Maldives (HRCM) has called on the government to strengthen the work of the Labor Relations Authority and establish the Employment Tribunal called for in the Employment Act at the earliest. The call was made in a statement issued with regard to the ongoing strike by staff of the 5 Star Luxury resort one and only Reethi Rah Resort. HRCM in the statement expressed concern that unless the dispute is solved amicably, and all parties concerned follow the spirit of the employment act, the tourism industry of Maldives may be adversely affected.

Resources can be better used in decentralized administration - President

President Mohamed Nasheed has said that better use of our resources can be made in a decentralized administration. President Nasheed made the statement after inaugurating a workshop on decentralization of administration of atolls, which was being held at Addu atoll. President Nasheed visited Addu Atoll on Sunday morning, after concluding his visit to Fuvahmulah. Speaking at the ceremony, President Nasheed said that the benefits of decentralization would be shared by all Maldivians. He also said that that in a multi-party political system, to reach an agreement we need not be from the same island, instead party ideology and policies could be the basis of mutual consensus. Further, he stressed that he wanted to carry out his responsibilities through democratic means and not by creating division among the people.

President Rajapaksa invites President Nasheed to visit Sri Lanka

President of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa has extended an invitation to President Nasheed, to make a state visit to Sri Lanka. The invitation letter was presented to Special Envoy of the President, Mr. Ibrahim Hussain Zaki, during his courtesy call on President Rajapaksa. During Zaki's unofficial visit to Sri Lanka, he met with the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, Rohitha Bogollagama; Foreign Secretary; Defense Secretary; the British High Commissioner and the American Ambassador. He also participated in a one-one show of MTV.

We do not want to live as environmental refugees – President

President Nasheed said that he does not want Maldivians to live as refugees in the event that rising sea levels force the country under water. Instead, he wants Maldivians to be financially prepared for such a disaster. President Nasheed spoke to Miadhu reporters, attempting to clear up some of the confusion in the wake of the national panic that followed Nasheed's now infamous remark regarding the purchase of a homeland. "The government hasn't been able to provide adequate shelter for our own tsunami victims even after four years." He said. "I shudder to think of what would happen if all of us ended up as refugees on foreign soil. I want us to be cautious and to save for the future."

MIFCO staff food allowances raised by 52%

Maldives Industrial Fisheries Company has increased food allowances for their employees by 52%, in consideration of the rise in domestic prices of goods and services. The raise, which was put into effect yesterday, came after a long period of petitioning by the staff and was authorized by the Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture Mr. Ibrahim Didi. A board of directors has yet to be appointed to the company and its affairs are presently conducted under the guidance of Mr. Didi. MIFCO's Managing Director Mr. Mohamed Shainee told Miadhu that this year's budget will be able to accommodate the increase in expenditure.

President urges World Bank to prioritize Maldives private sector

President Mohamed Nasheed (Anni) has said that he had requested the World Bank officials to priorities the Maldives' private sector over the Government in extending loan facilities. He made this statement at a press briefing held today, on establishing a transport network in the Maldives. He also noted that the

Government does not wish the transfer of people's homes from one island to another and the Government's long term plan was to open a national fund that would assist us in protecting ourselves form climate change calamities.

Maldives President Nasheed meets British High Commissioner

President Mohamed Nasheed has met with the British High Commissioner to the Maldives, Dr. Peter Hayes. The meeting was held this afternoon, at the President's Office. Speaking at the meeting President Nasheed and the High Commissioner discussed ways of further strengthening bilateral relations and possible areas of cooperation between the Maldives and the United Kingdom. President Nasheed also briefed Dr. Hayes on the Government's policies in delivering its pledges to the people.

Majlis starts bills on new Majlis constituencies and elections

The People's Majlis has completed the first reading of 2 important bills submitted by the Government which would govern the composition of the extended Majlis and Majlis election. The two bills were compiled by the Attorney General's Office in accordance with the new Constitution. The two bills will deal on these two issues in detail and need to be enacted before the parliamentary election to be held before the 15 of February 2009. The bill on Majlis election will address procedures and other matters pertaining to holding free and fair election of members of the Majlis in accordance to the new Constitution. The new Majlis will be comprised of 76 seats representing 76 constituencies. Every administrative region will have 2 seats and an additional seat for every 5000 population exceeding a population of 5000. According to this distribution, Male' will have 11 seats, HA 4, HDh 5, Sh 4, N 3, R 5, B 3, Lh 3, K 3, Aa 2, Adh 2, V 2, M 2, F 2, Dh 2, Th 3, L 4, Ga 3, GDh 4, Gn 3, Seenu 6.

Government submits bill on business tax

The Government has submitted to the People's Majlis a bill on business tax to be introduced soon. The bill will deal with procedures on levying duty on profits of businesses. This is a move announced by President Mohamed Nasheed as a measure to generate revenue for the government expenditure. Minister of Finance Ali Hashim has also told the People's Majlis when he proposed the Government Budget for 2009 about the intention of the Government to raise revenue through introduction of a business profit tax. Another bill pertaining to the administrative mechanism of such a tax has also been submitted to the Majlis. The Majlis is expected to deliberate on these bills as soon as possible. However, the current session will be concluded at the end of the month and the present Majlis will not be meeting anymore. A new Majlis will be elected by 15 February 2009.

Gayyoom has called for the protection of small nation from environmental threats

Former president Gayyoom is currently attending the two day meeting on the 'Clinton global initiative', held in Hong Kong, upon a special invitation extended by the former president of the United States, Bill Clinton. Speaking at the session on 'Green Building-Green cities' held yesterday morning Gayyoon spoke on the importance listening to the concerns of small island nations and the use of green technology to change the life styles of densely populated urban centers like Male'. He also urged the participants of the meeting to work to bring to the attention of United Nations, the right to a safe and secure environment.

Maldives formally accepts the ILO obligations

The Government of Maldives has formally accepted the obligations of the Constitution of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). In a letter to the Secretary-General of ILO, the President noted that, accordance with paragraph 3 of Article 1 of ILO Constitution, the Government of Maldives would undertake fully to perform each of the provision of the in Constitution. The President also noted that the Government of Maldives would bear its share of the expenses of the International Labour Organisation in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution of the Organisation and would make the necessary arrangements concerning its financial contribution.

Gasim Resigns as Home Minister; future of coalition threatened

After 22 days in office, Home Minister Gasim Ibrahim has resigned following an admission to the press on Tuesday that he had ordered police to go to One and Only Reethirah Resort subsequent to a request made but the management of the One and only Reethi Rah tourist resort to remove the 13 staff who had been dismissed. Gasim also stated that he felt constitutionally "obliged" to send police because he had been informed that the workers were "a danger to guests, employees and buildings". Gasim also admitted that Police commissioner Ahmed Faseeh, was reluctant to take police action regarding the matter but that he was grateful to the police for 'carrying out their duty'.However he added that that he was not responsible for ordering either the number of police or specifying that riot gear should be worn. The resignation came a day after, a press briefing by Gasim where he stated that the riot police didn't even use batons nor carry pepper spray to the resort, whereas the employees of reethi Rah have alleged use of electric batons and irritant spray from up to 50 police who arrived on the island in full riot early on Sunday morning.

MPs debate over 50 year resort lease and import duty

On Tuesday's parliamentary debate on the 2009 state budget MPs expressed their concerns over the new proposed lease term for tourist resorts import duty proposed bynew administration. It had proposed extension of resort lease periods to 50 years as a stop-gap measure to raise revenue, with a projected Rf 5 billion deficit. Opposition Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) MP Abdulla Shahid said that the proposed measure only ensures that profits form the tourism industry would continue to remain with the few that already has access to many of its resources and has gravely failed at providing alternatives to increase tourist arrival on the other hand.

BHUTAN:

POLITICAL:

- **Cabinet makes new appointments**
- **US delegation in Bhutan to study growing democracy**
- **Europe based Bhutanese extends support for Rai's treatment**

SOCIAL:

- **King Jigme not to get Indian award**

ECONOMIC:

- **IT giants look at Bhutan for investment**

GEO-STRATEGIC:

- **Resettlement in Netherlands benefits sick, disabled people**
- **Europe based Bhutanese extends support for Rai's treatment**
- **Indian power minister arriving**
- **Bhutan condoles Mumbai victims of terrorism**

Bhutan condoles Mumbai victims of terrorism

His Majesty the King will offer prayers and butter lamps this morning at the kuenra of the Tashichhodzong for the victims of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. His Majesty will be joined by the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, the prime minister, cabinet ministers, representatives of the zhung dratshang, members of parliament, and the armed forces, senior government officials, and heads of international organizations in Bhutan. The terrorist attack on Mumbai, which began late on Wednesday, has claimed about 160 lives, including those of 14 policemen and six foreigners as of Friday evening, say media

reports. Early in the morning of November 27, His Majesty sent messages of condolences to the people of India, the Indian president, prime minister, and to the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi. His Majesty also conveyed his sentiments to the president, the prime minister and senior officials of the Indian government. “It is with deep regret and concern that I learnt of the appalling terror attacks in Mumbai as I followed the news over the course of last evening and this morning. The pain and anger of such an attack on our closest friend and neighbour is felt deeply and profoundly by all Bhutanese people. I pray for the quick resolution of these unfortunate events without further casualties.” Late on Wednesday night heavily armed terrorists opened fire in about seven places in Mumbai, including on crowds at a major railway station and inside two high-end hotels. The attacks are believed to be the worst in Mumbai since nearly 200 people were killed in a series of bombings in 2006.

IT giants look at Bhutan for investment

Around 30 leading Information Technology giants from the global IT capital of Bangalore who are in Thimphu to hold their annual strategy meeting are also looking at ‘investment possibilities’ in Bhutan.The IT leaders said that Bhutan could play host to an array of possibilities like Data Centers Operation, Disaster Recovery Center, Business Process Outsourcing, Software Development Center. The gathering also witnessed the official launch of the NIIT center of excellence located at the campus of the Royal University of Bhutan to train 1000 IT students over the next two years. nfosys Board Chairman and IT leader, N.R Narayana Murthy also offered 100 seats in the Infosys institute in Banglore for ‘Intensive Training’ of Bhutanese students for six months. Speaking to Kuensel, N.R Narayana Murthy said, “We are looking at Bhutan as a good destination for investment”. He said that this was an initial reconnaissance trip and they had the privilege of meeting important people and would also be visiting a few place. “That is how you start building a relationship, once you start appreciating the country and good things in the country, possibilities start coming before your eyes,” he added.On the chances of a small country like Bhutan being an IT destination, he said that chances are good and the reason was that Infosys itself had started with seven people but was now worth 4.7 to 4.8 billion dollars.

Indian power minister arriving

India power minister Sushilkumar Shinde will arrive Thimphu today on a three-day visit to push ahead the projects on hydropower generation. He will hold discussion with government officials and political leaders on opportunities in hydro power sector. The 15-member delegation will hold extensive debates on implementation of eight hydropower projects which will generate over 8,000 MW power, all to be consumed in India. He will return Delhi upon completion of the tour on December .

Europe based Bhutanese extends support for Rai's treatment

The Bhutanese based in Europe have extended monetary of assistance of 38, 200 Nepali currency for treatment of Dhan Kumar Rai, who was released after 17 years of rigorous imprisonment a month back. "We have contributed this amount for treatment of DK Rai, who showed his courage and power to sacrifice for the Bhutanese citizens", said the release issued by Durga Giri, the general secretary of

Bhutan People's Pary, based in Germany.

US delegation in Bhutan to study growing democracy

The US Senator John McChain has arrived for a three day visit today.Led by McChain, 15 member delegation also includes Joseph Lieberman, a Senator from South Carolina.The delegation has arrived Thimphu to make ground study of the latest political changes taking place in Bhutan. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US delegation is also scheduled to meet the recently crowned king Kheshar and the Prime Minister.

Cabinet makes new appointments

The meeting of the council of ministers held early this week is leant to have made few new appointments.Though the decisions are not been publicized as usual, it is learnt that General V Namgyal has been appointed as the new ambassador to India and Nepal. Namgyal replaces Dago Tshering.Similarly, Yeshey Wangdi has been appointed as ambassador to Geneva and Lhatu Wangchuk to the UN headquarters in New York. Dawa Penjore was expected to be foreign secretary.The cabinet also decided to hear the grievances from candidates regarding the selection procedures of the Chief Executive Officer of the Bhutan Post. There had been complaints at the Anti-Corruption Commission following the CEO appoints saying he new CEO did not meet the set qualification.

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Resettlement in Netherlands benefits sick, disabled people

Between 2007 and 2008, 22 invited exiled Bhutanese arrived to the Netherlands. In November 2008, a Dutch team visited Nepal for a second selection. It is estimated that another 80 people will be invited by the Dutch government in 2009. Exiled Bhutanese are received by COA (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) in the small village of Amersfoort to wait for their assigned housing and learn Dutch language and customs. Starting in October 2008, Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD) the Hague conducted interviews with the newly resettled Bhutanese families, as part of a small research project to evaluate, monitor and report on the situation for the Bhutanese refugees that are resettling in the Netherlands. The purpose is to understand how they experience the resettlement process, what obstacles and opportunities they have encountered; and how they view their new life in the Netherlands.

King Jigme not to get Indian award

The Visva Bharati University in West Bengal state of India has dropped the name of Bhutan’s fourth king

Jigme Singye Wangchuk from the list of recipients of the Desikottoma award. In a 'meet the press' program of the university on Sunday, the vice chancellor Rajat Kanti told journalists that the name was proposed but not considered to be recipient.Earlier, the university had floated the name of Wangchuk among few experts for the award. The reason to drop the decision has been made clear. Kanti only said the name was not formally announced.

MYANMAR:

POLITICAL:

- **World leaders press UN chief on Myanmar prisoners**
- **Army collects paddy from local farmers**
- **Mandalay NLD members' appeal denied - Aye Nai**

SOCIAL:

- **Gas pipeline fails near Lamine – Blai Mon**
- **Over 1,000 HIV positives patients in 2008: KIO**

ECONOMIC:

- **World economic crisis hits Burmese workers in Malaysia - Min Lwin**
- **Associated Press: Myanmar PM says farm sector can absorb unemployed**
- **Myanmar PM says farm sector can absorb unemployed**
- **investment in Myanmar hits over 15 billion USD**

GEO-STRATEGIC:

- **India-Burma border closed for Indian elections**
- **Burmese refugees in Australia face more hurdles - Sai Awin Tai**
- **China, Burma take steps to strengthen military cooperation - Salai Pi Pi**
- **Burma- Bangladesh border trade normalizes**

Mandalay NLD members' appeal denied - Aye Nai

Mandalay divisional court yesterday summarily rejected the appeal of six Mandalay National League for Democracy members including organising committee member Win Mya Mya, said their lawyer Myint Thwin.Win Mya Mya and her colleagues – organising committee member Kan Htun, Mandalay NLD deputy chairman Than Lwin, Win Shwe of Kyaukpadaung, Tin Ko Ko of Meikhtila and Min Thu of Moegok – were given jail terms of between two and 13 years at the end of October for their participation in the

Saffron Revolution last year.Their previous appeal at Mandalay provincial court was rejected on 5 November.Myint Thwin said the group will continue to take its appeal to the higher level courts.

Army collects paddy from local farmers

The Burmese army in Arakan State has confiscated farmland from Arakanese farmers for army projects without compensation since 1988, but authorities are now collecting paddy from farmers that are located near base headquarters, said one farmer. U Tun Zan from Pya Lay Chaung Village located near the Sittwe and Ray Chan Bying motor-road was ordered by army authorities to provide paddy for two army battalions because his farms are located near the army headquarters.U Tun Zan had 20 acres of farmland but lost his land when it was confiscated for an army hospital and Light Infantry Battalion 270. After losing his land, he and his family struggled to survive, so he apealed to the high army authority for the return of his land. Upon this appeal, the army agreed to return six acres of his land.He was able to cultivate paddy again this year after the six acres of land were returned to him, but army authorities forced him to pay four tinns of rice per acre to the two army battalions when the harvest begins.A close relative of U Tun Zan said that the authorities told U Tun Zan that the farmlands are located nearby army headquarters and the owners of such farmlands have to pay rice to the army as a government tax for the land.U Tun Zan is now facing difficulties paying this demand because he spent a large amount of money in order to cultivate rice again. If he pays the army's demanded tax, he will lose any profit from his farm.

World leaders press UN chief on Myanmar prisoners

A letter signed by 112 former presidents and prime ministers urged U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Wednesday to return to Myanmar and press its military junta to free all political prisoners.Ban traveled to Myanmar, also known as Burma, last May after Cyclone Nargis devastated coastal areas. Setting aside political considerations, he persuaded the junta's top leader, Senior Gen. Than Shwe, to ease access for foreign aid workers and relief supplies.Ban received the letter and spoke with Bondevik on Wednesday."He said he would like to visit Myanmar again to discuss a broad range of issues but that he will not be able to do so without reasonable expectations of a meaningful outcome," U.N. spokeswoman Michele Montas said.Ban's special envoy to Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari, also will not go back until he has a "real possibility of moving forward there," she said.Among other signers of the letter were former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Jimmy Carter, former British prime ministers Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher and John Major, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, former Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi and former Polish president Lech Walesa. We urge you to make it clear that all political prisoners in Burma must be released by the end of this year, regardless of whether you travel to Burma," they wrote.Myanmar's military, which has ruled since 1962, tolerates no dissent and crushed pro-democracy protests led by Buddhist monks in September 2007. It holds more than 2,100 political prisoners, up sharply from nearly 1,200 before the demonstrations, human rights groups say.

Burma- Bangladesh border trade normalizes

The border trade between Bangladesh and Burma has returned to normal with Burmese cargo boats entering Bangladesh's Teknaf Port after trade stopped for a month due to tension over a maritime

boundary dispute. A businessman from Teknaf told Narinjara News yesterday over the phone that the border trade is now normal and many cargo boats loaded with goods from throughout the coastal regions of Burma have entered Bangladesh since last week.The Burmese exports, some legal and some not, include many raw materials such as timber, teak, rice, fish, and bamboo. These goods are exported to Bangladesh through the Teknaf border port situated on the Naff River opposite Burma's Maungdaw.Bangladesh authorities opened a border entry point in Teknaf to promote trade with Burma.Local people report that there are many Burmese goods exported to Bangladesh through the Teknaf Port, but some goods such as timber and teak are smuggled across because Burma does not allow their export to Bangladesh.Burmese businessmen from Arakan export timber to Bangladesh through Teknaf with the help of local army authorities who take large bribes from the smugglers.

Gas pipeline fails near Lamine – Blai Mon

The Kanbauk to Myaing Kalay gas pipeline burst near Lamine village, northern Ye Township, , although the gas did not ignite.At 5am on the 25th, a resident who lives near the pipeline said she heard a loud sound. The pipeline appears to have failed at the joint between two sections of pipe. According to area villagers who looked at the damage, a large crack is visible at the seam between the two pipe sections.According to local sources, Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, which is responsible for operating the pipeline, shut down the flow of gas and repaired the crack by the end of the day. The next day, the flow of gas had resumed, although it is unclear how much gas escaped before the leak was repaired. Trains between Lamine and Ye were also canceled on the 25th because the tracks pass close to the pipeline.According to the resident, her house would have been burned had the gas ignited. Other residents expressed fear at the pipeline explosion. "We are afraid because of explosions. When there is an explosion with fire, it is close our houses and we are afraid we will catch fire."

China, Burma take steps to strengthen military cooperation - Salai Pi Pi

Chinese and Burmese senior military officials on Saturday agreed to boost bilateral cooperation in various fields including military ties, a move observers said is meant to ensure the Burmese junta international support. Burma's third highest ranking military official, General Thura Shwe Mann, and his counterpart, Chen Bingde, Chief of the General Staff of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), on Saturday agreed to enhance military relations."The two countries should enhance military and state-to-state exchanges to promote regional peace, stability and prosperity," reports quoted Chen as saying.The agreement also includes the signing of a series of pacts on cooperation in the areas of economics, trade, culture, education, health, technology and tourism.However, Burmese military observers believe the two senior military officials also agreed on joint military exercises, in addition an agreement for Burma to purchase new military hardware as well as spare parts for the maintenance of earlier purchases."It is very possible that they discussed and agreed on an arms deal, joint military exercises and the buying of some peripheral equipment for military hardware such as helicopters, jet fighters and warships that Burma earlier bought from China," Aung Kyaw Zaw, a Sino-Burmese border based military analyst said.Aung Kyaw Zaw added that both countries might have included the issue of ethnic ceasefire groups, referring to groups including the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Kachin Independence Organization

(KIO) and Kokang rebels, who operate along the Sino-Burmese border.

investment in Myanmar hits over 15 billion USD

Foreign investment in Myanmar hit 15 billion U.S. dollars in 422 projects up to September this year, the local weekly 7-Day News journal reported Wednesday. Of the 29 countries and regions investing in Myanmar, Thailand stood first with over 7 billion dollars, followed by Britain and Singapore with over 1 billion dollars each, the report quoted the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry as saying.Sectorwise speaking, electric power sector dominated with 6 billion dollars, followed by oil and gas (over 3 billion dollars).Such sectors as manufacturing, mining, real estate development and hotel and tourism were injected with over 1 billion dollars each, while fisheries and livestock breeding, and transport and communication took 300 million dollars each, industry estate 100 million dollars, construction and agriculture 30 million dollars each.Myanmar also received 136.5 billion Kyats' (113.7 million dollars) investment from domestic companies in 11 sectors namely — manufacturing, real estate development, transportation, construction, fisheries and livestock breeding, mining, hotel and tourism, electric power, industries and agriculture, the report said.Of these sectors, manufacturing topped the investment with 40 billion Kyats (33 million dollars), followed by real estate development (25 million dollars) and transportation (16.6 million dollars).Myanmar opened to foreign investment in late 1988 after the present government took over the power of state.

Over 1,000 HIV positives patients in 2008: KIO

Over 1,000 patients have been found to be HIV positive in 2008 in the biggest hospital in Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) controlled Laiza, the largest ethnic Kachin ceasefire group in Burma's northern Kachin state, said KIO sources. Both KIO servicemen and the people can avail medical services at the hospital.The HIV positive statistics was recorded at the public and military hospital in Laiza, the headquarters and business centre of the KIO on the Sino-Burma border following blood examination of every patient who came to the hospital this year, said Naw Bu, deputy in-charge of the KIO central Health Department.Naw Bu added that only one-third of patients infected with HIV are residents of Laiza and the rest are from the villages around Laiza and people from Bhamo and Myitkyina townships, the most populated areas in the state.HIV was found mostly among Intravenous Drug Users (IDUs) in the Laiza hospital where the patients from outside Laiza also come for hospitalization, according to Naw Bu.Moreover, every eight out of 10 IDUs in Maijayang also called Mai Ja Yang in Kachin, another KIO business centre on the border and headquarters of the 3rd Brigade under the KIO are HIV positive, the results of blood examination revealed, a NGO worker in the border-based Health Unlimited (HU) said.

Burmese refugees in Australia face more hurdles - Sai Awin Tai

Many Burmese refugees who have newly arrived in Australia say they are being denied full welfare assistance by Centrelink, the Australian government support agency, despite government legislative programs which guarantee assistance for refugees.Burmese refugees, many of who spent more than 10 years in refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border, come to Australia on "Offshore Refugee and Humanitarian" visas, which give them permanent residency and means they should be able to access

government settlement programs.Most Burmese immigrants are concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne. Many have suffered trauma in Burma and now face language barriers and cultural and societal displacement.On arriving in Australia, humanitarian refugees are normally given a period of time to study English full-time, and to adjust to the demands of a very different culture.Under humanitarian visas, there is no requirement for them to sign up immediately to look for jobs that would entitle them to welfare payments.

Myanmar PM says farm sector can absorb unemployed

Myanmar's prime minister has said that the country's economy can provide jobs for returning migrant workers who lost their jobs due to the global financial crisis.All three state-run daily newspapers on Tuesday published the remarks by Prime Minister Gen. Thein Sein, made at a meeting with ministers, government officials and businessmen in the capital of Naypyitaw. It was the first public comment from the government on how the global crisis might affect the country.In the remarks, made Monday, Thein Sein said that should workers overseas lose their jobs, Myanmar's agricultural sector by itself could employ millions.Thein Sein said there are 46,057 Myanmar workers legally working abroad, but statistics from other countries and organizations estimate that more than 2 million are working abroad illegally, the New Light of Myanmar and other newspapers reported.Thein Sein said millions of workers are needed in palm oil plantations, rubber plantations and teak plantations, and for timber extraction. Fisheries and the salt industry are also ready to hire workers, he said.The foreign, labor and agriculture ministries all stand ready to help Myanmar workers who lost their overseas jobs, he added.The prime minister conceded that the global economic crisis could have an indirect impact on Myanmar and destabilize local markets even though the effect on the monetary sector should be minimal because Myanmar's currency is not freely convertible so money transactions are not closely linked to foreign banks.

World economic crisis hits Burmese workers in Malaysia - Min Lwin

Hundreds of Burmese legally employed in Malaysia are returning home after losing their jobs because of the worldwide economic downturn.Ye Min Tun, of the Malaysia-based organization Burma Workers' Rights Protection, told The Irrawaddy that more than 300 Burmese migrant workers had returned to Burma in late November, paid off by their employers because of falling orders.Hundreds of others faced dismissal before the Chinese New Year, Ye Min Tu said. Those still employed were experiencing cuts in pay and overtime.About one third of the 300-strong Burmese work force at one leading aluminum factory, Press Metal Berhad, were repatriated on November 27 and 30, according to Burmese workers at the Kalang plant."Orders for new consignments dropped after the onset of the world financial crisis and impacted us very badly," said one Burmese worker.An official of Press Metal Berhad refused to comment when contacted on Tuesday by The Irrawaddy.Dismissed workers say employers are paying them no compensation. Nor had employers given sacked workers any indication of whether they could reclaim their jobs if the world economy improved, Ye Min Tu said.

India-Burma border closed for Indian elections

India's northeastern state of Mizoram, bordering Burma's Chin state, on Monday sealed-off the international boundary between the two countries in preparation for Tuesday's elections.The deputy commissioner for Mizoram's Champhai district on Monday issued an order to close the 404 kilometer long Indo-Burma border for security purposes, PC Lal Duhthlanga, a sub-divisional police officer at the Champhai police station told Mizzima."We are going to have an election. For this purpose, all international and state boundaries will be closed," Duhthlanga said.According to him, the border, closed at 5:00 a.m. Monday morning, will not reopen until 5:00 p.m. Tuesday.On Tuesday, Mizoram state will elect 40 members to the Mizoram Legislative Assembly. Over 600,000, of an estimated population of over 900,000 in the state, are expected to cast votes, according to news reports.Meanwhile, Duhthlanga said the state government has also deployed additional security, including Mizoram police and Assam Rifles, along the border, and particularly at trade point No. 2, which links Zokhuathar village in Mizoram with Haimual village in Chin state – to try and prevent any crossing of traders and smugglers during election day."Assam Rifles and Mizoram police personnel are deployed along the border. One police post and Assam Rifles post are stationed on the main road [Indo – Burma border trade road (2)]," he added.

Business and Politics in Muslim World

India

Sadia Khanum

29th November to 5th December 2008

Presentation: December 10, 2008

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- 'It is too little, too late'
- CPI (M) to have poll tie-up with TDP
- Former royal families contesting from BJP
- Diversionary tactic, says BJP president
- It's time for action, can't fail nation'
- Over 72 per cent polling in Mizoram
- BJP raises questions in the wake of Mumbai terror case
- CPI (M) opposes military strikes on PoK targets
- BJP offers support for stern steps against Pakistan
- Stray violence mars Rajasthan polling
- Manmohan: no terrorist or enemy can destroy India's unity
- Advani sees Pakistan agencies' role in attacks
- Election Commission shows totaliser to political parties

Domestic Situation:

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- Train blast kills 3 in Assam
- Take our help to secure coast: fishermen
- 'Stone age' voters look for change
- Buddhadeb wants Maoists isolated
- Mobile user identification dangerously poor

Economic Front:

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- India-China trade to reach $55bn, to surpass 2010 target
- 5 lakh jobs lost in handicrafts
- 'Industrial output to grow by 6.3%'

- No early exit for investors in close-ended mutual fund schemes
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- Impact of global meltdown stronger on India: Subbarao
- Rice: we'll insist on direct, tough action by Pakistan

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Kashmir

- 68.22 per cent voting in 3rd phase in J&K

Social front

- Assam faces high HIV risk
- WHO calls for greater attention to curb HIV/AIDS

Foreign Relations

- India has 'proof of ISI involvement'
- 'Pakistani Army wants diversion from Afghan war'
- India tightens visa procedures for Pakistanis
- Zardari rules out returning fugitives

Political front:

Delhi records 60% polling

With 60% polling recorded in the city, the campaign to persuade Pappu, the apathetic voter, seems to have worked. Delhi chief electoral officer Satbir Silas Bedi said, "The poll percentage has definitely gone up in rural areas but urban Delhi too has improved its record." For instance, trends released by the CEO show that the lowest turnout was a healthy 55% in south-east district and the highest 63% in south-west district. Traditionally, high polling in rural areas and unauthorised colonies should help the Congress, but this time there is the BSP factor to contend with as the "blue party" fancied its chances on a dozen seats. Even if the post-Mumbai attack scenario makes the polls more bi-polar, BSP's vote share might be respectable. Given the BSP challenge, the Congress would hope its initiative to regularise unauthorised colonies creates a favourable stir. Unless its crosses a certain threshold, the BSP will harm the Congress'

prospects.

BJP managers were pleased to see the middle classes turn up at the polling booths. In Jangpura the turnout topped 59%. Anti-incumbency against the Congress may have been accentuated by the Mumbai events, reminding people of Delhi's encounter with terror earlier this year. "We are sure of a comfortable majority. The good turnout in the posh and middle class areas will obviously go in our favour. The turnout was low till noon but after lunch people came out to cast their votes as soon as the Mumbai operation got over," said BJP's chief ministerial candidate, V K Malhotra. A confident Delhi BSP chief, Brahm Singh Bidhuri, said, "An increase of over 18% in comparison to last year's municipal elections will help us win seats." Voting remained robust in rural areas from the start but in many places it picked up post noon. Till 10 am, the average polling percentage was 10% which rose to over 20% at noon and to around 38% by 2.00 pm. Post-noon it further picked up and polling continued even after 5.00 pm at some places like Bhatti Mines and Keshavpuram. In north-west Delhi, the rural voter turned out in good numbers. In Badarpur, Tuglaqabad, Sangam Vihar, Deoli, Ambedkar Nagar, Mehrauli and Chattarpur too, voters from unauthorised colonies and rural areas turned out in large numbers and polling had already crossed 20% by noon. This went up to over 50% after lunch. Batla House also saw voters thronging the booths. With the Jamia Nagar shootout still fresh in memory, voters shared the reasons for voting. Said 53-year-old I A Khan, a resident of Batla House, ‘‘My only concern is security around my area. We want the government to put things right. Otherwise, we have no problems with the current MLA.’’ Here almost 50% polling was recorded till noon. Voters turned out in east Delhi with a lot more enthusiasm than they had shown for the MCD elections last year. In several places, 50-60% voting had taken place by the afternoon. In middle-class dominated areas like Mayur Vihar, Patparganj, Vishwas Nagar and some parts of Okhla, youngsters came out in large numbers to vote. Among constituencies in north-east, again many unauthorised colonies, seats which witnessed heavy polling were Seelampur and Ghonda. By evening, most booths claimed to have crossed the 60% mark. New Delhi and GK, where chief minister Shiela Dikshit and Malhotra are contesting, respectively, saw a low turnout to begin with but the numbers increased therafter. But the turnout was not as high as what was seen all day in North-west, North-east and South Delhi parliamentary constituencies. With a slow start, polling booths across west Delhi were thronged by voters, and in some places, like Matiala, people had to wait for four hours before they could cast their vote. On an average, all polling stations recorded around 55% polling by evening. Interestingly, the Walled City area bore a deserted look till afternoon. Few people were seen in the polling stations at Ballimaran, Matia Mahal, Nai Sarak and Chandni Chowk and officials reported the turnout was a dismal 20-25%. However, the numbers started picking up later and more and more voters started to arrive. In Wazirpur, Jahangirpur, Adarsh Nagar, Sadar Bazaar and Tri-Nagar long queues could be seen from mid-morning onwards.

‘It is too little, too late’

Major political parties have described the Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil’s resignation as “too little, too late,” and said the decision should have been made earlier. The parties include the main Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) ally, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). Demanding that the UPA government should resign taking responsibility for its “failure” to handle internal security, the BJP spokesperson Prakash Javdekar said: “We have been consistently saying that the government has failed in its handling of terrorism. We want the whole UPA government to go lock, stock

and barrel and let the people decide now what approach the country should adopt in the fight against terrorism." Senior BJP leader Arun Jaitley said Mr. Patil's resignation as "too little, too late" while blaming the government for having "a weak policy against terror." "Too little, too late" was also the term used by the RJD chief Lalu Prasad to describe Mr. Patil's move. He said Mr. Patil was too late in tendering his resignation and the decision should have been taken earlier. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) Polit Bureau member Brinda Karat said the resignation was just symbolic and the real issues were the weakness in the system which needed to be addressed. She said there was a need to improve the intelligence network, and the Centre-State coordination. The Communist Party of India has welcomed Mr. Patil's resignation and said the government must pay serious attention towards the issue of terrorism. The party national secretary D. Raja said that finally good sense had prevailed and someone had taken the moral responsibility. "The UPA government has seen several failures [on the law and order front] during its four-year rule. This [resignation] was overdue but the issue of terrorism is beyond Mr. Shivraj Patil. The entire government will have to do serious introspection. Terrorism has to be addressed comprehensively and fought firmly," he added. Describing Mr. Patil's decision to step down as one in line with the party's tradition, Congress leader Veerappa Moily said the party had a tradition of taking moral responsibility after some "national tragedy" took place.

Former royal families contesting from BJP

The presence of members of royal families in the electoral battleground in Rajasthan has made the fight interesting. All of them are contesting the polls on BJP tickets. The list of candidates has a dozen candidates in the fray from former royal families. Analysts see this as a revival of feudalism. Chief minister Vasundhara Raje, maharani of erstwhile Dholpur, is again contesting the election from her old seat, Jhalarapatan, in Jhalawar district while Bharatpur royal family member Krishnedar Kaur Deepa is trying her luck from Nadbai under Bharatpur district. Princess Kirti Kumari is seeking votes from Mandal seat in Bhilwara district while the BJP fielded Rajkumari Sidhhi from Bikaner. The ruling BJP has also given a ticket to Maharani Rohini Singh from Karauli seat under Karauli district. Scion of Bharatpur's erstwhile royal family, Vishvendra Singh, is contesting the election from Deeg-Kumher constituency in Bharatpur district. Mr Singh resigned from the BJP and joined the Congress. Deeg is witnessing a close contest between the BJP candidate and industry minister Deegambar Singh. It has a sizeable number of dalits who are unhappy with their former raja because over 14 dalits were killed in 1992 in broad daylight in Kumher. In Bikaner, Princess Sidhhi, 34, said Ms Raje is a source of inspiration for her. Her grandfather Karni Singh served the Bikaner parliamentary constituency for 25 years. The princess is facing a challenge from BJP rebel Vishvajeet Singh and Congress candidate Tanveer Malawat.

Diversionary tactic, says BJP president

BJP president Rajnath Singh said that Mr Shivraj Patil's resignation as Union home minister was only a diversionary tactic and that "not only Shivraj Patil, but the entire Congress government" was responsible for the several intelligence lapses that had failed to prevent terrorists from striking repeatedly in the country. "It is an attempt to divert the attention of the public from the issue of terrorism," Mr Singh said while touring election-going Rajasthan by helicopter to make campaign speeches. Mr Singh and BJP prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani chose not to attend the all-party meeting called by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. "What has the Congress (which leads the UPA coalition at the Centre) done on terror? The country wants to know," Mr Singh told this newspaper, a point he made repeatedly in his campaign speeches at well-attended rallies in Alwar, Sawai Madhopur and Tonk districts of Rajasthan.

It's time for action, can't fail nation'

Congress president Sonia Gandhi said the time for intent is over. "The nation is looking for decisive action and determined leadership. We cannot afford to fail them," she said. In her hard-hitting opening remarks made at the CWC meeting she virtually set the agenda for the government on terrorism, saying that the attack in Mumbai was qualitatively different. "It calls for immediate and firm action." "We can no longer sit back and let these attacks overwhelm us . Our response has to be effective and it has to be decisive," she said. "As the party that leads this coalition, our first task is to restore faith among the people. They must feel that they have a government that is taking all possible measures to give succour to those who need it and, more important, to ensure that there is no recurrence of such traumatic acts of terror," she said. "I know there are no easy answers and effective change takes time. But we must plan what we can do in the immediate future and what long-term measures and reforms are needed to strengthen and equip our police and security to be better prepared for the challenge to face," Mrs Gandhi said. Without naming the BJP, she said, "This is a time when all political parties should come together and rise above partisan considerations. It is unfortunate that some of our political adversaries have not done so and instead sought to take advantage from the terrible suffering in the city of Mumbai. We stand firm against any attempt to divide our people on the issue of terrorism. We will persevere in our effort to work with all those who recognise this as a national challenge that we have to meet collectively."

Over 72 per cent polling in Mizoram

The Mizoram Assembly elections on Tuesday saw voting over 72 per cent. Joint Chief Electoral Officer Lalhmingthanga told that the provisional poll percentage was 72 when reports last came in. "However, the final percentage is sure to go up as there were long queues in a large number of polling stations of Aizawl and other towns even after the polling hours were over," he said. Mr. Lalhmingthanga said the elections were peaceful and there was no report of any untoward incident from any of the 1,026 polling stations in 40 constituencies. In six places, there was technical fault in some electronic voting machines and they were replaced. Chief Minister Zoramthanga expressed confidence that his Mizo National Front (MNF) would retain power for the third consecutive term. The Chief Minister is contesting from the Champhai North and Champhai South seats. Prominent among the 206 candidates are the former Chief Minister and PCC president, Lalthanhawla, and the former Chief Minister and World War II veteran Brigadier (retd.) T. Sailo, who is heading the United Democratic Alliance. The counting of votes will be held on December 8.

BJP raises questions in the wake of Mumbai terror case

The Capital being high on the hit list of terrorists, Delhi BJP president Harsh Vardhan has accused the Manmohan Singh Government of complete failure to curb terror and demanded that the Central Government itself should quit and make way for another dispensation rather than making scapegoats of small leaders. In a statement here, Dr. Vardhan said the Mumbai terror attacks have also raised a number of pertinent questions. Primarily, he said, people want to know from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh why maritime security was not enhanced when RDX and other explosives had come via the sea route for the Mumbai blasts in 1994. Of late, he said, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi had sought permission from the Centre to frame a stern law in Gujarat for tackling terrorism but the permission for it had been "kept pending". Also, he demanded to know how and why the terrorists who came from Karachi in Pakistan managed to enter Mumbai from the sea despite the presence of the Navy, Coast Guards, marine police and patrolling by the Customs. The BJP leader asked why security at the Taj Mahal hotel was scaled down after November 15 as pointed out by Tata Group chairman Ratan Tata. Dr. Vardhan has also taken an umbrage at the manner in which Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh had visited the hotel after the attack along with his actor son Riteish Deshmukh and well-known film director Ram Gopal

Varma. Questioning why senior officials had not been held accountable for the massive security lapse, Dr. Vardhan said it was also a matter of grave concern that some of the politicians were close to underworld don Dawood Ibrahim whose role in the terror attack is under the scanner of the investigating agencies. He pointed out that the BJP had been demanding for the past one year that a new law be framed against terrorism and a competent investigating agency established, "but the Congress had always been playing vote bank politics on the issue".

CPI(M) opposes military strikes on PoK targets

Attacking the Bharatiya Janata Party and a section of the media for advocating a U.S.-type response to the Mumbai terror attacks, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) on Thursday said such a move would only result in what terror outfits such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) wanted. Observing that after the attack on the Twin Towers, the Bush administration had waged a war against Iraq which had "nothing whatsoever" to do with the terror strike, the party said military strikes against targets in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) "will surely provoke a war" with Pakistan. "The result would be exactly what the extremist outfits like LeT want," CPI(M) Polit Bureau member Sitaram Yechury said. In an editorial in the latest issue of *People's Democracy*, he said what was required was not to go to war with Pakistan "but to ensure that strong action is taken against terrorist organisations and personnel in that country." Noting that the issue was to get the Pakistani government act against extremist groups, Mr. Yechury said all evidence collected should be presented to that government which should be asked to act promptly. "If they do not respond, then India should take the matter to the U.N. Security Council under its Resolution 1373 which asks all States to take steps to prevent commission of terror acts, deny safe havens to those who finance, plan or support these activities," Mr. Yechury said.

BJP offers support for stern steps against Pakistan

The Bharatiya Janata Party has conveyed to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee that the party will "stand by the government" if effective steps are taken against Pakistan. Senior BJP leader Jaswant Singh told reporters here on Thursday that he had conveyed the party's support to the government. He was addressing a press conference immediately after the party's core committee meeting held to discuss the aftermath of the Mumbai terror attacks. He said it was for the government to assess what steps were required. The BJP wanted that consensus must arise after a process of consultation, not "ex post facto," and there must be a "full and comprehensive sharing of facts." While not clearly spelling out whether it favoured exercising the military option, party leaders defended the policy of not crossing the Line of Control even during the Kargil war operations when a BJP-led government was in power. That was the right thing to do, party leaders said while defending troop mobilisation on the border that took place after the attack on Parliament. Mr. Jaswant Singh virtually charged Pakistan with resorting to blackmail by telling the West it would withdraw its forces from the North-West border with Afghanistan. "We hope that you [the U.S. and NATO countries] will see through the attempt that is being made at blackmail by insinuating that unless you [the West] toes its line, Pakistan may dilute even such cooperation as it is giving in the fight against jihadi terrorism," the party stated. A separate statement issued by BJP president Rajnath Singh warned the international community that it should consider the possibility of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal falling into the hands of "non-State actors" over whom the Pakistan President has virtually admitted having no control. "Should such a country be allowed to possess nuclear weapons at all?" At the core committee meeting the BJP decided to support the setting up of a federal security and investigative agency and a federal law to deal with terrorism. It also said there must be a uniform law to deal with terror. The party stressed that at every stage India should communicate effectively with the international community.

Stray violence mars Rajasthan polling

Stray incidents of violence and clashes among political and caste groups marred polling for the 200-member Rajasthan Assembly on Thursday, when an estimated 65-68 per cent of the 3.62 crore electorate exercised their franchise. Thousands of police and paramilitary personnel kept vigil during the polling across the desert State. In front of more than 42,200 booths in the geographically largest State were long queues during the nine hours of balloting which ended at 5 p.m. There were 2,194 candidates, including 151 women, in the fray. Clashes among supporters of different parties and complaints of EVMs developing technical snags were reported from various places. There were sporadic incidents of stone throwing, firing in the air, and attempts at booth capturing, damage to vehicles and skirmishes and fight among individuals. One person suffered bullet injuries near Balghat village in the Todabhim constituency when a supporter of BJP dissident leader Kirorilal Meena fired on a group of Gujjar voters on their way to a booth. He was later arrested and identified as Hola Singh Meena. According to police sources, a Central Reserve Police Force jawan fired in the air to disperse a violent crowd at Badikhera village in the Ladpura constituency of Kota district. No one was injured. State Chief Electoral Officer Vinod Zutshi said polling was not disturbed anywhere and the voter turnout was steady throughout the day after polling started on a brisk note in the morning. As many as 12 districts and over 8,400 polling stations had been declared sensitive where security was beefed up. The opposition Congress is contesting all 200 Assembly seats, while the ruling BJP has fielded its candidates in 193 constituencies and allotted the rest to its allies in the National Democratic Alliance.

Manmohan: no terrorist or enemy can destroy India's unity

Sending out a strong message in the wake of the recent acts of terrorism, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asserted that "no coward, no terrorist, no enemy of our secular and democratic republic will ever succeed in destroying the unity of our country." Making a specific reference to the attack on the institute three years ago, Dr. Singh said the terrorists targeted the IISc because "this great institution and this vibrant city [Bangalore] have come to represent the spirit of a resurgent India." He paid tribute to Prof. M.C. Puri, who was killed in that incident.

Advani sees Pakistan agencies' role in attacks

At a meeting with United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Wednesday, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and senior BJP leader L.K. Advani emphasised that the Mumbai attacks could not have been carried out without the Pakistan agencies' knowledge, guidance and training. While Ms. Rice reportedly told Mr. Advani that these concerns would be registered with Pakistan, Mr. Advani pointed out that Islamabad had repeatedly assured New Delhi that it would not allow its soil to be used for launching attacks on India.

Election Commission shows totaliser to political parties

The Election Commission on Wednesday held a meeting with recognised political parties on the use of totaliser machines for counting of votes by mixing. At present, votes are counted polling station-wise, which reveals the votes polled by each candidate. "In order to avoid the possibility of any intimidation and victimisation of electors, the Commission has proposed to use the totaliser machine in specified constituencies, and is of the opinion that it is absolutely necessary that votes recorded in EVMs should be mixed before counting," says a release. When elections were held using the ballot paper, the papers were mixed wherever it was considered necessary as provided under Rule 59A of Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. After the introduction of EVMs, there was no scope for such mixing of votes. The Commission proposes such mixing of votes wherever necessary.

Domestic Situation:

Maoists blow up school building

About 50 Maoists blew up the building of a middle school at Panki in Palamau district of Jharkhand on Saturday midnight.

'Stone age' voters look for change

I can barely see with one eye, and, it's a matter of time before I go totally blind", says Suji Devi, all of 48. Continuing in her sad, matter of fact tone, she also says that she lost her husband to the same disease, and, her 14-year-son too is likely to meet the same fate. Suji Devi, who works in a stone mine near here, says she has no other option but to surrender to Silicosis a disease caused by soft sandstone dust. She works in a sandstone quarry near Jodhpur. The average age of workers engaged in stone mining, according to studies conducted by local NGOs, is 44. Earnings typically range from Rs 40 (for women) to Rs 60 (for men). There are about 7,000 odd stone mines around Jodhpur. It is estimated that about 30 lakh people are engaged in stone mining in Jodhpur, Jalore, Barmer and Jaisalmer in western Rajasthan. So, is this a major election issue here? Who will they vote for? "We don't have any faith in politics," says Natharam, with others echoing similar feelings. The workers say that aspirants for Vidhan Sabha, have, on occasions, promised to take up their concerns, but nothing really happend. "The candidates who visit this region do not make it to the mines or to our hutments", says Suji Devi, adding, rather nonchalantly, "We don't matter for them". Ever thought forming a union to press for improvement in working conditions? "This thought does not even occur to us, we don't want to lose our jobs," says Natharam. Will they vote at all? Of course, they say. Says Suji Devi, "We vote according to the trend or as per the wish of our males. It could be Congress or BJP." They do not offer a categoric answer. However, one Hukmaram steps forward to say: "BSP this time".
Why? Having voted for the BJP and the Congress on earlier occasions, they are looking for an alternative. "We have been voting for these parties — ie, BJP and the Congress — for years but both of them have blatantly failed to respect our democratic right, so why not try an alternative this time?", says Hukmaram. Their expectations from politicians are minimal— something they are perhaps entitled to, something that should not require any special, spectacular effort. "We need BPL cards and toilets, which we are promised every now and then but not provided with," says Kesi Bai, a widow. An unusually large number of women here find themselves widowed rather early as they lose their husbands to silicosis. The workers, assembled at a makeshift high school run by Mine Labour Protection Campaign (MLPC), an NGO, at Ganderon ki dhani, said they were exasperated with the bureaucracy and filling of forms to secure the tag: 'Below Poverty Line' (BPL). "Every now and then we are told to arrange for photographs and photocopies of documents, all of which requires money, and giving up on our work", the women lamented. As Rana Sengupta, managing trustee of MLPC, elaborated: Most of the women

are not just widows, they are widows-in-debt. Their husbands, who had contracted loans from quarry owners, have died without clearing their debt. So, it's women and children now, toiling towards blindness and death as they seek to free themselves of debt. As for politics, it's time for change, they aver. Repeats Hukmaram, with others nodding: "This time, only BSP".

Train blast kills 3 in Assam

Three passengers were killed and 30 more injured when extremists triggered a powerful blast in a general second class coach of the 901 Lumding-Tinsukia passenger train around 7.50 a.m. on Tuesday. The train had just reached the Diphu station in central Assam's Karbi Anglong district when the explosion occurred. The station is located on the Lumding-Dimapur section of Northeast Frontier Railway's Lumding Division. Police suspect it to be the handiwork of the extremist Karbi Longri N.C. Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF) operating in the hill district. Tuesday was the first day of an indefinite economic blockade called by the outfit to press its 10-point charter of demands. Police believe the blast was triggered by a Programmed Time Delay device (PTD) that was probably concealed in a sack of vegetables. The Assam government has sounded a red alert across the State. Principal Secretary, Home, Subhash Ch. Das, told that intelligence inputs had warned of a KLNLF plan to trigger blasts in Diphu, Dokmoka, Howraghat, Dongkamokam and Bokolia of the hill district starting December 1. Following this, police found two improvised explosive devices near the local Congress office at Howraghat and a passenger waiting shed near the Dokmoka police station. The incident has come a little over a month after the October 30 serial blasts in the State that claimed 88 lives and left 826 injured. The KLNLF's demands include the creation of a political institution for self-determination for the Karbi people of Karbi Anglong and contiguous Karbi-dominated areas of Assam and Meghalaya under Article 3 of the Constitution with additional powers under Article 371, and eviction of all non-indigenous people who have settled in the proposed self-rule institution after 1951. A delayed report said that suspected KLNLF gunmen shot dead two members of a Hindi-speaking family at Dolamara, under the Bokajan police station of the district, on Monday. Police said KLNLF hit men went to the house and shot its members at point blank range.

Take our help to secure coast: fishermen

It was the fishing community which provided the first authentic information that the terrorists, who went on a three-day killing spree in Mumbai, had reached the city through the sea," Harekrishna Debnath, chairman of the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF), said on Thursday. the NFF intended to spread awareness among the fishing community all over the country on the need to complement the security agencies as information providers to protect the country's more than 6000 kilometre coastline. Mr. Debnath, who is also the convener of the National Coastal Protection Campaign, said that the three-day MFF general body meeting at Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu from December 14 would take up the subject earnestly. "Even historically, fishermen were the first line of defence along the maritime boundary of the country," he said. The fishing community had always been cooperating with the security agencies. But often they were not taken seriously. Instead of seeing them as the group with the biggest potential to make our maritime boundaries more secure, the security agencies often created problems for them. In fact, fishermen had been the main victims of terrorist and pirates, be it from Pakistan or Sri Lanka, he said. In the wake of the Mumbai incidents, there should be a genuine relationship in an organised manner between the security forces and the fishing community.

Buddhadeb wants Maoists isolated

West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee ruled out outlawing the Maoists in the State even as he asserted that the ultras were behind the ongoing tribal agitation in Paschim Medinipur district. The Lalgarh squad of the outfit was responsible for a bomb blast that narrowly missed his convoy and those of Union Ministers Ram Vilas Paswan and Jitendra Prasada on November 2, he told the Assembly here on Thursday. The leader of the squad is believed to be the brother of a local Trinamool Congress leader, he added. "What is required is to politically isolate the extremist outfit by winning over the confidence of those sections of the tribals that are vulnerable to the Maoist manipulation by taking forward the development process in the region. Police action is not the sole way to counter the extremists," Mr. Bhattacharjee said. The agitation of a section of the tribal population in protest against alleged police excesses that has resulted in parts of the district being cut off has been continuing for nearly four weeks now. Roads leading to the area have been dug up and roadblocks set up, virtually rendering inaccessible parts of Jhargram subdivision including Lalgarh.

Mobile user identification dangerously poor

Even as security agencies are trying to find out details of the five mobile SIM (subscriber identity module) cards recovered from the terrorists after last week's Mumbai attacks, government data reveals that mobile operators have failed miserably in subscriber identification, putting national security at risk. The Union Home Ministry as well as the Communications Ministry has issued strict instructions to all operators to thoroughly check and maintain details of all mobile subscribers, particularly those purchasing new SIM cards. However, the Department of Telecommunication (DoT) data reveals that identification details of 15-20 per cent subscribers are not verifiable. This means that in India, which has the world's second largest mobile subscriber base of 35 crore, the identities of almost seven crore subscribers could be in doubt. As per the DoT data updated till June this year, all leading operators fared badly in photo identity and address (PIA) identification and verification of customer acquisition forms (CAF). A CAF verification of Bharti Airtel with over eight crore subscribers showed that only 83.3 per cent of them could be verified. This shows that the credentials of over one crore of its subscribers are in doubt. In the case of Vodafone-Hutch that has over five crore subscribers, the CAF of only 78.3 per cent could be verified, leaving the identity of over one crore of them in doubt. Reliance Communications has over four crore subscribers, of whom the CAF details of only 80 per cent could be verified. In the case of Idea Cellular and Tata Teleservices with over three crore users each, the CAF particulars of only 75 over cent subscribers could be matched. Ironically, the worst record is that of the state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd. and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Ltd. The CAF details of only 60 per cent could matched in the case of BSNL, which has around four crore subscribers, while in MTNL that has operations in two terrorism-affected metros Delhi and Mumbai the CAF details of only 63 per cent could be verified. Despite repeated warnings, mobile operators have failed to take the CAF verification process seriously.

Economic Front:

Rupee down 57 paise to 50.07/10 a dollar

The rupee snapped a two-day gaining streak and tumbled by 57 paisa to 50.07/10 against the American currency after the deadly terror strike on the country's business hub raised fears of increased fund outflows. There was no trading at the Interbank Foreign Exchange (forex) market following the biggest-ever terrorist attack in the metropolis on Wednesday night that left over 100 people dead. The domestic currency resumed weaker at 49.65/69 a dollar and gradually moved downwards in an otherwise

lacklustre trade despite attempts by state-owned banks to prevent the rupee from breaching the crucial 50-level. Dealers at forex market said the activity was at a low ebb as foreign banks were sidelined in the prevailing situation arising out of the terrorist attacks. "Initially, the market witnessed some month-end dollar demand from oil refiners even as local stocks started on a positive note," said a dealer with public sector bank. Analysts said the terror strike virtually paralysed trading for two days inducing concerns that investments from abroad may be affected in future. However, the Indian benchmark Sensex today ended 66 points higher in a choppy trade.

India-China trade to reach $55bn, to surpass 2010 target

Bilateral trade between India and China will reach USD 55 billion by the end of December, surpassing the USD 60-billion target for 2010, Chinese Consul-General Mao Siwei said. At a seminar organised by the Asiatic Society Mao said, during the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to China, the two countries had set a trade target of USD 60 billion which would be surpassed. Recalling foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee's recent announcement in Guangzhou that China had become India's largest trading partner, Mao said bilateral trade was a driving force behind Sino-Indian relations.

CPI(M) to have poll tie-up with TDP

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) on announced that it, along with the Communist Party of India, would jointly work for an electoral understanding with the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh. The Polit Bureau also welcomed the CPI's decision to have a similar understanding with the TDP. The CPI (M) had been awaiting the CPI's response as it felt both the Left parties should decide on allies in unison. The Polit Bureau discussed the electoral line to do be adopted in Tamil Nadu. It said the understanding arrived would be conveyed to the Tamil Nadu State Committee so that a decision could be taken.

5 lakh jobs lost in handicrafts

With the US and European markets facing severe slowdown, India's handicraft exports have been hit hard resulting in job losses for over five lakh workers, industry officials said. "The initial industrial estimates of handicraft exports show a decline of 30% in the April-October period this fiscal," an Export Promotional Council for Handicraft (EPCH) official said. Over one million people are employed in the most affected handicraft clusters of Moradabad, Jaipur, Saharanpur, Jodhpur and Narsapur (Andhra Pradesh). "40% exporters have closed down their factories and 50% people in the four most affected clusters have lost their jobs," All India Handicraft Board vice chairman Sudhir Tyagi said. Art metal wares, laces, wooden and wrought iron handicrafts, embroidered and crocheted goods had huge buyers in the US, the UK, Germany, Japan and Middle Eastern nations. According to EPCH data, handicraft export in April-September this year declined by 22.10% to $1.04 billion, against $1.34 billion in the same period last year. "Export orders have almost frozen," Tyagi said adding, "December, especially the Christmas season, is very crucial for buyers abroad, the sale during the festival will decide on further export orders."

Last week, commerce secretary G K Pillai had said, five lakh people would lose jobs in the textile sector in the next five months. Moradabad (Uttar Pradesh) is a major exporting hub of art metal wares and imitation jewellery, while Saharanpur and Jodhpur are known for wooden, wrought iron and sea shell handicrafts. These products command big markets in US, Germany, the UK, Italy and Saudi Arabia. Lace and lace goods, which go to the US, the UK, Germany and Canada, are crafted in the Narsapur cluster in Andhra Pradesh.

'Industrial output to grow by 6.3%'

Economic think-tank CMIE has said that the industrial output is expected to grow by 6.3% in 2009-10 as against its earlier estimate of 8.3%. "Sharp downward revision in forecasts of electricity, textiles, cement, commercial vehicles, machinery, fertilisers, crude oil, petroleum products, man-made fibers and PVC pipes and tubes have pulled down our forecast for overall industrial production growth from 8.3% to 6.3%," CMIE said in its monthly report. Poor performance of IIP in first half and new stress seen in select industries led to a substantial downward revision in our forecast for 2009-10, the CMIE said. Some industries also face adverse conditions because of fresh supply constraints, it said.

No early exit for investors in close-ended mutual fund schemes

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), announcing a new set of measures aimed at the mutual funds industry, on Thursday said that all close-ended mutual fund schemes must be listed and that investors would not be allowed to exit from close-ended mutual fund schemes before their maturity. The schemes, which have been approved earlier but not yet launched, will also have to be amended accordingly. "It will be obligatory for the asset management company to list the close-ended schemes," Mr. Bhave said. The board also decided that for such close-ended schemes, the underlying assets will not have a maturity beyond the date on which the scheme expires. All such funds must invest in instruments in line with their maturity profile, he said. Commenting on the overall mutual fund regulations, Mr. Bhave said that, "from the October experience, we didn't face any difficulty with regard to equity schemes even though the market had come off so much. We wouldn't want to tinker unnecessarily with something unless an issue comes up. So just now the focus is more on what happens with debt schemes," he said. In October, the mutual funds industry faced a severe liquidity crisis following redemption pressure. The board has approved extension of validity of observation letter issued for public or rights issues from the present three months to one year, subject to filing of updated document where there are material changes. Mr. Bhave said that many issuers requested SEBI to extend the present time limit of three months as they were unable to come out with their issues, which are already approved by SEBI. "So we decided to extend this timeframe to one year considering the present market conditions."

Inflation at 7-month low

The rate of inflation dipped further to 8.40 per cent for the week ended November 22 from 8.84 per cent in the previous week on account of lower prices of non-administered fuel products and certain manufactured food items even as other food articles turned costlier. With the Wholesale Price Index-based inflation sliding for the fourth straight week in a row to its lowest level in seven months, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) now has a higher comfort level to go in for deeper rate cuts aimed at providing increased bank credit at lower rates of interest. The monetary policy changes by the apex bank

is to form a part of the comprehensive stimulus package to be unveiled by the Government to boost various sectors of the economy such as housing, auto, export, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and other labour-intensive industries which are witnessing a serious slowdown and job cuts in the wake of the global financial crisis. Among food articles, coffee, sea fish, masur, rice, eggs, arhar, fruits, vegetables and gram turned costlier during the week.

Impact of global meltdown stronger on India: Subbarao

The impact of global financial crisis on India is stronger than expected but it will be the first to recover, according to D. Subbarao, Reserve Bank of India Governor. "Though the country is not directly impacted by the global financial crisis, we have not weathered the indirect knock-on effect of the global crisis. And because the global crisis is turning out to be deeper and longer than we had earlier expected, the impact on India is also turning out to be stronger (than expected)." Mr. Subbarao said the inflation rate would further decline. The challenge before the central bank was to ensure a balance between inflation and growth. While the inflation rate was falling in the last three weeks, there was a moderation in growth. The RBI had shifted its monitory policy stance and adjusted the rates in the last two months. The Wholesale Price Index and the Consumer Price Index need to be watched. The apex bank initiated measures to maintain a comfortable liquidity of rupee and foreign exchange, besides ensuring continuous credit flow to productive sectors, exports and small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Geo-strategic developments:

Antony warns of airborne terror threat

With India's coastal security already breached in Mumbai by terrorists, Defence Minister A.K. Antony on Wednesday warned the armed forces of possible terror attacks from airborne platforms similar to the '9/11' attacks in the U.S. Mr. Antony asked them to be prepared to counter the threat of terrorists from the air and prevent a repeat of World Trade Center-type attacks carried out by the al-Qaeda. At a meeting with the three services chiefs and defence officials, he called for greater coordination among all security and intelligence agencies so as to make the intelligence inputs actionable. The meeting, attended by Navy Chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta, Air Chief Marshal Fali Homi Major and Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor and Defence Secretary Vijay Singh, also reviewed the situation along the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan in the wake of reports that its army was on a "high alert" following the Mumbai terror attacks. Mr. Antony, sources said, worked out measures with the armed forces for tightening security and vigil along the LoC to prevent infiltration of terrorists through land, as "Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) is known to be an important area for recruitment and training of terrorists." The top defence brass discussed plans for beefing up coastal security and hastening the acquisition process for systems and platforms including coastal radars and interceptor boats. \Of particular concern was the intelligence warning that airports around the country could be targets of terrorists, forcing the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security to issue a red alert to secure all important airports, sources added. Though it was pointed out that intelligence agencies issued regular warnings before important dates such as the Ayodhya complex demolition anniversary on December 6 and Republic Day on January 26, Defence Ministry sources said Mr. Antony asked the forces, particularly the Air Force, to be more vigilant to prevent any such threat.

Kashmir:

68.22 per cent voting in 3rd phase in J&K

Election authorities on Thursday said that 68.22 per cent polling was recorded in third phase of election in five Assembly segments of Kupwara district after final compilation of the figures. “With reference to the presiding officers’ diaries of the five Assembly segment of Kupwara district, which went to polls on November 30 in third phase of elections in the State was recorded as 68.22 per cent,” an official statement said. Giving further details, it said that 80.41 per cent of votes were cast in Karnah segment followed by 75.47 per cent in Handwara, 68.46 per cent in Lolab, 62.60 per cent in Kupwara and 61.46 per cent in Langate segment. The poll percentage in the third phase has gone up by more than six per cent from 61.32 to 68.22 per cent, an official spokesman said. He said the final figures were compiled after all the presiding officers submitted their reports to the election authorities. Elaborate security arrangements are being made for the fourth phase of elections on December 7, with as many as 140 companies of Central forces being deployed in militancy-hit Udhampur and Reasi districts. “Security forces have launched a major sanitising exercise in hilly, remote and sensitive areas of Udhampur and Reasi districts to ensure peaceful polling,” defence sources said. Giving details of security arrangements, a police official said that 70 companies of Central forces each would be deployed in two districts. State DGP Kuldeep Khoda visited Reasi-Udhampur range and reviewed security arrangements with officers, he added.

Social front:

Assam faces high HIV risk

Though the prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS is low, Assam has been categorised in highly vulnerable state of the country. Disclosing this here on Sunday, the Assam State AIDS Control Society (ASACS) has announced their resolve to shield the vulnerable group by creating maximum awareness. The project director of the Assam AIDS control society and additional secretary, health and family welfare J. Syamala Rao, told reporters: "Though the prevalence rate is low in Assam, it has been identified as a highly vulnerable state and that creates greater responsibility in checking its spread." He said that the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in the state is 0.03, which transforms into about 9,000 people, of which 2,195 have been identified. "It is very vital to detect all cases so that they can be given medication for their longevity as well as check the spread of the disease to others," he added. As in October this year, there were 805 AIDS cases in the state, of which 196 are female and 84 children, with most kids acquiring the infection in the womb. Altogether 127 people have died of AIDS till now, with Mr Rao underlining that many AIDS deaths go unreported or even undetected due to low awareness. He informed that creating greater awareness and motivating the people for voluntary blood testing were being pursued vigorously and more counselling centres were being opened throughout the state. Mr Rao identified female sex workers, men having sex with men, injected drug users, truck drivers and migrants as the high-risk groups. He also informed that a series of programmes were being planned for World AIDS Day on Monday; with chief minister Tarun Gogoi participating in the central function here. "Some of these groups are in conflict with the law, but we adopt a non-judgmental approach," he said.

WHO calls for greater attention to curb HIV/AIDS

Injecting drug users (IDUs) and men who have sex with men (MSM) require particular attention in the fight against HIV/AIDS and HIV continues to be a major public health problem in the South East Asia Region, with the highest incidence among sex workers and their clients, MSMs and IDUs ,” according to World Health Organisation South East Asia Regional office director Samlee Plianbangchang. In a message on World AIDS Day here, Mr. Plianbangchang said India, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia and Nepal accounted for the majority of the regional burden. Though significant improvements in the

coverage of harm reduction interventions were seen in the region, the coverage that comprised needle syringe programmes of opiod substitution therapy remained between 20 to 25 per cent. The WHO had asked the member-states to urgently scale up these interventions. National programmes were needed to pay significant attention to MSMs, as this group engaged in a wide range of sexual behaviour. But to design effective interventions for this group, a better understanding of different MSM sub-groups, including their behaviours and beliefs, was fundamental, the statement said.

Foreign Relations:

India has 'proof of ISI involvement'

India has proof of the involvement of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency in last week's terrorist attacks in Mumbai but will not level a public accusation because the ensuing tension in bilateral relations would play into the hands of those responsible for the incidents, authoritative sources claimed here on Thursday. Asked for the sort of proof linking the ISI to the attacks, the sources said investigators had "the names of the handlers and trainers, the locations where the training was held, and some of their communication through Voice over Internet Protocol have addresses that have been used by known ISI people before." The sources also clarified that contrary to media reports in India and Pakistan, the demarche which was handed over to the Pakistani side earlier this week did not contain the list of 20 most wanted terrorists that had first been given to Islamabad in 2000. Once the media started saying India was demanding the immediate handing over of the 20 fugitives, of course, the Government could hardly contradict these reports since their return has been a long-standing Indian demand, the sources added. The demarche made only a pro forma reference to the return of unnamed fugitives but was otherwise exclusively focused on the Lashkar-e-Taiba and its leader Hafiz Saeed, whom New Delhi regards as the perpetrators of the Mumbai terror strikes the sources said that India did not believe the civilian government in Pakistan was involved in the incidents. Asked about the Pakistani Army chief's potential role, they said it would be surprising if the ISI were able to operate without the military leadership's knowledge. Describing Pakistan as a country with a fragmented power structure, the sources said India's response to what has happened in Mumbai could not be the same as in December 2001, when a terrorist attack on Parliament triggered the offensive deployment of troops on the border and the suspension or downgrading of transport and diplomatic links. "Then, we were dealing with one Pakistan. There was Musharraf and that was it. Today, the situation is different."

The Pakistani Army would very much like a military crisis on the border with India because that would relieve the pressures it was facing on the Afghan front. "Our dilemma is that we don't want to play their game we want them to continue being engaged in the fight against terrorism in the west because that's also our war. But we can't give them a pass either. The perpetrators have to be fixed." It was because of this complexity, the sources added, that India's public response has been very limited.

‘Pakistani Army wants diversion from Afghan war’

Keenly aware of the Pakistani military’s desire to generate tension on the Indo-Pak border, India is calibrating its response to the proof it has gathered linking the Inter-Services Intelligence to the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai so as to avoid the political and diplomatic trap that has been laid for it, authoritative sources claimed here on Thursday. Giving an account of the diplomatic contacts India had with the civilian leadership of Pakistan in the aftermath of the attacks, the sources said it became quickly apparent that there was a major “disconnect” between the civilian government and the Army over how Islamabad should react to Indian calls for action against the perpetrators. In the Indian account, the picture that emerges is one of the Pakistani military using the Mumbai incident to pursue multiple goals such as diverting attention from the disastrous war the United States has made it wage near the Afghan border, reviving its sagging reputation as the custodian of Pakistan’s national interest and re-establishing its status vis-a-vis President Asif Ali Zardari and the civilian government as the final arbiter of official Pakistani policy on relations with India. In their telephone calls to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, President Zardari and Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani noted that their government had already suggested a DG level meeting between the ISI and the R&AW. “So they said, let’s do this meeting and let’s have a joint investigation,” the sources said. On his part, Dr. Singh said India would investigate matters on its own side but that once this was done, Pakistan could send the DG ISI over to see the evidence. India was surprised when Pakistan later went public about this, the sources said, putting out not one but two press releases. Later that night, however, the Army chief forced the government to rescind the decision. The Indian side was told at 2 a.m. on Saturday that Pakistan was sending its army chief’s plane later that morning to pick up Mr. Qureshi, who was still in India, and taken by surprise by the summons he received. It was precisely at this time, the sources said, that stories began appearing in Pakistani newspapers like the *Frontier Post* and *Pakistan Observer* that Mr. Mukherjee had been peremptory and rude in his telephone call. And then Geo TV ran a story about troops being moved to the border. “It was clear to us that the Pakistan Army was trying to create a sense of military hysteria.” According to the Indian sources, the military in Pakistan appears to be acting out of three motivations. First, they wish to divert international concern away from the Mumbai attacks and the role of Pakistan-based terrorists towards a more general concern about India-Pakistan tension. Second, they wanted to send a message to India that “you can talk all you like to Zardari and the civilian government but nothing will change.” The third reason, the sources said, was that the Pakistan army “needs a way out of the unpopular war it is fighting under U.S. pressure in FATA and Wana. They really have a problem and need a diversion. Thanks to the war on terror and the Musharraf legacy, for the first time in the history of Pakistan, the army is unpopular inside the country. They are in trouble.” India was determined to take these broad motivations into account as it crafted its response to Pakistan, the sources said. “We believe the civilian government is not involved. And it could be that the ultimate aim of this entire exercise could also be for the military in Pakistan to take power again in the name of dealing with an India crisis.” Though this would not happen overnight, the sources said this “would be the wrong outcome for [India] and so we are not going to [help them escalate].”India’s goals were narrowly focused on getting the Jamaat-ud-Dawa the parent organisation of the LeT banned as a terror organisation and its leader, Hafiz Saeed, dealt with. It was significant that unlike other groups such as the Jaish-e-Mohammed, the LeT had never attacked Pakistan establishment targets. “So the relations between the LeT and the ISI are very intimate,” the sources added. While the U.S. had shared crucial intelligence with India, the sources said no one should overestimate what Washington was likely to do. They said U.S. Joint Chief of staff Admiral Mike Mullen had delivered a tougher message to Islamabad than even Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. “Don’t argue with me, he told them when they denied responsibility,” the sources said, “I have the proof.” “At the same time, this is an administration that worked with and invested in [Pakistan army chief] Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. So you can’t expect them to admit they were wrong to have faith in him.” India had no intention of sharing the evidence it had with the Pakistani side, the sources said. “We will leave it to the Americans to show them any proof they want.” Dr. Rice had been told during her visit to New Delhi on Wednesday that America had levers of influence over Pakistan which India didn’t. “So please use them,”

we told her. Even though American citizens had been killed in the Mumbai attacks, the sources said India "can't expect the U.S. to do what suits us." The Americans, they said, would play this for what suits them to say, "OK, little boys, don't fight, we'll help you sort things out."

India tightens visa procedures for Pakistanis

India has made it more difficult for Pakistanis to obtain visas in the wake of the Mumbai attacks. A press release from the Indian High Commission here said that on account of the additional security measures following the attacks, "the processing time for issuing visas would now [take] a minimum of 30 days," except for medical emergencies. In recent times, the High Commission was issuing 10,000 to 12,000 visas a month and the minimum processing time had gone down to a week. The new procedures will mean fewer visas will be issued to Pakistani nationals.

Rice: we'll insist on direct, tough action by Pakistan

United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has promised to persuade Pakistan to take "very direct and tough action," even as India warned that it would react in "whatever way necessary" after receiving the response to its demarche to Pakistan served on Tuesday. Asked whether the series of terror attacks in Indian cities warranted Indian military strikes, Ms. Rice wanted New Delhi's response judged by its effectiveness which avoids "unintended consequences." She assured India that the U.S. would work "very closely" to bring the perpetrators of the attack to justice and prevent further strikes of this kind. Even if non-state actors were involved, it was Pakistan's responsibility to take action if the terrorists were based on its territory, she observed at a joint press conference with External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee at the end of a 45-minute interaction on Wednesday. Ms. Rice admitted that the Mumbai terror strikes were more sophisticated than the previous serial bomb blasts in several major Indian studies, but wanted the response limited to arresting the culprits and ensuring that no further attack took place. Pakistan had a central role to play in ensuring both these things, she added. "Someone's backside is going to be kicked very hard tomorrow in Pakistan," said sources, adding that the U.S. had been able to obtain all intercepts of the conversations between the terrorists and their handlers. Ms. Rice is visiting Islamabad on Thursday.

Zardari rules out returning fugitives

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari has rejected India's demand to hand over Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) chief Hafiz Mohd. Sayeed and other fugitives in the wake of the Mumbai terror attacks, and doubted whether the arrested terrorist is a Pakistani. Two days after New Delhi's demarche, demanding the handing over of 20 fugitives, Mr. Zardari made known Pakistan's reluctance to part with them. "If we had proof, we would try them in our courts. We would try them in our land and we would sentence them," he said on "Larry King Live" programme on CNN on Tuesday night. India's list of 20 most wanted criminals given to Pakistan included underworld don Dawood Ibrahim and Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar. India is awaiting Pakistan's response before deciding on the options it could exercise.