

IMF Asia chief admits flaws but defends bailouts

Malaysia may ease capital controls

BANGKOK, Jan. 24: The IMF's top representative in Asia Friday defended the bailouts offered to stricken regional economies, but conceded that initial conditions attached to the plans had been too stringent.

Hubert Neiss, International Monetary Fund (IMF) director for Asia and the Pacific, said there was "no serious criticism" of the Fund in the wake of its efforts to rescue crisis-hit Asian economies.

He mounted his defence just days after the Fund admitted in a report it had made errors in its initial forecasts and assessments of the chaos which began with the flood of the Thai baht in July 1997.

Neiss said the multi-billion-dollar bailout programmes for Indonesia, South Korea and Thailand had proven successful despite the depth of the crisis, which had taken all concerned by surprise.

"Had we known the depth of the recession we would not have

recommended such a tightening of fiscal policy," Neiss told reporters at a news conference.

"Some programme projections were over optimistic initially and some policies were not calculated exactly."

"This does not invalidate the overall strategy. We should not confuse detail and the strategy."

The IMF programmes approved in the second half of 1997 were accompanied by strict conditions designed to stem the flow of foreign capital and stabilise spiralling Asian currencies.

Neiss said high interest rates and tight fiscal policies were vital if the economies were to be pulled back from the brink of bankruptcy.

But critics have argued the IMF's austerity measures drove the stricken economies deeper into recession, with grave consequences for ordinary workers and traditional social structures.

"I do not see it (the IMF re-

port released earlier this week) either as a defence or as a confession. Such internal reviews of IMF policy are nothing new," Neiss said.

"Errors and misjudgements were made in forecasting the depth of the recession."

Governments as well as the IMF are, after all, human institutions.

"Our projections were not at that time much different from many of our critics, although some now claim that they had known better all along."

He said the IMF's bailouts were successful and the affected economies were expected to return to growth this year given no dramatic changes in the world economy, he said.

The programmes' macro-economic targets had been modified as the crisis unfolded and most had been achieved, with currencies stabilising and investor confidence returning. The final phase of "structural adjustment" was underway.

Despite the teething prob-

lems, the affected governments had been able to meet the IMF's targets, none had defaulted on their foreign debts and most were expecting to come out of recession in 1999.

"The policy course that is followed presently by Asian governments supported by the IMF is not challenged by any serious critics," Neiss said.

"Despite several imperfections, the basic strategy of IMF-supported programmes is sound."

Neiss dismissed calls for an "Asian fund" to deal with future regional crises as political and not "immediately relevant."

"We have to distinguish between calls for closer cooperation... and whether there should be a separate institution," he said.

"That (the so-called Asian fund) is a political issue and the countries involved have to decide for themselves. It's not an issue of immediate relevance."

— AFP Internet

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan. 24: The Malaysian government may announce an easing of some of the strict controls it imposed on foreign investors last year in response to the Asian economic crisis, a news report said Sunday, reports AP.

The announcement is expected to come soon after Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and other government officials meet Monday with 40 top international fund managers and potential investors, The Sun newspaper reported.

The report said Malaysia may relax curbs that had halted the flow of capital overseas by barring foreigners from repatriating money earned in Malaysian stock and bond markets for one year from the purchase date.

The imminent relaxation of controls over the management of these funds is expected to take the form of an exit tax, which would require foreigners to pay a small penalty on sums taken overseas after less than 12 months, the article said.

Analysts have said such a tax would be less onerous for investors than an outright ban. Some analysts have also warned of a mass exodus of foreign capital around Sept. 1, the first anniversary of the controls, unless the restriction is eased before then.

A government spokesman wasn't immediately available for comment.

The Southeast Asian nation is trying to attract foreign investors back because it needs money to pull out of its worst recession in a decade.

Last month, Malaysia's new finance minister Daim Zainuddin said the government was examining ways to scale back controls in order to draw more foreign investment.

Mahathir will present the government's view on the controls to fund managers such as JP Morgan and Co, Prudential Investment and Jardine Fleming at the meeting arranged by the government's financial adviser, Salomon Smith Barney, according to the article.



Commerce Secretary Syed Alamgir Farouk Chowdhury met members of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dhaka (MCCI) at the Chamber office yesterday and discussed issues relating to trade with India, particularly the 3rd Tariff Agreement due to be signed under SAPTA. Mahub Jamil, President of MCCI, was also present.

— MCCI photo

'Making Pak-IMF deal public to boost investor confidence'

KARACHI (Pakistan), Jan. 24: Publication of the full terms of Pakistan's loan accord with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will help boost investor confidence but achieving the target will be extremely challenging, analysts said, reports Reuters.

They said much would depend on the political will of the government and how pro-active the private sector becomes in helping it meet targets laid out in the agreement.

"To tell everyone yes this is what we have agreed helps recovered and boost investor confidence," said Gaiser Hasan, head of research at Jardine Fleming Pakistan.

Pakistan's Finance Minister Ishaq Dar unveiled the agreement before the National Assembly on Friday detailing the conditions it had agreed for the resumption of the IMF's 1.56 billion loan programme suspended after sanctions were imposed after Pakistan conducted nuclear tests last May.

He said the unprecedented disclosure was proof of the government's commitment to transparency after wild speculation about what the terms might be but diplomats said making the pact public was one of the terms of the agreement.

Analysts said while the government has lifted some concerns investors were still worried it might fail to meet them since as successive Pakistani governments have for years.

"There is little evidence from the last 10 years of IMF agreements that any government has shown the will power to

achieve the targets agreed with the fund, said Nadeem Nagvi, Head of Research International Asset Management.

But he said the government now had to achieve them because all other windows of external borrowing have been closed.

For its political survival the government is left with little option but to pursue these targets, he said.

The central bank has forecast a current account deficit equal to three per cent of GDP for the current fiscal year down from 3.2 per cent in 1997/98.

Hasan said he expected it to remain at that level in 1999/2000. I see a current ac-

count deficit of between 1.5 to 2 billion or 3 per cent of GDP, he said.

Hasan said the inflation target of six per cent was also not realistic, but added it could be held to single digit growth.

He added plans to remove food subsidies hike power tariffs and unify the exchange rate were all inflationary.

The most critical area for the government would be to bring the large informal sector into the tax base the analysts said.

Just seven million rupees were collected in retail sales taxes last year and only 600 outlets were registered said Subhani.

Intel to unveil new chips today

SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) - Intel Corp. said it will unveil four new processors today aimed at the mobile-computing market, including two new mobile versions of Celeron, its chip family for the low end of the PC market.

At a briefing today, Intel (INTC) will unveil two Pentium II processors for the mobile-computing market running at speeds of 333 MHz and 366 MHz.

The new Celeron chips, which are aimed at notebook

computers priced \$1,500 and less, will run at speeds of 266 MHz and 300 MHz, Intel said.

Price cuts in the current line of mobile Pentium II chips are also expected. Pricing details were not yet available.

All the new mobile processors will also include Level 2 cache memory on the processor, instead of separately, further condensing the packaging of chips for the mobile market and resulting in higher performance.

— CNN Internet

Metal: Weekly Roundup

Gold, silver make gains

LONDON, Jan. 24: Gold prices rallied on technical trades in spite of uncertainties surrounding the impact of the Brazilian currency meltdown, reports AFP.

Cash prices on the London Bullion Market rose to 287.55 dollars an ounce from 286.05 dollars last week.

Technical traders countered the negative impact of an announcement by the European central bank that a European central bank had sold 1.13 tonnes of gold.

Analysts predicted further widespread sales from the official sector in Europe in the coming months.

SILVER: Shine. Silver prices rose in line with gold on technical factors.

Cash prices on the London Bullion Market rose by six cents to 5.15 dollars an ounce.

PALLADIUM AND PLATINUM: Strong. Palladium prices posted strong gains in response to a drying up of deliveries from Russia, while platinum remained unchanged despite news that the biggest platinum prices held at 353.50 dollars an ounce.

Analysts pointed to trouble in getting deliveries from Russia, the biggest palladium producing country, so far this year.

Michael Steel, Marketing Research Director at Johnson Matthey, said "our traders in London haven't seen yet any sign of new Russian selling."

Analysts are at a loss why there are periods when it is difficult to buy the precious metals from Russia but bureaucracy is believed to be one of the biggest causes.

The market appeared to ig-

nore news Wednesday that the world's largest platinum producer, South African Anglo American Platinum Corporation (AMPLATS), has decided on a multi-million dollars mine expansion as part of a larger growth plan.

Often such news would drive prices lower.

COPPER: Relief. An announcement that a leading Canadian mine would be closed for an undisclosed length of time lent relief to copper prices, in spite of another increase in London Metal Exchange (LME) stocks.

Three-month prices rose by 3.20 dollars a tonne to 1,463.50 dollars per tonne.

The rise followed an announcement that management would close the Highland valley complex in western Canada from May 15.

LME reserves rose by 11,650 tonnes over the week to 615,875 tonnes.

Dealers warned that they expected prices to fall in the coming sessions in the face of an expected surge in exports from Chile.

LEAD: Gloomy. Lead prices fell slightly despite a decrease in LME stock levels.

Three-month lead prices fell by 3.25 dollars to 492.25 dollars per tonne. LME stocks fell by 675 tonnes to 105,950 tonnes.

ZINC: Zinc prices rose after speculative investment funds were attracted back to market by the current low prices.

Three-month prices rose by 29 dollars to 973.25 dollars per tonne.

ALUMINIUM: Slump. Aluminium prices slumped to a

five-year low on the London Metal Exchange under the crushing weight of a continued build-up of market reserves.

Three-month prices fell by 2.70 dollars to 1,215.80 dollars per tonne.

LME stocks rose by a bumper 111,550 tonnes to 776,725 tonnes.

Meanwhile, the International Primary Aluminium Institute (IPAI) said that global production of high-grade aluminium rose by 300 tonnes per day in December.

And the Russian producer, Sayansk said that it would increase production by 50,000 tonnes to 380,000 tonnes in 1999.

These figures eclipsed an announcement by the Ford Motor giant that it would increase the use of aluminium in its vehicles.

Analysts predicted that aluminium prices would remain under pressure because of low demand from some Asian countries. Russia and Brazil that have been subjected to sharp devaluation and economic turmoil in recent months.

NICKEL: Tumble. Nickel prices fell amid concern over the precarious state of the world economy after Brazil's latest economic setback raised fears over the future health of China, an important nickel producer.

Three-month prices fell by 80 dollars to 4,377.50 dollars per tonne.

TIN: Shine. Tin prices rose on technical trades and a fall in market reserves.

Three-month prices fell by 88 dollars to 5,152.50 dollars per tonne.



Kensaku Aomoto, Deputy Governor of the Export-Import Bank of Japan, and Lee Kyung-jae, President of Industrial Bank of Korea (right), sign a loan agreement totalling up to \$1.3 billion in yen equivalent, at the latter's office in Seoul on Friday. The loan is part of the \$3 billion financial assistance package JEXIM signed with the government of South Korea following the Japan-Korea October summit.

— UNB/AP photo

WB urges move to slash Y2K threat to developing world

By James P. Bond

Some predict the Year 2000 computer bug will trigger global recession, an energy crisis, travel disasters, food and water shortages, and simultaneous power outages across the planet.

Others dismiss these as alarmist doomsday scenarios.

But most have overlooked a startling fact: by January 1, 2000, the majority of the developing countries won't have fixed their so-called Y2K problems. Which threaten them, along with neighbours and trading partners, with potentially damaging consequences.

A World Bank survey of 139 developing countries found that only 35 per cent of them have a national plan to make their systems Y2K-compliant. Last December, officials from 120 countries gathered at the United Nations to discuss the problem, agreed that their governments will assign the "highest priority" to the Y2K problem.

Having a national plan is only the first step in getting systems ready for 2000. Implementing such plans is costly, both in funds and deployment of highly-skilled technicians. While wealthy countries and large companies have the money and skilled people needed to immunize computers and their operating software

from the millennium bug, many developing countries cannot muster the resources to tackle a problem that most see as a vague and distant threat.

As the millennium inches ever closer, however, the consequences of inaction and lack of preparedness grow more real.

For example, many developing countries, such as in Africa, have regional power-sharing arrangements where they rely on a neighbour's electrical supply which, in turn, uses computer micro-chips and software that may not be Y2K-compliant.

Many Eastern countries depend on computer-managed water desalination plants for freshwater supplies, and oil drilling rigs around the world use "embedded" chip systems, some of them buried on the ocean floor. Food and fuel distribution networks, health care, education, and road, air and maritime links could be severely affected.

Beyond these threats, emerging markets already weakened by massive capital flight could see their recovery delayed, as investors steer clear of companies that are not Y2K-compliant.

A worldwide inter-bank working group is currently conducting assessments of Y2K progress in six key sectors, to

share with its members as a tool in making investment decisions. Many mutual funds are already avoiding companies that don't have millennium bug action underway.

But it is in emerging markets where capacity to fix the bug is weakest. One private sector study found that companies in the worst-affected East Asian crisis countries have cut computer spending by more than 20 per cent.

At the same time, these and other developing countries risk being further undermined by a brain drain, as high salaries and relaxed visa restrictions in wealthier nations siphon off qualified computer experts just when their skills are most acutely needed at home.

Given these risks, the lack of interest in this issue is surprising. Perhaps it is because people cannot yet grasp that the Millennium Bug, living mysteriously and unseen within the microchips and software of the world's computer systems, could ever trigger a global catastrophe.

The problem is technical, abstruse, and its consequences unclear. Most of us are reluctant to acknowledge just how much we depend on technology, so Y2K has not, until very re-

cently, persuaded political leaders to take action.

Even if we can succeed in overcoming this resistance to accepting that Y2K is a serious problem, the challenge still looms large. It is already too late for most developing countries to carry out enough Y2K preparations to avoid disruption.

Instead, they should urgently devise contingency plans, for example, identifying a society's critical sectors and systems — water, power, food, health care, telecommunications, transport, finance and trading — checking the bugs in them, and preparing a backup plan should those systems, or their "fixes", fail on January 1, 2000.

This Herculean task costs money. Estimates of what it will cost to fix the millennium bug worldwide vary greatly, but we can get some idea by analyzing what major corporations have earmarked for the task. Chase Manhattan Corp is spending \$363 million, and DuPont Co., \$400 million, while the US Education Department's projected Y2K costs are \$45.5 million.

The World Bank, the OECD and a handful of donor countries such as the United Kingdom, the US, Canada and Italy,

together with other multilateral development banks and international private sector organizations, has undertaken an effort to raise awareness of Y2K, and to mobilize technical assistance and funds to help developing countries address it.

The Bank's Y2K initiative is championed by its *InfoDev* programme, an international-fund-funded programme launched in 1995 to help developing countries mobilize information and communications technologies to promote their economic and social development.

This Y2K effort — financed by US\$30-million in donor trust funds — has delivered Y2K seminars to 1,500 government ministers and information technology managers from 120 countries, and has either approved or is considering 125 grants for Y2K planning and repair work.

It is also advising governments to ensure that Y2K problems do not undermine activities connected with the Bank's loans to developing countries, ranging from support for power generation to pension reform.

Finally, the Bank has approved loans of \$29 million to Sri Lanka and \$30 million to Argentina to support specific Y2K preparations, and is studying

other proposals.

These efforts are extremely modest, given the enormity of the task and the global impact of a failure to act. It is now obvious that January 1, 2000, while not Doomsday, will unleash a chain of problems that will touch everyone on the planet, with the most damaging effects hitting the least-prepared, namely governments and businesses providing services to the world's poor.

Efforts by the World Bank, the UN and others can support some Y2K-fixing, but their most important effect must be a wake-up call to national, regional and local governments, companies and other international organisations to get involved now. Developing countries must devise contingency plans for those vital systems that are not yet Y2K-immune, as they dash — much too late — to develop an overall Y2K solution. But they cannot do it alone. The international stakes are simply too high.

James P. Bond is the coordinator of Year 2000 operational initiatives at the World Bank and Director for Energy, Mining and Telecommunications.

Exchange Rates

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

Currency	Selling TT & OD	Selling BC	Buying TT Clean	Buying OD Sight Export Bill	Buying OD Transfer
US Dollar	48.7050	48.7450	48.3100	48.1570	48.0850
Pound Sig	81.1912	81.2579	79.5183	79.2664	79.1479
Deutsche Mark	29.2230	29.2470	28.2327	28.1433	28.1012
Swiss Franc	35.5303	35.5595	34.7104	34.6005	34.5488
Japanese Yen	0.4295	0.4299	0.4183	0.4169	0.4183
Dutch Guilder	25.9360	25.9573	25.0570	24.9776	24.9403
Danish Krona	7.6460	7.6523	7.4645	7.4408	7.4297
Australian \$	31.3173	31.3430	30.0730	29.9777	29.9329
Belgian Franc	1.4168	1.4180	1.3688	1.3645	1.3625
Canadian \$	32.4117	32.4383	31.4990	31.3992	31.3623
French Franc	8.7133	8.7204	8.4180	8.3913	8.3788
Hong Kong \$	6.2982	6.3033	6.2225	6.2028	6.1936
Italian Lira	0.0295	0.0295	0.0285	0.0284	0.0284
Norway Kroner	6.5644	6.5698	6.4572	6.4367	6.4271
Singapore \$	29.3315	29.3556	28.3759	28.2860	28.2438
Saudi Rial	13.0140	13.0247	12.7622	12.7218	12.7028
UAE Dirham	13.2972	13.3081	13.1167	13.0751	13.0556
Swedish Krona	6.3197	6.3249	6.2361	6.2164	6.2071
Qatari Rial	13.1474	13.1484	13.2320	13.1901	13.1704
Kuwaiti Dinar	166.6208	166.7636	154.5425	154.0531	153.8228
Thai Baht	1.3393	1.3404	1.3248	1.3200	1.3187
Euro	57.1553	57.2023	55.2183	55.0435	54.9612

Bill Buying Rates:

TT Doc.	30 Days	60 Days	90 Days	120 Days	180 Days
48.2112	47.9074	47.5045	47.1023	46.6667	45.8945

US Dollar London Interbank Offered Rate (Libor) as of January 22, 1999

Buying	Selling	Currency	1 Month	3 Months	6 Months	9 Months	12 Months
48.0850	48.7050	USD	4.96	4.97	4.97	4.98	5.03
48.0850	48.7050	GBP	5.00	5.78	5.90	5.90	5.43

Exchange rates of some Asian currencies against US dollars

Indian Rupee	Pak Rupee	Thai Baht	Malaysian Ringgit	Indonesian Rupiah	Korean Won
42.450/42.550	50.450/50.550	36.850/36.950	3.799/3.802	8825/8825	1178.5/1181.0

Amex notes on Sunday's market

The USD/BDT market remained high with demand for the greenback from local private bank. The range for Sunday was between 45.6700 and 48.6825 with most deals done at 46.6750.

The local money market calmed down from pre-Eid sessions with most deal done between 9.50 and 10.50 per cent.

The dollar rose against the yen of Friday as investors wagered Brazil's currency slump would trigger losses in currencies of developing Asian nations, which could weaken Japan's economy. But the greenback was mixed against other major currencies as investors picked through a full plate of news, including Argentina's surprise Thursday announcement that it plans to abandon its peso and issue dollars instead.

Many investors believe the worst is now over for Brazil and Latin America while China and other Asian nations could still see weaker currencies and economies, which would hurt Japan. The market recently tested the dollar's resistance at 115 yen twice, but failed to push it decisively above that level. But attempts to push the dollar down also failed due to rumours of a devaluation of the Chinese yuan. As a result, the market had lost a sense of clear direction.

Dollar/yen was boosted by a rising euro/yen, which rose more than a yen to nearly 133. The euro edged higher against the dollar, ending at \$ 1.1585/95 in New York session close on Friday 22 January 1999.