

China okays new rules to develop private sector

BEIJING, Oct 8: China has approved new rules for small enterprises which aim to develop the long-neglected private economy, an official and state media said, reports Reuters.

The guidelines, approved by the cabinet this week, offer more government support to millions of small companies and make it easier for them to raise funds, they said.

Policymakers have been ambivalent towards private firms in the overwhelmingly state-run economy but attitudes are slowly changing as the government seeks more drivers for growth, analysts said.

China is trying to reform its ailing state sector and millions of jobs are under threat as firms try to improve efficiency.

The new rules encourage banks to lend more to small companies and allow firms meeting requirements to list stock and issue bonds, the Economic Information Daily reported.

"China's nearly 10 million small and medium enterprises will enjoy national treatment together with their 'older brother' - state enterprises," the newspaper said.

Some 85 per cent of China's small and medium enterprises are "non state," including private and collective firms. China has 1.28 million registered private companies.

But banks have been reluctant to lend to private firms since they do not have state backing in case of defaults.

Under the new guidelines, interest rates for loans to small companies will be allowed to float in an even wider band to compensate for banks' higher risk, the newspaper said.

Loans to small companies are already allowed to float up to 30 per cent above or below the base level set by the central bank. For other larger companies, the limit is 10 per cent.

A spokesman for the People's Bank of China said the central bank had yet to set fresh band limits under the new guidelines.

Central bank chief Dai Xianglong said in July that China's rigid interest rate regime would be relaxed over the next three years by allowing the market to set most deposit and lending rates.

Under the new rules, China will, "at an appropriate time" allow small companies - especially high-technology ones - to list stock or issue bonds, the newspaper said.

Chinese govt urged to cut stamp tax on share trading

BEIJING, Oct 8: Chinese tax experts and economists are urging the government to cut the stamp tax on securities transactions to boost local stock markets, state media reported, says AFP.

Lower stamp tax rates would also make the stock markets more attractive to foreign investors, who are likely to arrive in greater numbers after China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), the China Daily business weekly said.

"China will have to gradually drop the stamp duty rate," Liu Zuo, a researcher at the State Administration of Taxation, told the paper. "The country's economy will develop further and more foreign investors will join in China's stock markets after our accession to the WTO."

Chinese stocks were the world's best performers in the first half of the year, rising 47 per cent, spurred by government moves including a cut in the stamp tax last year.

In June 1999, China's securities authorities slashed the stamp tax on transactions in B shares, which are nominally reserved for foreigners, to 0.3 per cent from 0.4 per cent.

Despite the lower rates, the bull market has caused stamp tax revenues to flood into state coffers.

Tax authorities collected 14 billion yuan (1.7 billion dollars) in stamp tax revenues in the first quarter, five times more than in the same period last year.

The Chinese government is in greater need than ever of money like that, since it is fighting a battle against soaring expenditure on items ranging from welfare to military hardware.

This year, the public deficit is expected to hit an all-time high of 230 billion yuan (28 billion dollars).

Rising deficits are one reason why the Chinese government might be reluctant to cut the stamp tax further, but local economists do not buy that argument, because lower tax rates are likely to boost transactions.

"A drop in the stamp duty rate will certainly not result in a decline in stamp duty income," said Yang Siquan, an economist with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the country's top government think tank.

Yang pointed out that value-added tax is a major source of revenue for many western governments.

A greater emphasis on value-added taxes - a taxation of consumption rather than production - is one of the ways for China to increase its revenues without WTO entry, the paper said.

Tax officials are preparing new rules that will tax a wider range of goods and services, according to the paper.

New US trade act may generate controversy at African summit

WINDHOEK, Oct 8: The United States' recent enactment of the African Growth and Opportunities Act is expected to generate some controversy at a southern African economic summit in Windhoek next week.

Many of the countries in the region have been excluded by the terms of the new law, say the organisers of the Southern Africa Trade and Investment Summit, which will take place from Monday to Wednesday.

US Deputy Trade Representative Susan Eshman will deliver a keynote speech on the expected impact and importance of the act at the summit, which will also be attended by financiers and captains of industry.

Leaders of the 14-nation Southern African Development Community (SADC) expected to attend, apart from host President Sam Nujoma of Namibia, include presidents Festus Mogae of Botswana, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, deputy presidents Jacob Zuma of

South Africa and Justin Malewezi of Malawi, and prime ministers Pascual Mocumbi of Mozambique, Bethuel Mosisili of Lesotho and Barnabas Dlamini of Swaziland.

But at least three of the countries whose top leaders have been invited have been disqualified from the terms of the act, which President Bill Clinton signed on May 18 and which Washington has touted as a means of halting Africa's growing economic marginalisation in the trend towards globalisation.

Lesotho and Swaziland have been disqualified for unfair labour practices, while Zimbabwe is currently facing a barrage of sanctions from the United States for its perceived lack of respect for the rule of law.

Other regional countries that have been barred from benefiting from the act include Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Angola.

Namibia, South Africa, Gabon, Mozambique, Sudan, Ivory Coast, Tunisia and Morocco top

DRC against rebels backed by Uganda and Rwanda.

The conference, organised by the Paris-based International Herald Tribune, hopes to draw foreign investment into the SADC countries, seen as one of the most stable and organised trading blocks in Africa.

But although a recent World Economic Forum competitive report on Africa rated Botswana, South Africa and Namibia relatively highly in terms of investor-friendly environments, this has had little impact on direct foreign investment in their economies.

The 2000 UN World Investment Report, released earlier this week, showed that Angola topped the list for direct foreign investment, with a total of 1.8 billion dollars invested largely in its energy sector.

Egypt attracted the second-highest direct foreign investment with a total of 1.5 billion dollars, also largely in its energy sector.

The summit will address topics such as the potential for growth in telecommunications, water supply, tourism, transport infrastructure, energy and mining.

off the list, in that order, of the total 10.3 billion dollars direct foreign investment in Africa.

Executive director of the Namibia Investment Centre David Nyomwa said the investment flows into Africa as outlined by the UN report simply defied logic.

Namibia and Botswana, rated respectively as the third and fourth most competitive countries in Africa, failed to attract the kind of foreign investment that war-torn Angola and Sudan did, he pointed out.

This showed that foreign investors still looked at Africa simply as a source of cheap raw material, such as oil and diamonds, he said.

"Whether there is war in the country, investment will still flow due to the need for raw materials," he said in remarks quoted the local media.

The summit will generate topics such as the potential for growth in telecommunications, water supply, tourism, transport infrastructure, energy and mining.

China's Internet start-ups need capital to survive

BEIJING, Oct 8: Beijing's so-called "Silicon Valley of China" is facing severe funding shortages and needs an injection of capital to survive, state media quoted a senior state financial expert as saying Saturday.

The Zhongguancun Science Park, home to China's many Internet start-ups, needs a capital inflow of about 200 billion yuan (24.15 billion US dollars) in the next 10 years to become successful, the China Daily quoted Lu Kequn, chairman of the Beijing Securities Co., Ltd, as saying.

Lu said more of the companies should go public in coming years to generate the 20 billion yuan (2.42 billion dollars) needed by the firms each year.

He predicted about 80 companies would go public by 2005, with 20 to 30 to be listed on domestic stock exchanges, another 20 to 30 listed in China's soon-to-be-set up second board for high-tech companies and start-ups and five to 10 to be listed in Hong Kong.

The remainder should go public via acquisitions and mergers with already listed companies, Lu said.

Only 11 firms located in the development district northwest of downtown Beijing have been listed on domestic exchanges so far while two have gone public in Hong Kong.

Lu said the government should also encourage companies to list on overseas stock markets.

But industry sources said Lu's recommendations overlook a fundamental problem -- the government's policy restricting foreign investment in the Internet sector.

Relying on domestic stock market investors for funding is unrealistic as those investors have limited resources and are not familiar with high-risk investments, industry officials said.

They said China's Internet industry would not be able to grow without foreign investment.

"China's Internet market

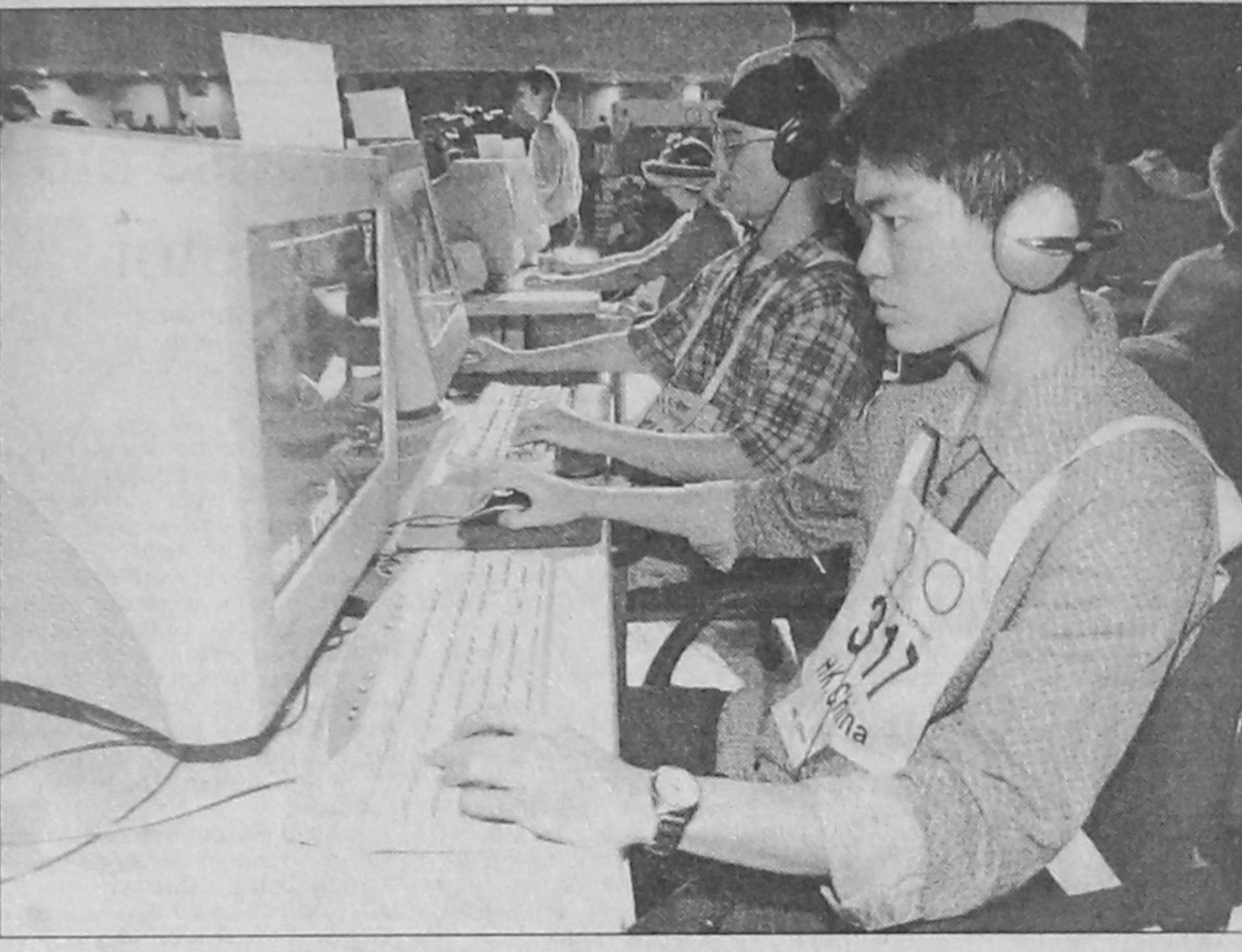
will face a very grim period in the next year. Many companies will collapse," said Roland Shi, chairman of Elawchina Network Technology Co., Ltd., which runs a law resources website.

"If foreign investment is allowed, it will be a great opportunity for these companies, not only because of funding but the experience these foreign companies will bring."

China in theory forbids foreign investment in the Internet sector but has turned a blind eye to hundreds of millions of dollars poured into Chinese Internet firms by foreign investors.

As part of its effort to join the World Trade Organization, China has agreed to allow up to 50 per cent foreign participation in its Internet companies.

Foreign buyers were barred from the country's first auction of dotcoms held last week to raise funds for cash-strapped companies. The auction fizzled with only one company able to find a buyer.



Hong Kong contestant Yip Shing Chi, 22, plays Quake III Cyber game during the first round in the Everland amusement park in Yongin, south of Seoul, yesterday. Some 170 game fanatics from 17 countries are playing the World Cyber Game Challenge which will continue till October 15.

Philippines looks to overseas workers to save peso

MANILA, Oct 8: With Christmas fast approaching, the Philippines is looking forward to a special present -- a bounty of foreign exchange remittances from the millions of Filipinos working overseas to pull up its battered peso, reports AFP.

The peso had been hitting record closing lows for over a week before it finally struck a historic low of 46.61 to the dollar in early trade Wednesday.

It recovered only after intervention by the central bank, a sizable hike in the reserve requirement of banks and an announcement of a "currency risk protection program" to help corporates in need of dollars.

But few believe the peso's fall has ended.

"There is a continuing perception that the peso will not stay where it is. It will continue to depreciate until we see a fundamental change in the horizon," said Villanueva Vital, chief economist of All Asia Securities.

"We have no fundamental reason why we should strengthen," a trader for a local bank said. "The parallel market is even doing 46.70 to the peso, we remitted in the same period in 1999, the central bank's research division said.

Remittances in June alone totalled 494 million dollars, down 21.7 per cent from 631 million dollars in June last year, the division added.

Danny Alcantara of the policies and programs office of the government's overseas employment agency said the remittances shrank even though the number of overseas workers actually increased slightly while their salaries did not go down.

Johnny Noe Ravalio, chief economist of the Bankers' Association of the Philippines, said overseas workers were likely speculating by holding onto their dollars while waiting for the peso to fall further.

"For as long as the peso will continue to show some weakening, the remittances of the overseas Filipino workers income will be delayed," he said.

But Ravalio believes eventually overseas workers will have to send their earnings home because "the families here are going to have to spend, one way or another" for Christmas.

"There will come a time whether it is 42 or 52 pesos to the dollar, they will have to convert (their dollars) because you cannot go to a department store without pesos."

Renato de Guzman, senior vice-president of foreign branches of the Philippine National Bank, the largest conduit of workers' remittances, said the fall of the peso had already encouraged overseas workers to send their money home.

Indonesian economic czar says bank sale delay technical

The government, under heavy parliamentary pressure, agreed on Thursday to postpone the stake sales in Bank Central Asia (BCA) BBCA, JK and Bank Niaga BNKA.

JK only hours after announcing the fourth quarter sale targets to finance its precarious budget.

Under an agreement with the IMF, the government planned to sell off shares in the two major commercial banks before the end of 2000. The money is vital to help cut a substantial budget deficit, currently partly financed by foreign aid.

Ramli said he did not see the postponement of bank asset sales having an impact on future loan disbursements from the IMF.

The IMF should focus on policy targets and not implementation, Ramli said.

Asked about IMF disappointment over the delay, which officials said was partly prompted by an unresolved controversy over how to deal with debt repayments by former bank owners - Ramli brushed off the objections.

In order to meet the agreed targets, Ramli said Indonesia planned to sell some loans held by the Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency (IBRA) instead.

It is just a question of technicality because we are ready to dispose of assets in BCA and Bank Niaga," Ramli told a news conference on the second day of a two-day official visit.

Chinese stocks were the world's best performers in the first half of the year, rising 47 per cent, spurred by government moves including a cut in the stamp tax last year.

The need to process the issue of technicality, I think it can only be done in the first quarter next year,"

He hope not...the bottom line

is that we meet the targets and we intend to sell the assets at the appropriate time."

Previous delays on IMF reforms have unsettled the country's financial markets.

In order to meet the agreed targets, Ramli said Indonesia planned to sell some loans held by the Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency (IBRA) instead.

Under an agreement with the IMF, the government planned to sell off shares in the two major commercial banks before the end of 2000. The money is vital to help cut a substantial budget deficit, currently partly financed by foreign aid.

Ramli said he did not see the postponement of bank asset sales having an impact on future loan disbursements from the IMF.

The IMF should focus on policy targets and not implementation, Ramli said.

Weekly Asian Currency Roundup

Most units fall against US dollar

Currency dealers say it is likely to go back toward the record low it touched Wednesday of 39.92 cents.

It has followed a drop in the Aussie after the Reserve Bank of Australia left its interest rates unchanged.

The kiwi has shown some improvements however.

"There's still going to be a bit of demand around 39 to 40 US, and we're probably a little bit higher," said Sean Brown of Deutsche Bank said.

Economists said a recovery was unlikely, and that the shift of global capital to the US dollar would see the local currency remain at low levels.

"Australian economic fundamentals are reasonably supportive of the Australian dollar actually," said Commonwealth Bank economist David Moore.

"Economic growth is sound and monetary policy is prudent,"

Australian dollar: The Australian dollar is expected to test new lows this week as funds continue to flow into the US dollar from the previous week's close of 39.775 to the greenback.

The Australian dollar was trading at 39.12 against the euro late Friday, down from 39.82 a week earlier.

On Thursday, the ECB raised its regular refinancing rate by 25 basis points to 3.75 per cent and 5.75 per cent respectively.

The yen-euro rate was little affected by the ECB decision on Friday but the yen fell sharply against the euro in late trading on rumors that the ECB was holding an emergency meeting to discuss euro-buying intervention, dealers said.

New Zealand dollar: The New Zealand dollar closed Friday worth 40.23 US cents, against the closing a week earlier of 40.68.

Philippine peso: The Philippine currency fell to 46.395 pesos to the dollar on Friday from 46.150 on September 29.

The Philippine peso has been sliding downwards for over a week, falling to an all-time low of 46.61 to the dollar in

early trade on October 4. However Central Bank intervention, a hike in banks' reserve requirements and the announcement of a "currency risk protection program" managed to pull it back up.

South Korean won: The won strengthened against the dollar, closing at