

BJP govt running out of time on economic front

By Paranjay Guha Thakurta

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: The stormy winter session of the Indian Parliament concluded with the government making very little headway on its legislative business. At least three crucial economic bills had to be deferred and could not be enacted into law.

These bills are aimed at doing away with the government's monopoly on the insurance business and allowing foreign investors to enter the arena; providing exclusive marketing rights to holders of international patents on food and agro-chemical products; and enabling companies to buy back their own shares.

Though the patents bill was passed by the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament) thanks to the support extended by the main opposition Congress party, the government could not get the bill passed by the Lok Sabha (Lower House) where it is supposed to enjoy a majority. At one stage, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Madan Lal Khurana claimed the bill was delayed because it had to be approved by President K R Narayanan, but a sharp rejoinder from the head of state made the minister hastily eat his words and issue an apology.

While the insurance bill has been referred to a committee of MPs to be appointed by Lok Sabha Speaker GMC Bhalogi, the October 31 ordinance amending the Companies Act of 1956 to allow firms to buy back

their own shares could not be passed as the government was too preoccupied with ensuring order in the House, besides keeping its own house in order. To ensure continuity, a fresh ordinance would now have to be issued in January before the old one lapses.

Meanwhile, Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha, who appears to be a beleaguered man these days, acknowledged that the fiscal deficit as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) would exceed the 5.6 per cent target set in his June 1 budget.

Speaking at a function organised by the Punjab, Haryana, Delhi Chamber of Commerce, Sinha took umbrage at the chamber chief claiming that the fiscal deficit would touch seven per cent of GDP during the current financial year. Sinha said such statements undermined the government's efforts to boost business confidence. At the same time, he conceded that the deficit was "under pressure" on account of low collections of indirect taxes. In particular, collections of excise duty on manufactured products have fallen well below expectations as industrial production in the first half of the fiscal year (April-October) grew by a niggardly 3.6 per cent against 6.2 per cent in the corresponding period of the previous year.

In the manufacturing sector, only two segments — computers and pharmaceuticals — have performed well. The worst per-

formers are steel and cement, demand recession having hit both industries pretty badly. In addition, steel manufacturers are reeling under high inventories apparently on account of cheap imports. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's grandiose plan to construct six-lane highways to criss-cross the country — which could boost steel and cement demand — is still in limbo with the detailed financing modalities yet to be worked out.

The government's supporters are arguing that the country's economic problems are a consequence of a "cyclical slowdown" in the world economy. They add that even if the real rate of growth of GDP in the year ending March 1999 is somewhere between 4.5 per cent and 5 per cent — the official projection is still 6 per cent — India would not have performed all that badly since the world economy is expected to grow by only 2 per cent during calendar year 1998. That is, however, small consolation for a country whose GDP went up in real terms by 7.5 per cent in 1996-97 and by nearly 5 per cent during the following 12 months.

More than the financial meltdown in Southeast Asia and the fall in the unit value of commodity exports from India, what has upset the government calculations is the fall in the projections of agricultural output on account of floods and adverse weather conditions. Be-

tween 1996-97 and 1997-98, total agricultural production came down by as much as 2 per cent and foodgrain output fell by 2.5 per cent. There were expectations that agricultural output would bounce back by 4 per cent this fiscal year, but the latest data point towards a rise in crop output by 3 to 3.5 per cent. In other words, the actual rise would be only 1 to 1.5 per cent which would hardly raise agricultural incomes which, in turn, creates new demand for industrial products.

On the corporate front, there is a lot of activity in the automobiles industry. With a host of new manufacturers entering the fray, market leader Maruti Udyog Limited (a joint venture between the Indian government and Japan's Suzuki Motor Company) is getting reconciled to a drop in its currently formidable share of over 80 per cent of the country's market for passenger cars.

The Tata group has announced the launch of its new indigenous small car model, the Indica. The Tata group is also in the process of consolidating its holding in various associate and group companies. For historical reasons, government-controlled financial institutions in India are the major shareholders in large privately-managed corporate enterprises. Hence, the quip that there was little private about the country's private sector.

— India Abroad News Service

Painful tests await ROK

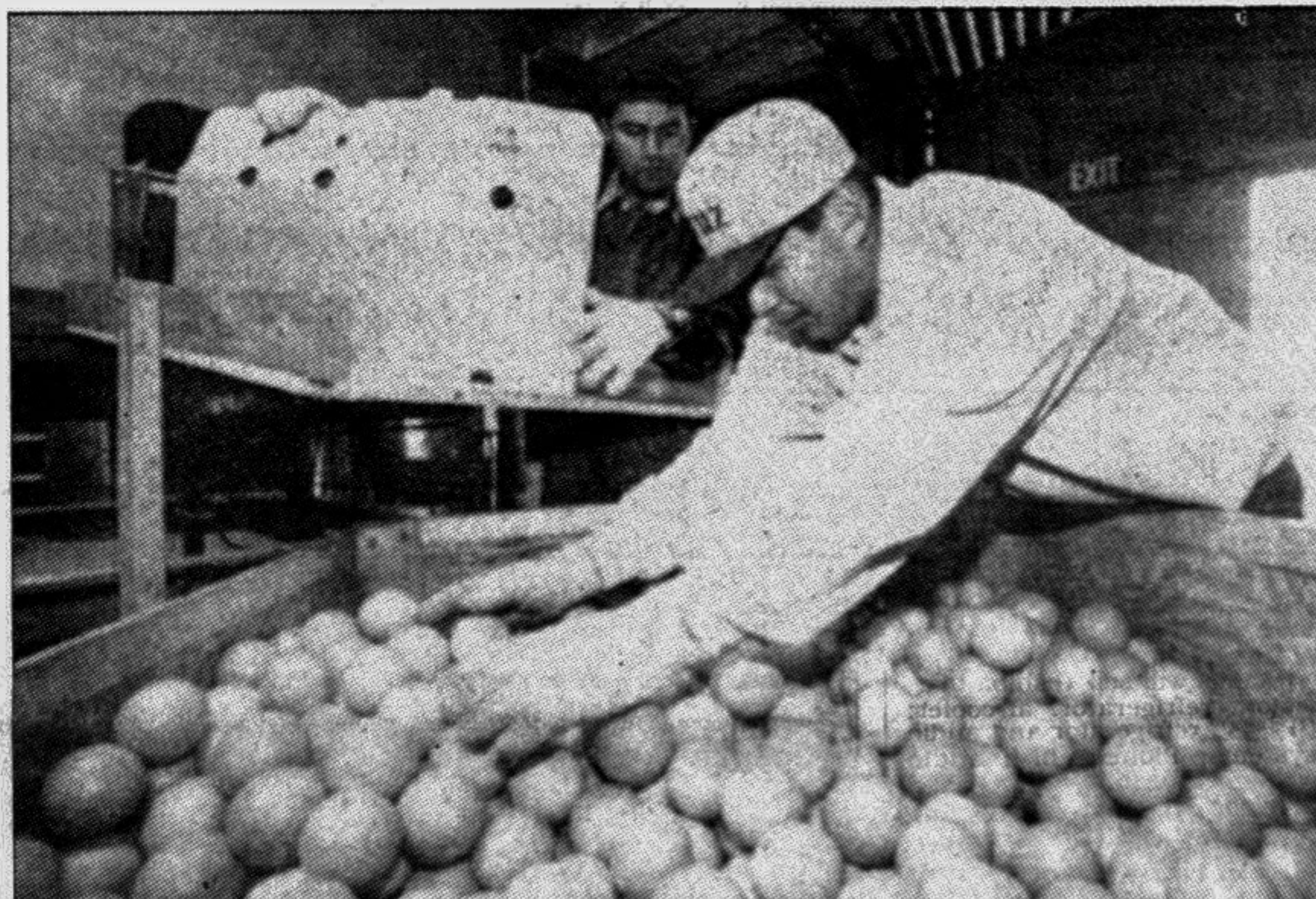
SEOUL, Dec 27: South Korea in a 1998 managed to survive the brunt of what is billed here as the worst economic crisis since the Korean War, but the coming years hold in store its most painful tests yet, reports AFP.

The country, the world's 11th biggest economy a year ago and now ranked 18, is now expected to emerge stronger than ever in the next century if its financial, corporate and labour sectors submit to crisis-imposed reforms.

"South Korea has successfully overcome the short-term liquidity crisis but it has yet to fight the real battle," an analyst with the private Korea Economic Research Institute (KERI) said.

"The deepest pain will come next year when economic restructuring starts in earnest. Its impact will be felt not only by large conglomerates but their numerous suppliers," the KERI analyst, Lee Soo-Hye, told AFP.

The Asian "tiger" stumbled to the brink of disaster in December 1997 and was forced to accept a 57-billion-dollar International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout when it had only a few days foreign currency reserves left.



Gerardo Cruz (front) and Evaristo Aguilera finish loading oranges during a short work day at the Lindsay Fruit Packing Co. in Lindsay, Calif. Saturday. The packing day was shortened due to the recent freezes in the Central California area. Lindsay Packing was one of the few companies in the area which had oranges to pack. Growers were banking on a slow warm-up to allow some table oranges to heal and save them from a profitless season. — UNB/AP photo

Asia hopes to see recovery kickstart in mid-'99

HONG KONG, Dec 27: Asia's troubled economies head into 1999 hoping against hope a recovery will kick in at least by mid-year, but their prospects are fought with risks beyond the region's control, economists warn, reports AFP.

As the new year beckons, eight of the region's economies led by Japan are bogged down in recession and still waiting for confirmation the worst is over.

Economists say there could be more pain ahead as a slow-down looms in US and European economies, private capital flows decline and Japan's efforts to fix its banking crisis flounder even as governments elsewhere in Asia struggle with reform and stimulus.

"Given the forecast of a slowdown in the US and European economies next year, it would be hard to expect export-led economic recovery in Asia," Industrial Bank of Japan (IBJ) chief economist Shu Tamaru said.

"Governments will be faced with worsening fiscal positions, due to increased pressures to implement additional fiscal stimulus policy and bank reform," Tamaru said recently in Bangkok.

In Hong Kong, Nikko Securities chief strategist Marshall Mays echoed the warning. "The opportunity for demand growth in the United States will be a problem," he said.

Expectations that Japan's economy will turn around and lift the rest of Asia have been dampened by the latest indicators from Tokyo showing no signs of bottoming out.

Japanese prices are falling, output is down, the jobless rate rising and consumer spending down.

"I think it is safe to say that most experts expect the economy to deteriorate further in the coming months," said Kankaku Research Institute analyst Hiroshi Sakurai in Tokyo.

One obvious indication is that corporate capital spending has been falling and is still falling.

Past data and analyses of the current conditions suggest that the economy should cyclically start to recover in the summer next year. I expect the

economy to continue deteriorating at least until around June next year."

Interest rates across the region are falling from the exorbitant levels they reached in early 1998, providing a boost to equity markets, and exchange rate volatility has eased.

But there is no hint of an upturn in the real economy. The latest data did nothing to dispel the gloom over the region, in which Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand have sunk into recession.

Japan's economy shrank for a record fourth straight quarter in the three months to September. The government lowered its gross domestic product growth forecast in the year to next March to minus 2.2 per cent from minus 1.8 per cent.

The economic growth target of 0.5 per cent for the next fiscal year to March 2000 is the lowest for an initial target.

Hong Kong's economy shrank 7.0 per cent in July-September, its worst quarterly performance on record. GDP is forecast officially to shrink 5.0 per cent this year.

Malaysia's GDP contracted 8.6 per cent in the September

quarter the sharpest decline in the current recession. It is expected to shrink 6.80 per cent in the current year and rebound by one per cent in the next.

South Korea's GDP shrank 6.8 per cent in the quarter, its third straight quarterly contraction, matching its forecast for the whole year, and grow by 2.0 per cent next year.

The Philippines' economy went into recession with a second successive quarterly contraction. But it is still expected to grow 0.5 per cent this year and 3.0 per cent in the next.

Singapore technically entered a recession. GDP growth is officially forecast at 0.5 per cent to 1.0 per cent this year, and minus 1.0 per cent to plus 1.0 per cent in 1999.

In Thailand, the government expects GDP to contract seven per cent this year, and grow 1.0 per cent in 1999.

In Indonesia, the worst hit by the regional economic crisis, the government has projected a 13.8 per cent GDP contraction in 1999, followed by 1.0 per cent growth in 1999.

Almost all countries are hoping for the start of a recovery by the middle of 1999, but analysts are less upbeat, noting

recession has squeezed off consumer spending that is so crucial to reflect economies.

"At this stage it's extremely difficult to say where the growth is going to come from," said ABN Amro head of research Graeme Blench in Bangkok, where the regional crisis began with the forced devaluation of the baht currency in July 1997.

"Any increase in government spending will have to go on bailing out the financial institutions, so growth will have to come from consumption."

"Consumption depends on the return of consumer confidence which is difficult to gauge given the slow pace of corporate restructuring," Blench added.

Seoul-based consultant Hank Morris said boosting domestic consumer demand was the key to any real recovery, warning also that regional and global turmoil could set back recovery efforts.

He said, "until domestic demand improves, there can be no real sustainable growth."

"It is crucial to get that going again and to do that you need to restore real confidence," Morris said.

S'pore to lower port handling charges

SINGAPORE, Dec 27: Freight handling and storage charges in Singapore, one of the world's busiest ports, are likely to fall in line with government initiatives to lower port costs, a newspaper reported Sunday, says AP.

Private freight forwarders will probably lower labour, transport and warehousing fees as soon as the government-linked port operator, PSA Corp., unveils further details of the latest round of rebates, said The Sunday Times.

Last month, the government announced a 20 per cent cut in port dues for 1999 as part of wide-ranging measures to lower business costs to boost competitiveness.

Together with a similar move in July, the government

rebates total 46 million Singapore dollars (\$ 28 million).

The Singapore Freight Forwarding Association, which represents more than 210 members, will review its price guidelines shortly, said the report.

The imminent reduction of port-related costs by government and private handlers comes after shipping charges for smaller quantities of goods have dropped below the cost of local handling and storage charges, the report said.

While many port charges in Singapore have been traditionally higher than its regional competitors, the small city-state has continued to attract customers to its efficient, perennially busy port.



The second annual general meeting of Homeland Life Insurance Company Ltd was held in Sylhet recently with the company chairman Kazi Enam Uddin Ahmed, president, Vice-Chairman Abdur Shukur, Managing Director Sharafat Ullah Dhal and Company Secretary Mosleh Uddin Dhal were present. — Homeland Insurance photo

Corporate India switching to e-cards

NEW DELHI, Dec 27: Corporate India, on an austerity drive is saying "Happy New Year" via the Internet, preferring e-mail to the more expensive greeting card. While some Indian companies are still buying greeting cards for their executives, the Internet savvy have discovered that e-cards are a better way of exchanging greetings. And it's cheaper and faster.

"Not buying cards and opting for e-cards is not a conscious corporate cost reduction strategy as yet. But ready availability of technology to replace such costs will definitely lead to it, possibly next year," Vijaya Sampat of the company Indal told The Economic Times newspaper.

Viren Srivastav, Managing Director of Adtran, an ABB and Daimler joint venture, said "internally and also with some

of our European customers we are linked by Lotus Note. We create an image and send greetings with a click of the mouse. We use 25 per cent of traditional cards which the older generation feels comfortable with. The younger ones prefer the electronic version." Sending e-cards is just a click away, and it is free. It saves the sender from cumbersome tasks like buying cards, sealing envelopes and pasting stamps. Besides it is delivered almost instantly and the sender gets immediate confirmation too.

Popular e-card providers on the Net are Corbis on the Excite Portal, E-Greetings on Yahoo and Cool Greetings. According to Senior Vice President MJ Z Mowla of Bata India, "We have to buy a huge number of cards and they are very expensive. From next year, we too may move over to e-cards." — IANS

SAIC launches website on Internet

The SAARC Agriculture Information Centre (SAIC) has launched a website on Internet which is the first step of SAIC's comprehensive project on "SAARC agriculture data on Internet," reports BSS.

The Director of SAIC, Dr M Zahangir Kabir told the 13th meeting of the Governing Board of SAIC which began in Dhaka yesterday that under the project to be completed in two to three years, all important agricultural information, data and technology of SAARC countries will be made available on Internet. An internet site will be created in each country in collaboration with the apex body of agriculture in the seven SAARC countries.

He said the contents of websites would include agriculture information, data and technology and these will be selected in consultation with scientists, research managers, extension personnel and policy-makers in the SAARC countries.

Dr Kabir said in recent years the SAIC had completed as many as 21 programme of activities and disseminated them to the member countries in the form of various databases, bibliographies, reports, publications and other media like diskettes, CDs and videos.

The inaugural function of the 13th governing body meeting of SAIC was also addressed by Executive Chairman of Bangladesh Agriculture Research Council (BARC) Dr Zahurul Karim and Director of SAARC Secretariat Liaquat Ali Chowdhury while Chairman of SAIC governing body Arif Mahmud presided.

The three-day meeting will review the past achievements and implemented programmes of SAIC, it will also discuss the new programmes, budget estimate for 1999 and matters relating to functioning and administration of SAIC.

Kazakhstan plans oil tanker fleet

MOSCOW, Dec 27: The Kazakh government plans to create a fleet of tankers to ship oil abroad, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported Saturday, says AP.

The government will spend \$94 million on purchasing tankers from other countries or construction of the ships at its own Zenit defence plant in Ural'sk, northwestern Kazakhstan.

The tankers will ply the Volga River, Black Sea, Bosphorus Strait and the Mediterranean.

'98 — a challenging year for Zimbabwe

HARARE, Dec 27: 1998 saw Zimbabwe face a difficult year with many challenges to its economy, reports Xinhua.

Low economic growth rate, high inflation and interest rates, unstable exchange rate, poor export performance and social unrest experienced this year, had a negative impact on the country's overall economic performance.

The southern African country adjusted this year's economic growth rate to less than 2.4 per cent from an earlier forecast of 3.7 per cent.

The agricultural sector, the first major pillar of the country's economy, is expected to grow merely by 3.2 per cent this year with most crops register-

ing reduced yields because the El Nino related bad weather forced farmers to reduce their sown areas.

Maize, the Zimbabwean's staple food grain, is estimated to yield 1.4 million tons this year, a decrease of 19.5 per cent as against that of last year, compelling the country to import about 500,000 tons from South Africa.

Tobacco, the country's biggest foreign currency earner, contributes 25 per cent to Zimbabwe's total foreign currency earnings although the country harvested a generally better quality crop of 210 million kilograms, a 7.7 per cent increase over last year.

Exchange Rates

StanChart foreign exchange rates (indicative) against the Taka clients.									
Effective on Sunday, December 27, 1998									
Central Bank USD/BDT Rate: Buying - BDT 48.35/Selling - BDT 48.65									
Selling		Currency		Buying		Currency		Buying	
TT/OD	BC	TT Clean	OD Sight	TT/OD	BC	TT Clean	OD Sight	TT/OD	BC
48.7100	48.7500	USD	48.3150	48.1549	48.0708	48.1549	48.0708	48.1549	48.0708
81.6626	81.7196	GBP	80.0000	79.7349	79.5956	80.0000	79.7349	79.5956	79.5956
29.1027	29.1306	DEM	28.6057	28.5109	28.4106	28.6057	28.5109	28.4106	28.4106
0.4215	0.4219	JPY	0.4108	0.4095	0.4088	0.4215	0.4219	0.4108	0.4095
36.6636	36.6629	CHF	34.9551	34.8393	34.7031	36.6636	36.6629	34.9551	34.8393
25.8148	25.8360	NLG	25.3969	25.3127	25.2287	25.8148	25.8360	25.3969	25.3127
29.5840	29.6063	SGD	28.9919	28.8958	28.7936	29.5840	29.6063	28.9919	28.8958
8.6566	8.6567	FRF	8.5340	8.5057	8.4863	8.6566	8.6567	8.5340	8.5057
31.6093	31.6353	CAD	30.9315	30.8290	30.7162	31.6093	31.6353	30.9315	30.8290
6.0760	6.0830	SEK	5.9576	5.9567	5.9441	6.0760	6.0830	5.9576	5.9567
30.1758	30.2008	AUD	29.0132	28.9170	28.7223	30.1758	30.2008	29.0132	28.9170
57.8188	57.8663	ECU	55.4415	55.2577	55.0170	57.8188	57.8663	55.4415	55.2577
6.2978	6.3029	HKD	6.2298	6.2091	6.2007	6.2978	6.3029	6.2298	6.2091
13.0223	13.0330	SAR	12.8446	12.8202	12.7999	13.0223	13.0330	12.8446	12.8202

Usance Export Bills									
TT DOC	30 days	60 days	90 days	120 days	180 days	TT DOC	30 days	60 days	90 days
48.2154	47.9172	47.5208	47.0641	46.5677	46.0712	48.2154	47.9172	47.5208	47.0641

Exchange rates of some Asian currencies against US dollar									
Indian Rupee	Pak Rupee	THA BAHT	Malay Ringgit	Indo Rupiah	Sing. Dollar	Indian Rupee	Pak Rupee	THA BAHT	Malay Ringgit
42.526/	51.45/	36.29/	3.79/	7750/	1.6540/	42.526/	51.45/	36.29/	3.79/
42.535	51.55	36.29	3.80	7950	1.6500	42.535	51.55	36.29	3.80

US dollar									
Buying	Selling	1 Month	3 Months	6 Months	12 Months	Buying	Selling	1 Month	3 Months
Cash notes	48.15	48.75	USD	5.6175	5.25	5.11031	5.00031	Cash notes	48.15
T/C	48.1	48.7	GBP	6.50025	6.35641	6.04594	5.745	T/C	48.1

Shipping Intelligence

Chittagong Port

Berth Position and Performance of Vessels As On 27.12.98.

J/8	Ken Pan	Wheat (G)	Norl	OWSL	9/12	29/12
J/9	Banglar Shobha	Wheat (G)	K Dia	BSC	R/A	30/12
J/11	Golden D	Wheat (G)	K Dia	Frank	R/A	28/12
J/12	Megha	Cont	Sing	BDSHIP	17/12	27/12
J/13	Jurong Balsam	Cont	Sing	NOL	20/12	28/12
CCT/1	Manaslu	Cont	Sing	RSL	21/12	29/12
CCT/2	Richmond	Cont	P Kel	QCSL	20/12	29/12
RM/14	Al Swamruz	C Clink	Cica	ASLL	30/11	27/12
CGJ	Al Quamar	C Clink	Taje	PSAL	12/12	31/12
GSJ	Vick Hutu	Wheat (G)	Roma	Ancant	19/12	28/12
TSP	Suthathip Naree	Repair	Ham	Move	10/12	30/12
RM/6	Mingzhou-3	Urea	Sing	Seacom	13/12	30/12
DDJ/1	Tanary Star	Idle	Para	PSAL	-	31/12
DDJ/2	Seabulk Command	-	K Dia	IBS	R/A	
RM/8	Al Muztuba	Repair	CLB	CLA	R/A	31/12
RM/9	Banglar Mamata	Repair	BSC	R/A	24/12	
Kafco(U)	Apj Anand	Urea	-	MHL	R/A	25/12