

Indian PM tries to resolve national telecom chaos

NEW DELHI, Sept 21: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee held a series of overnight meetings to try to resolve a serious breakdown in national telecommunications which entered its ninth straight day today, says AFP.

Private telephone operators complained of disruptions to long distance connectivity but said overseas services were not hit, amid continued agitation by telecom unions opposed to the corporatisation of state-run telecom services.

The prime minister, who returned Tuesday from an 11-day visit to the United States, held a series of meetings with top officials of the MTNL who have access to certain key passwords and have immobilised digital exchanges in New Delhi and Bombay which account for the heaviest traffic," the Indian Express said.

It also slowed Internet services and scrambled mobile telephone networks.

The precise cause of the network breakdowns has yet to be confirmed, although some have blamed the chaos on employees of the state-run Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Ltd (MTNL) which controls telecom services in New Delhi and Bombay. "The villains of the piece are some

officers of the MTNL who have access to certain key passwords and have immobilised digital exchanges in New Delhi and Bombay which account for the heaviest traffic," the Indian Express said.

MTNL officials denied the charge, saying the disruption was being caused by "technical faults."

The media called on the government to see through its pledge to the promotion of China's reform and opening up...and will



Samuel S Chowdhury, Director; Dr Arq Baksh, Deputy Managing Director; Md Kabir Reza, Company Secretary; Samson H Chowdhury, Chairman; Tapan Chowdhury, Managing Director; Anjan Chowdhury, Director; Jahanara Chowdhury, Director and Kazi Iqbal Harun, Director, are seen at the 34th AGM of Square Pharmaceuticals Ltd at Dhaka Officers Club in the city yesterday. — Square photo

Police gearing up for protests at IMF-WB meet in Prague

PRAGUE, Sept 21: Police refused Thursday to allow American and Italian activists to enter the country to join protests when International Monetary Fund and World Bank officials meet here next week, says AP.

The government is also moving police reinforcements into the Czech capital to prevent a repeat of the disorder which marked the conference of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle and last spring's meeting of the IMF in Washington, DC.

Last Wednesday, a group of 70 activists travelling from Hanover, Germany to Prague by bike arrived at the German-Czech border northwest of the capital.

Protest organisers said two Italians and one American, Kay Morrison of Seattle, were refused permission to enter the Czech Republic early Thursday.

The others were camped with them Thursday on the German side of the border waiting to decide what to do next, according to a member of the protest group, Viktor Pirocky.

IMF and World Bank officials open their three-day annual joint conference Tuesday in this for-

mer communist capital to discuss the state of the global economy and reforms in the two pillars of global capitalism.

A disparate group including human rights activists, environmentalists, anarchists, communists and far right-wing skinheads has announced plans for protests during the conference.

"We want the IMF and World Bank to shut down," said Alice Dvorska, a spokeswoman for INPEG, an umbrella organisation coordinating the protests. "Any form of dialogue will only improve their PR and that's not what we have in mind."

On the opening day of the conference, Dvorska said protest plans to surround the Congress Center along the Vlatava River to prevent delegates from leaving the building.

"We do not have to be there forever or in the millions," Dvorska said when asked if protesters would try to block the center indefinitely. "It will be largely symbolic."

To prevent trouble, about 1,500 additional police from throughout the country arrived here Wednesday, joining about

1,000 others sent here the day before, according to the Czech news agency CTK.

Many of the protesters are expected from elsewhere in Europe and as a precaution, German authorities have stepped up controls along the Czech border to screen out troublemakers.

The German Interior Ministry said anyone found with materials indicating they are planning violence or to disrupt law and order would be turned back.

Mindful of the two institutions' controversial image, the new head of the IMF, Horst Koehler, has announced plans for broad reforms to give poor countries a bigger voice in globalisation.

These include proposals to reassess the influential voting rights of a handful of rich countries and to give special loan packages to 10 more of the world's poorest nations by the end of the year.

Koehler, who took office in May amid high hopes the often-criticized IMF can be revamped, said inclusiveness was a real them for the summit.



Picture shows the participants of the recently-held Singer Sales Conference 2000 in Bangkok. — Singer photo

Oil prices help push July US trade gap to record

WASHINGTON, Sept 21: Soaring prices for imported oil and weaker overseas sales drove the US trade deficit to a record \$31.89 billion in July as shortfalls with Canada, Western Europe, Japan and China set fresh records, the Commerce Department said yesterday, reports Reuters.

A strong US dollar and the plunging value of the euro sapped demand for American-made products in Europe while oil prices surged to their highest level in a decade, providing a double whammy to a deteriorating trade outlook.

The July deficit followed a

revised \$29.85 billion gap in June and sent the shortfall for the first seven months of 2000 to \$ 266 billion, a huge 46 per cent above the \$141 billion gap in the comparable period a year earlier.

The mind-boggling deficit just keeps widening and there is no reason to believe that a major narrowing will occur anytime soon," said economist Joel Naroff of Naroff Economic Advisors Inc. in Holland, PA.

A weaker euro was one factor as the monthly deficit with western Europe shot up 66.6 per cent in July to an all-time high of \$7.22 billion. Exports to Europe were down from June

levels while imports rose.

But US trade troubles extended well beyond Europe.

The monthly gap with China rose to a record \$7.64 billion from \$7.22 billion in June, and the gap with Japan grew to a record \$7.52 billion from \$6.31 billion. That with Canada ballooned to new high of \$4.75 billion from \$4.08 billion.

Total exports of US-made products dropped to \$89.67 billion in July from \$90.99 billion in June, while imports gained to a record \$121.56 billion from \$120.84 billion.

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