

Abu Dhabi court rejects pleas for BCCI officials' release

ABU DHABI, Feb 7: An Abu Dhabi criminal court on yesterday rejected pleas by defence lawyers to release former BCCI officials who have been held in the emirate since 1991 when the failed bank was shut down, reports Reuter.

The court trying 13 former Bank of Credit and Commerce International officials adjourned until February 19 the hearing in the biggest court case to stem from the bank's collapse.

It held its session behind closed doors for the second time since it formally charged the 13 executives in October.

A court spokesman reading judge Shehab Abdul-Rahman Al-Humadi's decision after the hearing said the judge rejected a request by defence lawyers for the release of the defendants.

He said the judge ordered the continued detention of the defendants.

Eleven defendants in court have pleaded not guilty to criminal charges including dissipating funds, forging documents, concealing deficits and losses and approving false loans. Ten have been held in the Abu Dhabi Police Club while one has been free on bail.

BCCI founder Agha Hassan Abedi and Ziauddin Ali Akbar, sentenced in London to six years imprisonment for his part in the misuse of more than 1.2 billion dollar, are being tried in their absence.

"(The court) will also inform ... Ziauddin Ali Akbar, through diplomatic channels, of the civil claims facing him," the court spokesman said.

The Abu Dhabi ruling family.

Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) and Abu Dhabi Finance Department have filed two civil claims worth about 10.3 billion dollar against the 13 defendants based on the criminal charges.

ADIA and the Abu Dhabi ruling family owned 77.4 per cent of BCCI before it was closed.

The bank's former Chief Executive Mohammed Saeed Naqvi faces nine charges in Abu Dhabi. Along with Abedi, he is charged with using funds entrusted to them by the shareholders and depositors to cover losses made by the bank.

The court said the adjournment was necessary to allow the defence to study auditing reports by the firm Ernst and Young to prepare the defence. Lawyers have also been seeking access to full texts of interviews by the accounting firm Arthur Andersen with defendants.

His surrender was part of an agreement that the United States reached on Sunday with the Abu Dhabi ruling family that also calls for a major financial settlement and access to key documents and witnesses.

Abedi and Naqvi are accused of taking money from the personal portfolios of UAE president Sheikh Zaid Bin Sultan Al-Nahayan and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zaid Al-Nahayan to cover losses made by the bank.

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Abu Dhabi has agreed to send Naqvi to the United States by May 8 to face BCCI related criminal charges there. Lawyers representing Naqvi in the US case have been meeting him this week in Abu Dhabi.

Stock prices fall in Tokyo

TOKYO, Feb 7: Tokyo stock prices fell moderately Monday, but political uncertainty kept investors from selling heavily in the wake of last Friday's plunge on Wall Street. The US dollar edged higher against the Japanese yen, reports AP.

The 225-issue Nikkei Stock Average fell 287.03 points, or 1.41 per cent, closing at 20,014.40. On Friday, the index rose 126.61 points or 0.63 per cent.

The Tokyo Stock Price Index of all issues listed on the first section slipped 13.36 points, or 0.83 per cent, ending at 1,601.44. The TOPIX gained 2.07 points, or 0.13 per cent, on Friday.

After opening sharply lower, prices remained steady in thin trading as market players waited for the government's expected announcement of measures to help Japan break out of a prolonged recession.

Chief government spokesman Masayoshi Takemura said after markets closed that the government hoped to reach agreement on the economic package sometime later Monday.

Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa is under heavy pressure to produce the package before a February 11 summit with President Clinton in Washington. But his seven-party coalition remains divided over how to pay for a massive tax cut to encourage consumer spending.

The uncertainty over the economic package may have helped prevent a more precipitous decline in the wake of the Dow Jones industrial average's 2.4 per cent plunge last Friday after the US Federal Reserve raised its federal funds rate, the interest banks charge each other for overnight loans, to 3.25 per cent.

Higher interest rates in the United States usually strengthen the dollar and hurt stock prices since investors can earn more on dollar deposits.

Some market analysts said the tumble in New York share prices could help the Tokyo market if money pulled out of the New York market heads toward Asian markets, including Japan's.

Volume on the market's first section was estimated at 300 million shares, down from Friday's 370 million.



Dr Manmohan Singh, Finance Minister of India, delivering his key-note speech on 'Law as a Catalyst for Foreign Investment' in New Delhi on the occasion of the Third SAARCLAW Conference held there from January 28-30. Justice M H Rahman (2nd-R) of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh chaired the session.

Wall Street strategists expect more heavy selling

NEW YORK, Feb 7: Wall Street strategists didn't rule out more heavy selling Monday after the jolt that dampened enthusiasm for stocks and wracked the Dow Jones industrial average down nearly 100 points, reports AP.

Others called the decline an understandable and temporary setback. Some said the American stock market still remains the best place for investors to place their money.

Researchers at the CS First Boston Inc. investment banking firm, for example, said Sunday in a weekly strategy bulletin to clients that a correction "does not appear imminent. We remain fully invested."

Although Friday's drop resurrected memories of market behaviour that led to the Black Monday crash of October 19, 1987, Wall Street professionals called the parallel a gross oversimplification. Friday's decline in the Dow amounted to 2.4 per cent, compared with 4.6 per cent, the day before the crash.

In contrast to seven years ago, interest rates and inflation remain subdued, an underlying condition that has been a major contributor to the stock market's stamina.

Even with the Fed's move to hedge a key short-term interest rate known as the federal funds rate up to 3.25 per cent Friday from its previous three per cent, that's only considered a marginal increase.

In addition, the nation's financial markets have instituted several "circuit-breaker" anti-panic restraints since 1987 that provide for closer market coordination and less speculative selling when declines get particularly extreme.

Treasury Secretary Lloyd Bentsen made these points in playing down the market's drop. Asked Sunday on NBC's "Meet the press" about Wall Street's reaction to the interest-rate hike, he said: "I think you have a much different situation than what you had in Black Monday."

Bentsen also characterized the Fed's move the same way Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan did: a pre-emptive strike against resurgent inflationary pressures in the increasingly healthy economy. "A quarter of a per cent increase in the short-term rate is not that big a deal," Bentsen said.

Others said it wasn't the size of the increase that mattered, but rather what the increase said about a change in thinking by the nation's central bank. In their view, future rate increases now are much more likely.

The average tumbled 96.24 points, the biggest one-day point drop in more than two years, to 3,871.42. Broader market indicators also retreated in a selling deluge that left unsettled nerves in the nation's financial capital.

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