

Central bankers meet to address financial crisis

HONG KONG, Jan 11 - Central bankers from 17 economies started a day of closed-door talks in Hong Kong on Monday to address both global and regional financial concerns.

The talks were the first governor-level meetings at the new Asia-Pacific regional offices of the Swiss-based Bank for International Settlements (BIS).

The subject of the meeting will be discussed in a media briefing at the weekend.

"But we do expect to take a look at the world economic financial situation and at progress on strengthening financial systems, particularly in the emerging market economies," he said.

Crockett would hold a news briefing in the evening at around six p.m. (1000 GMT), BIS

said.

Joseph Yam, chief of Hong Kong's Monetary Authority, told reporters on Sunday he would raise the issue of a single Asian currency but the other central bankers declined to comment on points they might press.

Shortly before the meeting began, U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan met with Yam and Hong Kong leader Tung Chee-hwa for about an hour.

"We spoke about the U.S. economy, Japan's economy and various other issues," Yam told reporters.

He said they also discussed the world's economic situation and its prospects. Asked whether Greenspan discussed U.S. rates, Yam said such details were not discussed.

Most of the central bank governors, who began arriving

on Saturday, have been tight-lipped, keeping reporters at bay. Indonesian central banker Syahril Sabirin discussed domestic issues with reporters, but when asked about the BIS meeting only said no policy proposals were expected. He said the important point was that the central bankers were exchanging views.

Of 17 central banks and monetary authorities attending, 11 were from the Asia-Pacific area.

Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, China, the Philippines, Thailand and host Hong Kong.

Also attending were central bank governors from Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Mexico and the Czech Republic. Wim Duisenberg, President of the European Central Bank also

joined Greenspan at the meeting.

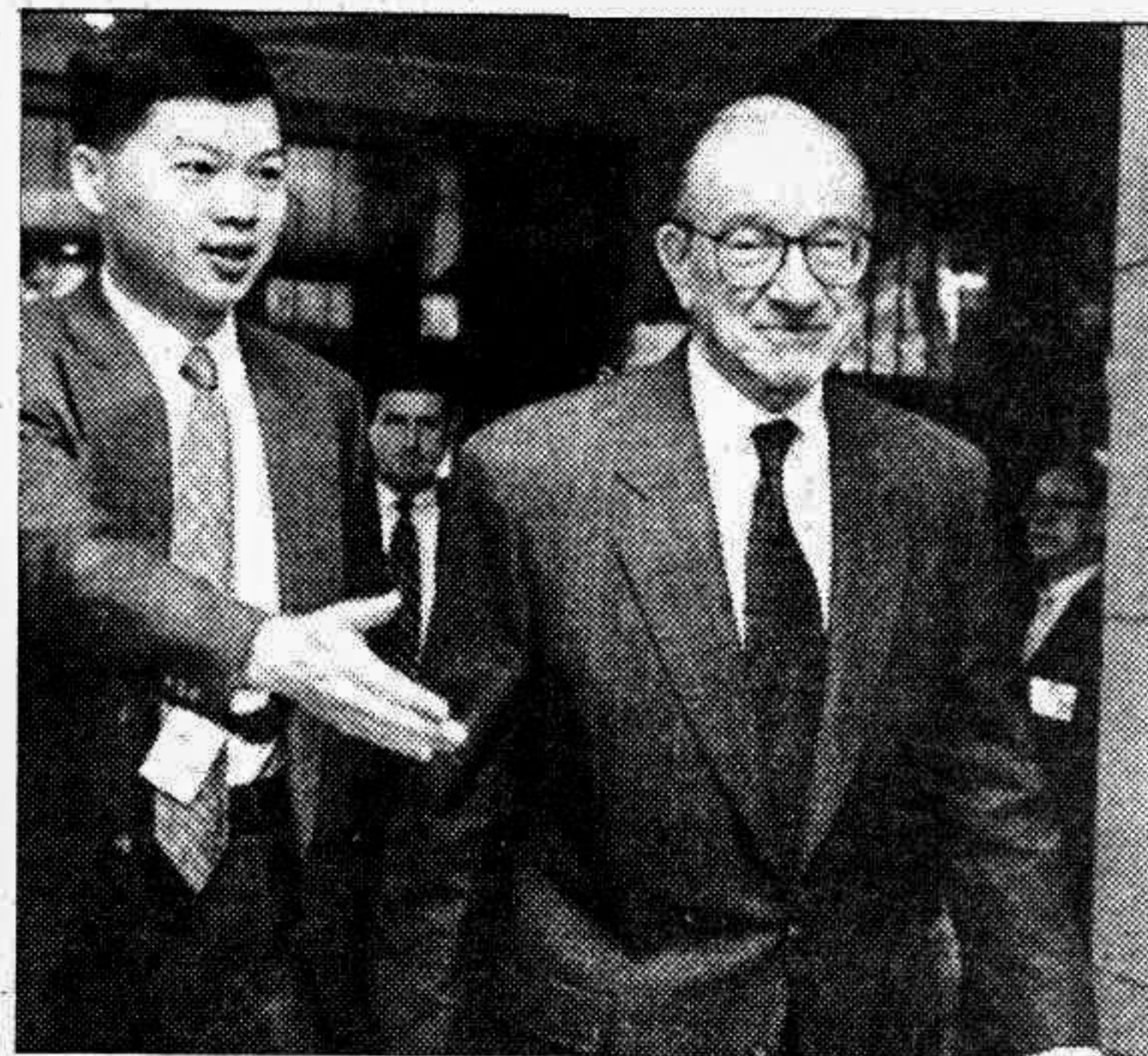
Crockett told reporters over the weekend that the meeting would be predominantly an Asian grouping to discuss issues that would be of direct concern to them.

At the same time, he said, any regional grouping could benefit from outside perspectives on how to deal with financial difficulties.

"The European central banker and Mr Greenspan will be able, especially with the BOJ (Bank of Japan), to represent the three main industrial country groupings...to provide the overall global context," he said.

On Tuesday, Greenspan will go to Beijing to meet again with People's Bank of China governor Dai Xianglong, who is attending the BIS meeting.

-- Reuters Internet



US Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan (R) is escorted by an unidentified official to a meeting with Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa in Hong Kong Monday. After the meeting, Greenspan was scheduled to attend a meeting with international central bankers to discuss the global economy, and in particular financial developments in Asia.

— UNB/AP photo

Many European firms not ready to cope with euro: Study

Most European stock market analysts believe that Europe's new single currency, the euro, will improve the business environment in the European Union.

But according to a survey compiled by Deloitte Consulting, the professional company watchdogs warn that many companies are not yet ready to cope with the new currency.

Hans Christian Iversen, partner at Deloitte Consulting, said: "Analysts are clear that the medium and long term benefits for the business of being 'in' (the euro) are substantial, but they are showing some signs of being concerned that companies have not resolved all the strategic, IT and organisational issues that will allow them to benefit from the euro."

According to the survey more than 70% of UK-based an-

alysts believe that the euro will boost the medium- and long-term prospects of the EU economy.

However, they are convinced that the transition to the euro will involve substantial costs too.

Profit margins

One cost factor is the technical preparations for the euro, for example getting computer systems ready and changing marketing material.

Of greater worry, though, is the erosion of profit margins in some industries. A clear majority of stock market analysts says that many companies are not prepared for this change.

The problem are competition and pricing levels in different countries in the euro-zone. The euro makes such price

differences more obvious and will intensify the competition. Goods that until now could be sold at high prices in some countries will have to become cheaper.

But more than 80% of stock market analysts warn that many companies have not come to grips with this new reality.

The fans of the single currency hope that the pricing pressures will soon filter through to consumer goods. Not everybody is so sure about this. Nearly a third of UK analysts believe that shoppers will not benefit much.

Euro communications

Another charge levelled against Euroland companies is that they have failed to communicate effectively their euro strategies.

This is a bitter read for many businesses as it could have a direct impact on their share prices.

Equity analysts now monitor closely whether companies are 'euro-ready'. To them it is an important indicator of a firm's performance and potential. If they fail the euro test, a "buy" recommendation can quickly be downgraded to "hold" or "sell".

Deloitte Consulting polled 47 UK-based analysts and 53 French, German and Italian experts for its survey.

On Friday the consultancy had published a survey highlighting the heavy costs of the euro transition, but said a majority of analysts believed that the long term benefits would ultimately outweigh the costs.

-- BBC Internet

Asian stock markets close lower

HONG KONG, Jan 11: Asian stock markets closed generally lower Monday, with share prices falling in Tokyo for a second consecutive session, reports AP.

Tokyo's benchmark 225-share Nikkei Stock Average shed 23.33 points, or 0.17 per cent, to close at 13,368.48. On Friday, the average fell 144.75 points, or 1.07 per cent.

Share prices fell on lingering concern about the yen's recent rally against the dollar.

A stronger yen is viewed as bearish for shares of export-oriented companies as it makes Japanese exports more expensive abroad and reduces the value of dollar-denominated profits made overseas.

The dollar was quoted at 110.22 yen in late afternoon trading, down 1.20 yen from late Friday in Tokyo and also below its late New York level of 110.93 yen Friday.

Share prices in Hong Kong closed lower after four straight sessions of gains.

The Hang Seng Index, the Hong Kong market's key indicator of blue chips, fell 88.43 points, or 0.8 per cent, to 10,634.27. Brokers said investors took profits following sharp gains last week.

News that the investment arm of one of China's wealthiest provinces has filed for bankruptcy, leaving debts worth \$4.3 billion, also dampened market sentiment.

Officials from Guangdong International Trust and Investment Corp. announced the losses after a meeting of a committee overseeing the company's liquidation Sunday.

Friday's record rally on Wall Street had little impact in Asia, traders said. The Dow Jones Industrial Average gained 105.56 points to 9643.32, closing above the 9600 level for the first time.

However, South Korean shares closed sharply higher on expectations of a recovery in the country's sluggish economy this year.

The South Korean central bank has said that it expects the

economy to shift to a growth of 3.2 per cent this year from a contraction of about six per cent for 1998.

The Korea Composite Stock Price Index rose 14.62 points, or 2.3 per cent, to 640.95.

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian share prices closed higher, with investors signaling their approval to a Cabinet reshuffle Friday when Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was appointed deputy prime minister. The benchmark Composite Index rose 6.76 points, or 1.1 per cent, to 598.46.

TAIPEI: Share prices closed lower on profit-taking. The market's key Weighted Stock Price Index fell 14.76 points, or 0.2 per cent, to 6,406.99.

WELLINGTON: New Zealand share prices closed higher, with brokers saying rise by market heavyweight Telecom Corp. of New Zealand Ltd. buoyed sentiment. The NZSE-40 Capital Index rose 9.11 points, or 0.4 per cent, to 2,169.40.

MANILA: Share prices closed slightly lower on profit-taking. The 30-company Philippine Stock Exchange slipped 1 point, or 0.05 per cent, to 2,139.64.

SYDNEY: Australian share prices closed mixed after profit-taking in blue chip industrial stocks countered a resource sector boosted by higher metals prices. The All Ordinaries Index fell 6.90 points, or 0.2 per cent, to 2,849.4.

SINGAPORE: Share prices closed lower as profit-taking eroded the market's early gains, dealers said. The Straits Times Index fell 2.10 points, or 0.1 per cent, to 1,543.08.

JAKARTA: Share prices closed lower on continued profit-taking in shares that rallied last week. The Composite Index fell 2.198 points, or 0.5 per cent, to 4,377.29.

BANGKOK: Thai share prices closed mixed, with the benchmark index slipping marginally lower on profit-taking. The Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) index slipped 0.23 point to 399.20.

India monitoring euro for reserve composition

NEW DELHI, Jan 11: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is closely monitoring the developments in euro to see if it needs to change the composition of reserves which has a high proportion of US dollars, officials said today, reports Xinhua.

It was imperative to see the movements in the new currency to hold a higher amount of euro in the reserves, RBI officials said.

In case the euro appreciates against the US dollar, it makes sense for RBI to reduce the dominance of the dollar in the reserves, the said.

Usually the RBI holds currencies in its reserves in proportion to the trade with the different countries. If exporters prefer to invoice in the euro instead of the US dollar, it will prompt the RBI to hold more euros.



Members of a samba group from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil dance close to the sign of the Euro cent during the opening of the 100th Press Ball in Berlin Saturday night.

— UNB/AP photo

Merger mania continues in new year

Tobacco giants strike deal

British American Tobacco, the UK-based tobacco giant, has launched a \$13bn merger with rival Rothmans.

The new group will own a plethora of leading cigarette brands including Lucky Strike, Peter Stuyvesant, Benson & Hedges, Dunhill and of course Rothmans.

However the deal will lead to job losses. BAT employs 200 at its London headquarters and 900 workers at a factory in Southampton which makes cigarettes for export.

A spokesman for BAT said: "There will be job losses sadly, but it is too early to say what they will be."

Market leader

The deal will create one of the largest cigarette producers in the world, with a leading market position in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Australia, as well as a large share of US and Western European markets.

The merger brings together the second and fourth largest international global cigarette companies, with a combined volume in 1997 of over 900bn cigarettes and a world-wide market share of over 16 per cent.

Rothmans also owns the international merchandising rights to its most famous brands.

Martin Broughton, chairman of British American Tobacco, said: "This merger represents a major step forward in the achievement of our vision to become the world's leading international tobacco company."

Cost savings

The two groups hope the deal will lead to cost savings of \$250m, some of which will be achieved by job cuts.

The deal is designed to improve the profit performance of the two tobacco magnates.

The tobacco industry has

been under a cloud over the past few months, hit by flat sales in the mature markets of the developed world and dogged by escalating legal action from smoking victim and US health authorities.

However demand for cigarettes is still rising sharply in the developing world, and that is where tobacco groups are looking to expand.

Stop press

The UK's largest regional newspaper group, Trinity, has pulled out of talks with the Mirror Group in what was to have been a \$1.3bn merger.

It is the second time in seven months that talks between the two groups have collapsed.

A Trinity Group statement said: "Trinity Group plc announces that it is withdrawing from merger talks with the Mirror Group with immediate effect."

Industry sources say divisions within the Mirror board led to the latest breakdown in talks.

Montgomery's talks

There have been recent press reports that Mirror chief executive David Montgomery has been exploring other deals with venture capitalists.

One newspaper said five of London's biggest capital groups had made informal approaches to Mr Montgomery.

But the Mirror Group has denied there have been any such offers made.

The Mirror Group is best known for its flagship tabloid, The Mirror, but it also owns a number of regional newspapers and the loss-making cable channel LiveTV.

It is believed that the two sides had agreed in the past few days that Trinity's chief executive Philip Graf should run the newly merged business.

The latest set of negotiations came after an initial set of exploratory talks had also broken down.

Fiat talks to Volvo

Fiat of Italy has confirmed it is in talks with Sweden's Volvo over a possible tie-up.

Analysts say the talks may lead to a merger of the car manufacturing operations of the two companies. However, the 30 per cent shareholder in Fiat, the Agnelli family, said the company was also talking to other car makers but declined to name them.

Fiat chairman Umberto Agnelli said "there are in effect talks with Volvo", the Financial Times has reported. There has been no official word from Volvo but it confirmed on Friday that it was in restructuring talks.

Volvo has been the centre of speculation in recent weeks over possible tie-ups with Fiat, Ford and Volkswagen.

Joint sales

Italian media reported last week sources close to Fiat saying it talks with Volvo also involve a joint approach to sales and marketing and dealing with suppliers.

The sources said working parties have been formed to look at jointly manufacturing parts for cars produced by both groups, which could lead to the transfer of existing car and truck plants into a joint venture. A deal is said to be expected in March.

Volvo is believed by some industry analysts to be aiming to sell or merge its car-making business.

Ford and Volkswagen have also identified as possible bidders for the Volvo car division, with an estimated value of around \$5bn (\$3.2bn).

Leif Johansson, Volvo's chief executive, has said the company would like to expand Volvo's truck, bus and construction equipment divisions, higher-margin businesses than its car manufacturing.

Telecoms industry in tie-up mania

The world's telecommunications industry is buzzing with takeover and merger rumours, as bidding intensifies for the largest US mobile phone operator.

Airtouch Communications, the San Francisco-based firm is currently facing two offers, one of \$48bn from the largest regional phone company in the US, Bell Atlantic, and \$55m from Britain's biggest mobile phone company, Vodafone.

Airtouch serves 35m customers around the world and its operations would nicely complement the business of both Bell and Vodafone.

But several other companies are rumoured to be ready with rival bids. One of them is MCI WorldCom, the world's fastest growing telecoms company.

However, late on Friday MCI said it was "currently not interested in a deal."

Nonetheless, analysts predict that the bidding war could escalate, given Airtouch's global position in the lucrative telecoms sector.

The strategic appeal of Airtouch is such that you can see it appealing to more than two players," one said.

Potential suitors mentioned on the markets are British Telecom, Atlanta-based BellSouth Corporation and Germany's Mannesmann. All three have described the reports as "pure rumour and speculation" or declined to comment.

British Telecom is certainly an unlikely candidate, as any Airtouch deal would threaten its recent link-up with AT&T, the dominant long-distance carrier in the US.

Vodafone negotiations

A negotiating team from Vodafone met Airtouch officials last week and will report the results back to London on Monday, when Vodafone's chief executive Chris Gent returns

from a working holiday in Australia and New Zealand.

Vodafone and Airtouch are already business partners in Egypt and Sweden and co-operate on Globalstar, a satellite-based mobile-phone system.

A merger with Vodafone would create a global cellular giant worth around \$60bn (\$100bn).

If the deal with Bell goes through it would create a west-to-east coast link-up for the 61m users in the US and put pressure on AT&T to lower its prices.

Tim O'Neill, analyst at SoundView Technology Group, said a full link-up with Airtouch would make "sense strategically" for both Vodafone and Bell Atlantic.

Cable & Wireless

The most attention, though, is paid to Cable & Wireless, the UK telecom company with strong interests in Hong Kong. Since C&W surprisingly lost its successful chief executive Dick Brown to computer services giant EDS in December, the company appeared more than ready for a takeover.

Germany's recently privatised Deutsche Telekom is reported to be interested in C&W, triggering a 9.7% rise in Cable & Wireless shares last Friday.

Both companies declined to comment, but one analyst said he was 95 per cent certain that C&W had put itself up for sale.

As hard information on any of these deals is scarce, investors and analysts are getting increasingly frustrated. One market watcher said: "All these companies, whose share prices are being swept up on the back of market rumours, are not giving any information to investors at all. These share prices are running on vapour right now."

The world's telecoms industries are firmly in the grip of merger mania.

-- BBC Internet

China plans trade centres in Brazil, Argentina

BEIJING, Jan 11: China plans to set up trade and investment consultation centres in Brazil and Argentina to boost trade with Latin America, the official Xinhua news agency reported and Economic Cooperation Ministry was quoted as saying centres are expected to start operation later this year, says AFP.

The Chinese government will encourage enterprises to increase trade and investment in Latin America, Xinhua said.

China has 190 enterprises in Latin America, with an investment of 337 million dollars, it said.

However, Xinhua quoted Wang as saying that in 1998, Sino-Latin American trade ties went through difficulties.

Economic growth in Latin America slowed because of the negative effect of the Asian financial crisis and falling raw material prices on the international market.

Meanwhile, China's exports felt the pressure of the Asian financial crisis and the decision not to devalue its yuan.

IDB gives \$20b soft loans since '76

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia, Jan 11: The Saudi Islamic Development Bank has given some 20 billion dollars in soft loans since 1976, Director Ahmed Mohammed Ali said, reports AFP.

The loans have gone towards more than 2,450 development projects among the 53 members and Muslim communities in non-member states, he said, quoted by the official SPA news agency.

IDB, established by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in 1975, receives its largest contributions from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Exchange Rates

American Express Bank Ltd foreign exchange rates (indicative) against the taka to cents.

Currency	Selling TT & OD	Selling BC	Buying TT Clean	Buying OD Sight	Buying OD Transfer
US Dollar	48.7050	48.7450	48.3100	48.1570	48.0850
Pound Stg	80.1489	80.2148	79.0110	78.7608	78.6430
Deutsche Mark	26.2056	26.2296	26.2030	26.1137	26.0717
Swiss Franc	35.0951	35.1239	34.5367	34.4274	34.3759
Japanese Yen	0.4433	0.4437	0.4353	0.4340	0.4333
Dutch Guilder	25.9205	25.9418	25.0307	24.9514	24.9141
Danish Kronar	7.6351	7.6414	7.4528	7.4292	7.4181
Australians	31.3904	31.4162	30.1454	30.0500	30.0050
Belgian Franc	1.4160	1.4172	1.3674	1.3631	1.3610
Canadians	32.5568	32.5836	31.6372	31.5370	31.4989
French Franc	8.7078	8.7150	8.4089	8.3823	8.3697
Hong Kong	6.2983	6.3035	6.2223	6.2026	6.1933
Italian Lira	0.0295	0.0295	0.285	0.284	0.2834
Norway Krone	6.6167	6.6222	6.5013	6.4807	6.4710
Singapore	29.4432	29.4674	28.4981	28.4079	28.3654
Saudi Riyal	13.0227	13.0334	12.8464	12.8057	12.7865
UAE Dirham	13.2976	13.3085	13.1167	13.0751	13.0566
Swedish Krona	6.1735	6.1785	6.0926	6.0733	6.0642
Qatar Riyal	13.4174	13.4284	13.2320	13.1901	13.1704
Kuwait Dinar	166.9695	167.1066	154.9391	154.4484	154.2174
Thai Baht	1.3416	1.3427	1.3277	1.3235	1.3216
Euro	57.1212	57.1681	55.1604	54.9875	54.9035

Bill buying rates:

TT Doc	30 Days	60 Days	90 Days	120 Days	180 Days
48.2112	47.9074	47.5048	47.1023	46.6667	45.8945

US dollar London Interbank Offered Rate (LIBOR)

Buying	Selling	Currency	1 Month	3 Months	6 Months	9 Months	12 Months
48.0850	48.7050	USD	5.00	5.03	5.06	5.06	5.09
48.0850	48.7050	GBP	6.12	5.9375	5.625	5.50	5.4375

Exchange rates of some Asian currencies against US dollars

Indian Rupee	Pak Rupee	Thai Baht	Malaysian Ringgit	Indonesian Rupiah	Korean Won
42.507/42.5127	51.00/51.20	36.23/36.29	3.7888/3.7912	1650.00/1650.00	100.00/100.00