

Top judge suspends Estrada trial as prosecutors quit en masse

Thousands protest Senate decision, president senses acquittal

MANILA, Jan 17 : The Philippines' top judge today adjourned the corruption trial of President Joseph Estrada until further notice after prosecutors called the proceedings a "charade" and quit en masse, reports AFP.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Hilario Davide said the Senate hearing would be adjourned "until such time that the House of Representatives" has acted on the prosecutors' resignation.

The 11 prosecutors from the House resigned Wednesday after the Senate in a 11-10 vote along party lines on Tuesday effectively cleared Estrada of the charges he faced which included bribery and corruption.

Wednesday's hearing lasted a mere 20 minutes after being delayed for an hour. The prosecutors' bench was deserted, leaving

just a row of empty chairs.

Senators sitting as judges in the emotionally-charged trial shouted down a move by an Estrada lawyer to set a deadline for the House of Representatives to elect a new set of prosecutors.

The prosecutors told the Senate in a letter: "We fear that our further participation will only mislead the people, our ultimate judges."

They described the proceedings as a "charade", alleging the Senate has "lost moral authority to render judgement on an impeachable official who has lost the moral ascendancy to govern."

Defence lawyers "wanted to have a definite date to resume, but we can not do that without the prosecutors because that would be a fixed match," Senator Renato Cayetano said. "That would be a travesty of justice."

Cayetano was among the 10 senators who fought a lost battle to open bank documents which prosecutors said would provide clear proof of the graft charges against Estrada.

The suppression of key evidence led to massive protests on Wednesday and a beating of the financial markets.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Filipinos took to the streets on Wednesday to condemn a decision by the Senate to effectively clear President Joseph Estrada of serious corruption charges.

About 30,000 people gathered outside a shrine on Manila's major EDSA thoroughfare in a show of anger at Tuesday's 11-10 vote in the upper house disallowing the inspection of a 66-million-dollar secret bank account where Estrada allegedly hid his ill-gotten wealth.

The protesters, including nuns, office workers, laborers, schoolchildren and activists, waved signs saying "Guilty", "Oust Estrada now" and "Justice died last night" as they chanted, "Enough is enough. You're exposed. Get out."

Another report says Philippine President Joseph Estrada was keeping his fingers crossed today as the former movie star's trial on charges of wholesale corruption appeared to be following his chosen script.

Estrada was sensing acquittal after a stunning Senate vote late Tuesday set aside potentially the most damaging evidence against him.

"I thank the Good Lord for giving us this initial favorable vote -- which is the first major vote in the many more major votes to be cast," he said in a statement.



Some 10,000 anti-Estrada demonstrators call for Philippine President Joseph Estrada to resign on Wednesday to protest the Senate decision suppressing potentially damning evidence at President Joseph Estrada's corruption trial in Manila. Cardinal Sin warned the decision could spark bloodshed.

--AFP photo

Siliguri goes without newspapers for 27th day

SILIGURI, Jan 17: This commercial hub of North Bengal went without newspapers for the 27th day yesterday as a meeting convened by the mayor of Siliguri municipal corporation failed to solve the dispute between CITU-affiliated hawkers and newspapers' managements, reports PTI.

The town has been practically without newspapers since December 20 with only state-owned Bengali daily 'Dainik Basumat' being found on the streets.

Mayor Prof Bikash Ghose told PTI that the meeting, held yesterday, was attended by leaders of CITU-affiliated Darjeeling district newspapers sellers union and agents of different dailies.

While the union withdrew its earlier demand for supply of gunny bags and plastic covers and expressed willingness to distribute papers which were delayed due to late hours of publication, the agents said they had to take the consent of the irrespective managements.

A woman raped every 34mins, killed every 93 mins in India

NEW DELHI, Jan 17: Every 34 minutes, a rape occurs and every 93 minutes, a woman is killed in the country, reports PTI.

With this gloomy picture, which was presented by a report, commissioned under the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) and released here yesterday, the social activists demanded 'gender-budgeting' to address what they called 'people's issue' and not 'women's issue.'

The report 'Women in India: How free? How equal?' said the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than the population growth rate by 2010, according to national crime records BUGEAU.

With the help of the published data, media reports and findings of local surveys, it highlights the situation of women in the country.

HC ruling upholds validity of Fiji constitution

SUVA, Jan 17 : Fiji's military backed administration received yet another legal setback Wednesday with a High Court ruling upholding the validity of the 1997 constitution, reports AFP.

Lautoka High Court Judge Anthony Gates ruled in favour of the 1997 constitution when he ordered that all sittings of the constitution review committee be stopped and that public funding to the committee cease.

Justice Gates was ruling on an injunction sought by deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and president of the Fiji Labour Party Jokapeci Koroi.

It sought to stop the proceedings of the constitution review commission in view of an earlier ruling by Justice Gates that the committee was illegal as was the post coup administration which had commissioned the committee.

Labour Party lawyer Vipul Mishra argued that carrying on with the work of the committee was tantamount to defiance of the rule of law in view of several High Court decisions to date upholding the validity of the country's multiracial 1997 constitution.

India test fires Agni-II missile

NEW DELHI, Jan 17 : India successfully test-fired its longer-range Agni-II intermediate ballistic missile for the second time Wednesday, a defence ministry statement said, reports AFP.

The missile was tested at 10:00am (10:30 BST) at the interim test range of Chandipur in the eastern coastal state of Orissa "in its final operational configuration," the statement said.

"Flight test results have indicated that mission objectives were met satisfactorily," it added.

The Agni-II has a range of around 2,500 km, making it capable of delivering a nuclear warhead anywhere in Pakistan and, more significantly, deep into China.

The test came as India and Pakistan appear to be making tentative steps towards some sort of dialogue over Kashmir, and also coincided with the ongoing visit to

India of China's second highest leader, Li Peng.

The missile was first tested in April 1999, drawing strong protests from Britain, Pakistan and the United States.

Wednesday's test was witnessed by Defence Minister George Fernandes and Air Force Chief A.Y. Tipnis.

Complimenting the scientists and engineers of the Defence Research and Development Organisation, Fernandes highlighted the "role and relevance of Agni-II in meeting our national security interests," the defence ministry statement said.

The Agni-II is a two-stage, all solid motor missile with a payload weight of one tonne and can be fired from a mobile launcher.

Following the first test flight in 1999, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee stressed development of

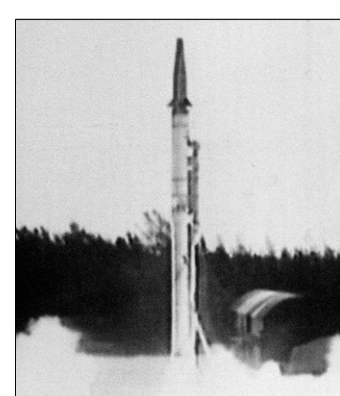
the Agni-II was "not meant for aggression against any other nation."

However, some observers have tagged the missile an "insurance policy" against any major reversal in Indo-Chinese relations.

The missile is considered crucial to India's plans for developing an effective nuclear deterrent following its shock underground nuclear tests in May, 1998.

"What we tested the last time was the re-entry technology of the Agni-II; the impact of the atmosphere on the missile shield as it re-enters the earth's atmosphere," said former Indian army chief V.N. Sharma.

"This time it would have been the guidance systems -- its circular error of probability or the accuracy of the missile. It should not land beyond 100 yards (meters) from its target."



This file picture dated April 11, 1999 shot off a video projection shows the test launch of the Agni II missile in the eastern Indian state of Orissa, screened during a press conference in New Delhi.

--AFP photo

China closes 110 fire hazard night-spots

HONG KONG, Jan 17 : Chinese authorities have closed down 110 Shenzhen night-spots to prevent another tragedy like the Christmas night fire at a club in which 309 people died, a report said today, reports AFP.

The 110 entertainment venues, mainly frequented by Hong Kong visitors, include night clubs, karaoke bars and saunas, bowling allies and restaurants, and were shut on Tuesday, the Chinese-language The Sun said.

Shenzhen fire authorities said some of the venues had blocked fire escapes, or had failed to pass fire safety inspections.

Those venues which remain open were planning to cash in on the move ahead of the Lunar Chinese New Year which starts on January 24.

Millions of people from Hong Kong will be heading for the mainland for the long holidays, the main celebration in the Chinese calendar.

Rescue efforts focus on quake survivors

SANTA TECLA, El Salvador, Jan 17 : With little hope left of finding survivors, rescue workers Wednesday focused on helping thousands of people made homeless by El Salvador's earthquake, as the appalling magnitude of the catastrophe became clear, reports AFP. Red Cross workers made their way slowly through rural areas Tuesday discovering more villages destroyed by Saturday's devastating earthquake, suggesting the death toll will continue to rise.

So far, the quake has claimed 675 lives, but rescuers said at least 2,000 people were believed missing and feared dead. It would be a miracle to find survivors amid the destruction, they added.

Visiting Nicaraguan President Miguel Aleman, after touring the

worst-hit areas told reporters here Tuesday: "The magnitude of the disaster is difficult to comprehend."

He said he would put helicopters at the disposal of El Salvador's relief efforts even though his own country's resources were limited.

Just outside the capital, workers dynamited massive hillside boulders to prevent them from crashing on the roads, several of which, including one major highway, reopened late Tuesday.

Alongside the highway, families kept watch of their meagre belongings, burning garbage to give them light after sundown as power remained cut off in those areas.

S Korea braces for early visit of North's leader

SEOUL, Jan 17 : South Korean leaders today ordered heightened preparations for an earlier-than-expected landmark visit by North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il following his surprise trip to China, officials said, reports AFP.

The South Korean government has yet to confirm that the North's supreme leader is on a second secretive trip to China in eight months.

But a National Security Council meeting chaired by President Kim Dae-Jung discussed prospects for a speedy visit to Seoul by Kim Jong-Il, a

presidential spokesman said. Seoul newspapers said the government is actively preparing for a fast visit.

According to an official statement, Kim Dae-Jung rejected accusations from conservative opponents that Kim Jong-Il was trying to fool the world with talk of opening up.

"There are some allegations that North Korea is not changing but it is reported that Chairman Kim Jong Il is visiting China and looking at industrial complex," he told the meeting.

Gulf War anniversary Saddam declares victory over enemies

BAGHDAD, Jan 17 : Iraqi President Saddam Hussein declared a "victory over enemies" of the Arab world during the 1991 Gulf War, in an address to the nation Wednesday to mark the 10th anniversary of the conflict, reports AFP.

"Iraq achieved victory against the enemies of the Arab world and its own enemies, and it will triumph in the coming phases, with the help of God," he said in the televised address.

A US-led coalition launched the Gulf War on the night of January 16-17, 1991, ousting Iraqi occupation forces from Kuwait six weeks later.

Hundreds of Iraqi demonstrators burnt US and British flags in a

protest to mark the 10th anniversary of the start of US-led missile and air strikes on Iraq in the Gulf War, a correspondent reported.

Some 400 protesters took part in a march through the Iraqi capital, organised on Tuesday night by the Iraqi students' union.

Former US attorney general Ramsey Clark and other American anti-sanctions campaigners were at the demonstration as it wound up outside offices of the UN Development Programme.

S Korea to develop missile

SEOUL, Jan 17 : South Korea declared today it would develop new missiles capable of hitting targets in most of North Korea, despite international fears of a missile race on the Korean Peninsula, reports AFP.

"Today our government adopted new guidelines on missile and commercial rocket development," the foreign ministry said in a statement. The new policy would allow South

Korea to develop short-range missiles with a range of 300 km and a payload of 500 kilograms (227 pounds). A previous accord with the United States limited South Korea's missile range to 180 km.

"Under the new guidelines, we will be able to develop and deploy missiles with a range of 300 km and a payload of 500 kilograms," the ministry said.

It was not known immediately whether Washington endorsed the program. The United States had feared the development of South Korean missiles would provoke the Stalinist North.

But South Korean officials said Washington had already agreed to ease restrictions on South Korea's missile development.

Israel eases Gaza blockade as talks with Palestinian Authority go on

JERUSALEM, Jan 17 : Israel eased its tight grip on the Gaza Strip again today as talks continued with the Palestinians on a future peace deal, though with little sign of progress, reports AFP.

Palestinian parliament head Ahmed Qorei told Palestinian radio, "The negotiations will resume today after yesterday's meeting which was very serious but has not filled the gaps between the two parties."

On Tuesday, "There were serious

talks to try to bridge the wide gaps. I cannot say that the gaps no longer remain, but there were serious efforts from both sides," Qorei told al-Ayyam, the Palestinian newspaper.

Tuesday's meeting focussed on an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and water reserves.

A plan put forward by outgoing US President Bill Clinton on December 23 remains the basis of discussions. It would give the Pales-

tinians roughly 95 percent of the West Bank and also calls for Palestinian sovereignty over the Arab quarters of east Jerusalem as well as all of the Gaza Strip.

Sovereignty over the disputed Temple Mount would be shared, while the Palestinians would renounce demands for a right to return to their homes in what is now Israel for an estimated 3.7 million refugees.

Tuesday's political talks were

followed by an overnight meeting on security, during which the Palestinians demanded the lifting of the blockade on the Gaza Strip imposed on Monday following the murder of an Israeli settler.

Israel responded Wednesday by partially opening roads, crossing points and the Palestinian airport, in a relaxation introduced Thursday last week but which lasted only four days.

Lawyer Benson Samay said last week that Ta Mok had gone insane and was also so ill with heart and stomach ailments that he could not stand.

Jailed Khmer leader Ta Mok hospitalised

PHNOM PENH, Jan 17 : Jailed Khmer Rouge leader Ta Mok, known as "The Butcher", was taken to hospital and received treatment for high blood pressure before being returned to his prison cell, his lawyer said today, reports AFP.

"Ta Mok is really sick and I don't know for sure how many days he is going to be alive," said lawyer Benson Samay, announcing that his 75-year-old client spent about two hours at the hospital Tuesday.

The doctor who saw the former Khmer Rouge military chief at the hospital, Song An, told AFP. "He walked as usual, although with a stick, and said he felt dizzy. We found his blood pressure was high. I gave a prescription for medicine."

Asked whether Ta Mok's condition was serious the doctor said he was not in a position to make a judgement, but added "the blood pressure can be dangerous because he's old."

Lawyer Benson Samay said last week that Ta Mok had gone insane and was also so ill with heart and stomach ailments that he could not stand.

UK govt steps into trans-Atlantic feud over adopted twins

LONDON, Jan 17 : Britain's government said on Tuesday it will examine the unsettling case of twin baby girls being fought over by two adoptive families on either side of the Atlantic after being sold over the Internet, reports AFP.

The American-born girls are living in North Wales with a British couple who claim they legally adopted them, but a couple in California claim they had already signed a deal with an intermediary to adopt the twins.

Doctors remove skin cancer from Clinton's back

WASHINGTON, Jan 17 : A small lesion removed from President Bill Clinton's back last week during his annual medical check-up tested positive for the most common form of skin cancer, the White House said on Tuesday, reports AFP.

But spokesman Jake Siewert told reporters that the afflicted tissue was removed and that the outgoing leader, who leaves office Saturday, no longer

suffers from the relatively mild affliction, superficial basal cell carcinoma.

"While the president, I guess it could be said, had skin cancer, that has been removed and he no longer has it," said Siewert.

"The risk of recurrence of basal cell skin cancer is low; but the risk of developing a new lesion in the future is increased over the rest of the population."

Lankan offensive claims 108 as battle rages

COLOMBO, Jan 17 : Heavy fighting in northern Sri Lanka has killed at least 108 people, including 54 government troops, officials said Wednesday as Norway kept up attempts to broker peace in the island, reports AFP.

Government troops killed at least 52 Tamil Tiger guerrillas and recovered the bodies of 40 of them while two more were captured alive, defence ministry spokesman Sanath Karunaratne said.

"A few adjustments are being done here and there today, but there is no major fighting now," Karunaratne said adding that security forces lost a total of two officers and 52 soldiers killed while another 147 were wounded.

He said the rebel losses were expected to be higher than the 52 the Tigers had said in their radio transmissions monitored by security forces.

There was no immediate reaction from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to military claims of casualties in the latest fighting which broke out in the Jaffna peninsula on Tuesday.

The government made it clear that the resistance security forces encountered was probably greater than anticipated.

"Terrorists fought back ferociously using almost all of their indirect weapons systems," the government said in a statement.

"By looking at the deployment of terrorists' indirect weapons systems, it was obvious that they were preparing for a major operation."

Military officials said arrangements were being made Wednesday to return some of the bodies of rebels recovered from the battlefield to the LTTE.

The remains are to be sent through the International Commit-

tee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the military said, even as heavy long-range exchanges continued.

The ICRC confirmed they were approached by the military to transfer the bodies, but said they could not immediately give an exact number.

In Tuesday's fighting, a Hindu priest was also killed and another person was wounded when a mortar shell fired by the LTTE hit a temple at Mirusuvil in Jaffna, the government said. Another civilian died elsewhere.

In a statement sent here late Tuesday from their office in London, the rebels said the latest fighting again threatened mediator Norway's bid to broker peace in Sri Lanka.

The fighting was concentrated along the army's final defence line at Kilali and Eluthumadduval, 22 kilometres (14 miles).