

Clinton's proposed 2001 budget forecasts slower US growth

WASHINGTON, Feb 7: President Bill Clinton's proposed budget for fiscal year 2001 forecasts US economic growth of about 2.6 per cent in 2001, down from 4.0 per cent in 1999, White House officials said, reports Reuters.

Growth would moderate further to 2.5 per cent for the following couple of years, Joe Minarik, associate director of economic policy at the budget office, told reporters.

Economic growth would then revive to about 3.0 per cent per year until baby boomers begin to retire later this decade and the growth rate slows, Minarik said.

He projected a consumer price inflation rate of 2.5 per cent in 2001, edging up to 2.6 per cent afterward.

The Consumer Price Index, the nation's main gauge of price pressures at the consumer level, was up 2.7 per cent overall in 1999, boosted by higher oil prices and energy costs. That was the biggest rise since 1996.

Clinton's 2001 budget projects the unemployment rate will grow from a 30-year low of 4.0 per cent in January to 4.5 per cent in 2001, five per cent in 2002 and 5.2 per cent after that.

Sylvia Mathews, deputy director of the White House Office

of Management and Budget, said the budget is based on economic assumptions that are "slightly more conservative" than the consensus of top economists.

The budget envisions a \$184 billion surplus, another record.

The surplus projection includes \$160 billion from the Social Security retirement system, which would go toward paying off the federal debt by 2013, said Sylvia Mathews, deputy director of the White House Office of Management and Budget.

The budget request includes numerous new spending programmes, including a prescription-drug insurance plan for Medicare patients, subsidies for retirement savings and rent subsidies for low-income families.

The programmes set an ambitious agenda for Democratic candidates in this year's elections and would give Clinton a policy legacy extending far beyond the expiration of his term next January.

Republicans in control of Congress have offered cooperation on proposals including Medicare and paying down the \$3.6 trillion debt by 2013. But they have pledged to cast a wary

eye on other spending initiatives and to battle for greater tax cuts than the \$256 billion net reductions proposed by Clinton.

The White House portrayed the budget as responsible in an era of surpluses that it projects at \$2.4 trillion over 10 years.

The \$167 billion surplus it projects today for fiscal 2000, which ends September 30, would be the third consecutive annual surplus.

"Everyone believes that debt reduction is real, and that surpluses are real. And I think now we face the challenge of how do we maintain fiscal discipline and a balanced approach to the things the government does in an era of surpluses," Mathews told reporters in a telephone conference call.

Clinton's 2001 request is four per cent higher than the \$1.765 trillion he sought last year. It forecasts revenues of \$2.019 trillion.

Government spending as a share of the economy would fall to 18.3 per cent in 2001, which is down from 18.7 per cent in 2000 and the lowest figure since 1966, Mathews said.

Clinton's budget projects the Social Security system will generate \$2.2 trillion in sur-

pluses over the next 10 years, and the rest of the budget will generate \$746 billion in surpluses. His plan would use the entire Social Security surplus and half of the remaining surplus to repay the federal debt.

Although Clinton dropped his goal from last year of overhauling Social Security policies and finances, the budget proposes extending the financial solvency of the system by 16 years to 2050. It would do this by funnelling interest savings from the debt into it beginning in 2011. Over the first five years \$690 billion would be placed into the system.

Clinton resubmits a proposal that fell flat last year — investing a share of the Social Security trust fund in equities — but he revises it by delaying the start of the programme until 2011. The equities — investment plan aims to extend the solvency of the system another four years, to 2054.

The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the non-Social Security surplus could reach 41.9 trillion over 10 years if spending were frozen — thus giving Republicans more room for tax cuts than Clinton sees. But the White House has said a spending freeze is unrealistic.

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Filipino inflation rate lowest in 13 years

MANILA, Feb 7: Philippine annual inflation in January came in well below expectations at 2.6 per cent, and economists said that should help keep local interest rates stable, reports Reuters.

It was the mildest year-on-year increase since a 2.0 per cent rise in May 1987.

A Reuters poll of 10 economists last week forecast a rise of 3.88 per cent, compared with 4.3 per cent in December and 11.5 per cent in January 1999.

Economists attributed the tame inflation to abundant food supply and the effect of last year's high base level.

"A big factor that contributed to that spectacular new year's surprise is base effect," said Helen Alvarez, research director of All Asia Capital and Trust Corp.

Emilio Neri, economist at Abacus Securities Corp, said low demand was also a factor.

"I see the primary reason (for this) is that demand is still very selective. People are not as imprudent in their expenditure patterns, primarily because of

the weaker peso, and also employment in the urban areas is not as much available as before," Neri said.

Despite the good inflation numbers, a drop in local interest rates would be limited by concerns over the budget deficit, the weak peso, and possible further increases in US rates.

Asked if interest rates should be substantially lowered in light of the January inflation number, Alvarez said: "They should not because we still have the fiscal position we should keep a tab on."

The government overshot its 1999 target with a budget deficit of 11.66 billion pesos (\$2.76 billion). It has pledged to prune the deficit to 6.25 billion pesos this year.

"I don't think there will be any change in interest rates, especially downwards."

Neri said he expects no change in rates but that the central bank was more likely to rise them if anything, though he added that the Bureau of Treasury was preventing the central bank from doing so.

Exchange Rates

Following are yesterday's Standard Chartered Bank rates of major currencies against Taka.						
Central Bank USD/BDT Rate: Buying-BDT 50.85/Selling-BDT 51.15			Buying			
TT/O'D	B/C	Currency	TT Clean	OD Sight	OD Doc	OD Transfer
512300	512700	USD	60.8200	50.6516	50.5833	
04901	04904	JPY	0.4594	0.4579	0.4571	
316939	317186	CHF	80.7553	30.6533	30.5443	
316332	316579	SGD	29.6240	29.5258	29.4743	
366242	366528	CAD	34.3425	34.1228	34.0998	
59850	59867	SEK	5.8763	5.8659	5.8436	
337913	338177	AUD	30.9545	30.8519	30.6463	
136254	136360	MYR	13.2340	13.1902	13.1569	
63356	63408	HKD	6.4809	6.4594	6.4457	
137719	137826	SAR	13.4430	13.3985	13.3645	
140634	140743	AED	13.7210	13.6756	13.6406	
04456	04456	KRW	0.0448	0.0446	0.0446	
824188	824832	GBP	80.1940	79.9282	79.6369	
509175	509373	EUR	48.9651	48.8028	48.7176	
Usance Export Bills						
TT Doc	30 Days	60 Days	90 Days	120 Days	180 Days	
507152	504023	49.9846	49.5042	48.9821	47.8126	
Exchange Rates of some Asian currencies against US dollar						
Indian Rupee	Pak Rupee	Thai Baht	Mal. Ringgit	Indo. Rupiah	Sing. Dollar	
43.60/	51.88/51.90	37.45/37.50	3.7999/01	7465/7495	1.6895/	
43.65					1.6905	
Market Commentary						
On Monday, the local interbank market was back to operation in full swing after a three-day break. The demand for dollar escalated a little bit. The demand for call money went up and the call rate ranged between 6 to 7 per cent.						
In the international market, dollar nudged higher carrying over recent bullish sentiment and stoked by strong US data late last week in an otherwise quiet condition. Some traders also said the dollar drew light support from a relatively lacklustre performance in the benchmark Nikkei stock average, which scored modest gains but remained well below the closely-watched 20,000 point-level breached briefly on Friday. Dollar buying by foreign and Japanese trust banks was detected after the US currency held above 107 yen in an early test of downside. But this did not establish a clear direction for the dollar, traders said expressing doubt that it would climb substantially higher, specially with the market turned by a lead in Singapore and Hong Kong for the Lunar New Year.						
Euro hovered in a narrow range against dollar with the downside drawing modest support from comments by Bundesbank president Wiedlack on Sunday that euro's current weakness was only a psychological concern, while the upside was limited due to weaker than expected German industrial orders data. On Friday, US jobs data for January showed that 387,000 new jobs were created outside the firm sector while the unemployment rate fell to 4.0 per cent, its lowest level in 3 years. Early on Monday dollar came under pressure as market participants, who took long positions during last week's rally, lightened their expectations the US currency gain had run their course for the near term. News that the German industrial orders posted a seasonally-adjusted, month-on-month drop of 1.9 per cent in December, undermined the confidence in euro. On the crosses, euro was higher against yen, quoted at 105.64/77 yen, which helped buoy dollar against yen.						
At 1600 hours local time, dollar traded at 108.40/43 against JPY, euro at 0.9603/08 against USD and GBP at 1.5960/65 against USD.						

S Africa's labour laws killing small businesses: Mbeki

JOHANNESBURG, Feb 7: "Unreasonable" aspects of South Africa's labour laws are strangling small businesses and have to be amended, President Thabo Mbeki said in an interview published Sunday, reports AFP.

Expanding on comments he made in a state-of-the-nation address to parliament on Friday, Mbeki told the Johannesburg Sunday Times the laws, aimed at overhauling exploitative apartheid-era labour legislation, had had "unexpected consequences."

The burdens placed on small businesses to comply with some of these provisions are quite unreasonable," Mbeki acknowledged. "I'm told of instances where they would prone to paralysis."

He said many small companies and non-governmental organisations did not have enough money to advise them of

the requirements of the laws.

"Some people might have all their revenue for six months swallowed up by hiring a lawyer — they'll die. And yet the law says that if they don't behave correctly, they will be in violation of the law. It's things such as this that need to be attended to."

Clauses which big business claims have forced enterprises to cut their labour force and resort to mechanisation include those relating to probationary employment, notice periods, pay for overtime work and work on Sundays, and procedures around unfair dismissals.

A concession that businesses employing fewer than 10 workers are entitled to pay a lower overtime rate has not resolved the problem.

Labour Minister Mbeki said at the weekend he expected amendments to certain provisions of the

Labour Relations Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the Insolvency Act to be completed by August this year.

Business has blamed the legislation for not providing the proper environment to create jobs and for leading to higher labour costs.

Unemployment is currently running at around 30 percent and business has warned it will rise should the restrictions of the laws not be eased.

Mbeki said in the interview he had begun a new and intensive interaction with trade unions through a presidential working group to bring labour on board on a range of contentious economic policies aimed at attracting investment.

These include the setting of inflation targets, the lifting of exchange controls, the right-sizing of the public service and an increased pace of privatisation.

StanChart Sylhet branch opens

Standard Chartered Bank soft-launched its Sylhet branch recently (January 29, 2000) in the presence of a host of bank officials, customers and the elite of Sylhet, says a press release.

The branch, which is located in East Dargate, is the sixth branch of the bank in Bangladesh. It introduces 24-hour banking through the first MoniLink ATM and Phonetel banking services in the city.

The ATM offers both deposit and withdrawal facilities to the customers. The branch is also going to offer Priority Banking services to its high net-worth customers in the district town.

Keith Vaz MP, British Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Office, visited the branch on January 31, 2000, during his short visit to Sylhet. Dr David Carter, British High Commissioner in Bangladesh, Dr Habibur Rahman, Divisional Commissioner of Sylhet, and Sethu Venkateswaran, Chief Executive Bangladesh of Standard Chartered Bank, accompanied him.

The formal launching of the branch will be held soon.

Kofi Annan to visit Thailand for UN meet

BANGKOK, Feb 7: United Nations secretary general Kofi Annan will arrive in Thailand this week for a four-day visit to attend the start of a global trade and development meeting, a statement said Monday, reports AFP.

The UN chief will fly in late Wednesday night and stay until February 13, when he leaves for Singapore, the foreign ministry said.

Thailand is hosting the 10th United Nations Conference on Trade and Development from February 12-19.

Annan will hold talks with Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai and Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan during his stay.



Keith Vaz MP, British Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Office, is seen entering the Sylhet Branch of Standard Chartered Bank which was launched recently. British High Commissioner in Bangladesh Dr David Carter and Sethu Venkateswaran, Chief Executive Bangladesh, are also seen in the picture.