

Japan opens consulate on Sakhalin Island

AFP, TOKYO
Japan formally opened a consulate on the island of Sakhalin Monday, making it the only country to have three consular offices in the Russian Far East, the Japanese foreign ministry said.

The consular mission, which will have an initial staff of five, was established in response to an increased workload as more and more Japanese visit the region, said an official with the foreign ministry in Japan.

"The number of Japanese people - businessmen, students and others - has risen in the area," he said.

"Our workload has increased and we were asked by the government of Sakhalin to establish an official consulate."

Japan has maintained a small office without consular status in Sakhalin since 1997, he explained.

A Japanese diplomatic mission was stationed in Sakhalin in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The new consulate is located in the city centre of the island's capital Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, in a building built by the Michinoku Bank.

Jakarta hopes US will lift arms embargo

AFP, JAKARTA
A senior Indonesian minister expressed his confidence on Monday that the new US administration of George W. Bush will lift an arms embargo imposed by his predecessor over East Timor.

"I am optimistic that the military sanctions will be lifted because the Bush government is more pragmatic and realistic," Foreign Minister Shihab told journalists at the presidential palace.

The military assistance ban, imposed on Indonesia by the administration of ex-president Bill Clinton, came after pro-Jakarta militia launched a wave of violence in East Timor after its residents voted overwhelmingly to split from Indonesia in 1999.

The terror campaign prompted some 300,000 East Timorese to flee to Indonesian West Timor.



EU team to meet Suu Kyi

AP, Yangon
A European Union mission began an effort Monday to break a decade-long deadlock between the ruling military and pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The EU troika, which includes representatives from Sweden, France and Belgium, was scheduled to meet with Suu Kyi, who has been under house detention since Sept. 22.

The delegation, led by Sweden, arrived in the Myanmar capital of Yangon for the four-day visit Sunday evening.

"The visit will be the continuation of the EU visit in July 1999 and partly a fact-finding visit in relation to the current developments in Myanmar," Deputy Foreign Minister Khin Maung Win told reporters before the delegation's arrival.

Philippine volcano may erupt soon

AFP, MANILA
A volcano in the eastern Philippines is showing signs of a possible eruption within days, state volcanologists said Monday.

Mayon volcano "continues to manifest a high state of unrest" and has been ejecting ash since last week, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) said.

About 42 volcanic earthquakes had been recorded in 24 hours ending Sunday morning, and the lava dome appeared to be growing.

"It looks like its tendency towards an eruption is increasing," Phivolcs chief Raymundo Punongbayan said over radio station DZMM. "Seismicity is high, the dome in the crater appears to be glowing continuously."

Judge set to issue rule on Pinochet charges

AFP, SANTIAGO
A judge could decide as early as Monday whether former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet will stand trial for human rights abuses committed during his 17-year iron-fisted rule.

Judge Juan Guzman returns to the Chilean capital Monday after "reflecting and relaxing" at a beachfront community on the Pacific coast since Tuesday's historic interrogation of Pinochet.

"It's possible that an announcement could come from the courts that day," lawyer Hugo Gutierrez said Sunday. Gutierrez represents several of the plaintiffs bringing some 214 charges of human-rights violations against the ailing ex-dictator.

Suspension of talks solely Barak's decision: Arafat

AFP, DAVOS



The suspension of Middle East peace talks was the decision of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak alone, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said here Sunday, renewing his verbal attack on Israeli tactics.

"I think this is the sole decision of Mr Barak. He's a man who makes his own decision," Arafat told an impromptu press conference with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in

Davos, which is hosting the World Economic Forum.

Annan sought to play a conciliatory role, amid reports that an angry Barak had cut off the talks after being incensed by Arafat's comments here.

Meanwhile the fighting on the ground continued, with nine Palestinians wounded in the Gaza Strip on Sunday, one of them seriously, after being shot by Israeli gunfire, according to Palestinian sources.

The Israeli Prime Minister announced Sunday that he had suspended negotiations until after the February 6 leadership election, following a week of intensive negotiations that failed to yield an accord.

Sources said the Israeli leader was "furious" after Arafat's speech Sunday at the World Economic Forum in which he called on the international community to "protect his people" from the "collective punishment" meted out by Israel.

However, in his later comments, Arafat did not rule out meeting Barak before the election "if it is necessary".

"I expected him here in Davos," he said.

"We realise he's in an election campaign and he will take the decision that he sees fit for his situation."

Asked whether he would pick up the negotiations with hardliner Ariel Sharon should he, as expected, win next week's vote, Arafat replied: "We make peace with the Israeli government."

"Despite all the difficulties of the Palestinian people, we stress our commitment to pursue the peace process," he added.

However at the same time the Palestinian leader renewed the verbal attack he had made on Israel earlier in the day.

"Did I send my tanks?.. Did I send my gunships?.. Did I send my artillery, am I using the internationally forbidden weapons including uranium?"

Asked about the progress made at the Egypt talks, Arafat said he had nothing new to add: "We have no right to go beyond what was agreed to be stated and announced yesterday," he said. "It was very positive."

The two sides had wrapped up six days of talks in the Red Sea resort of Taba on Saturday on an optimistic

Russian space ship comes to a fiery end above Pacific

AFP, MOSCOW

A space cargo ship which docked last week with the doomed Mir space station came to a fiery end above the Pacific Ocean early Monday when it burnt up on re-entry into the earth's atmosphere, the Interfax news agency reported.

The engines of the Progress M-43 were shut down at 5:12 a.m. (8:12 BST) causing the ship to fall to earth, burn up and its fragments to fall into the Pacific Ocean at 5:58 a.m. (8:58 BST), the Korolyov mission control centre outside Moscow told the news agency.

The M-43 delivered rocket fuel to the ageing space station before undocking last Wednesday to make room for the Progress M1-5 ship which will nudge the Mir station into its own fiery descent to earth.

Russia will mark the 15th anniversary of Mir's launch on February 20, a few days before the scheduled date of its demise.

12 kidnappers get death sentence in Philippines

AFP, MANILA

A Philippine court on Monday sentenced to death 12 members of a notorious kidnap-for-ransom gang and jailed a 13th female member for life.

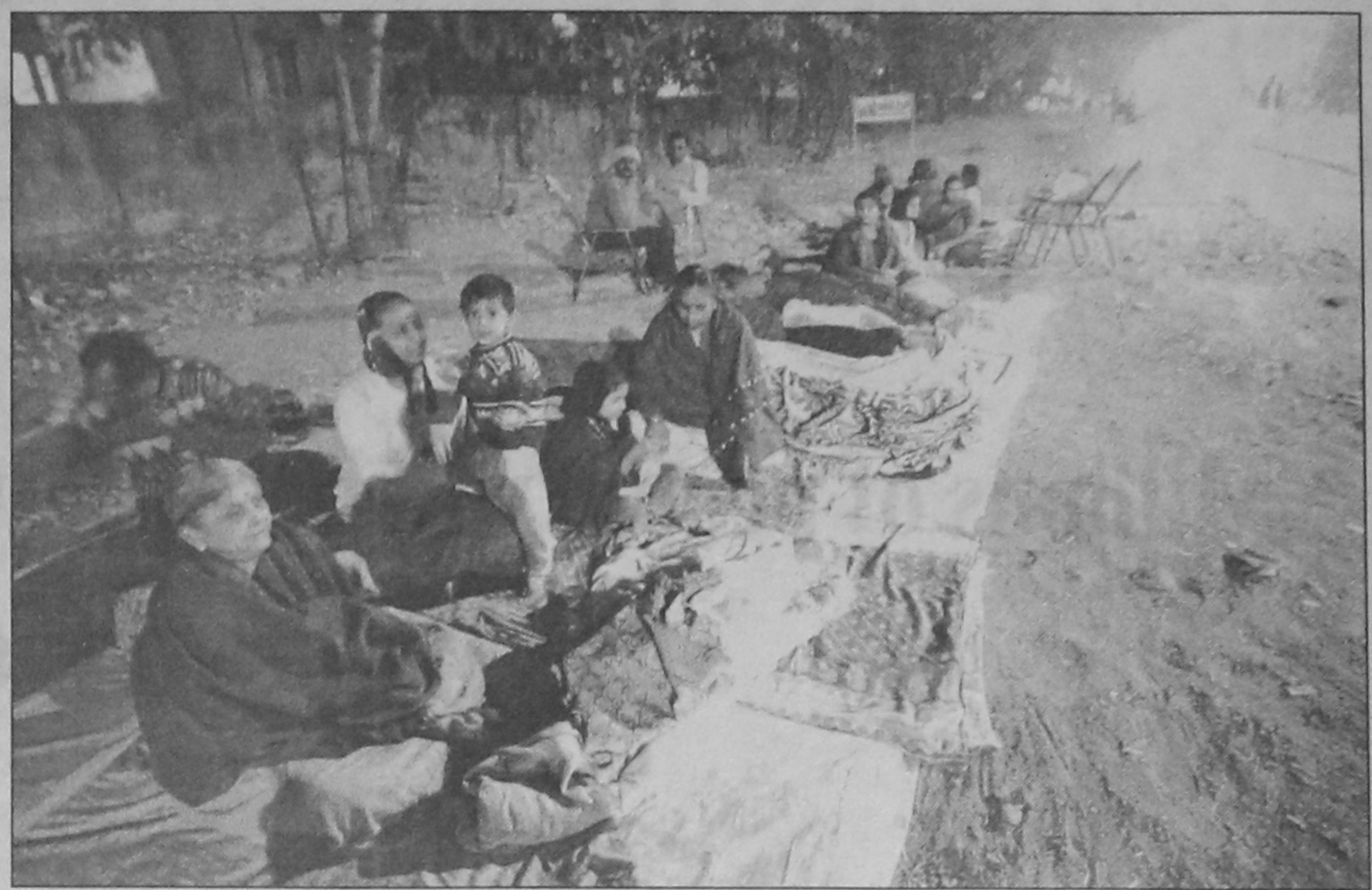
Regional trial court judge Bayani Rivera took only about half an hour to hand down the sentences on the "50 million peso gang" members who victimised rich members of the Filipino-Chinese community in Manila.

There was no immediate explanation on why the lone female member was given a lighter sentence.

The gang earned its name because it asked ransoms of 50 million pesos from families of all its victims, who were usually kept in safe-houses for periods stretching up to six months under dire conditions.

Police bust the gang in 1998 with the help of a teenager who led them to the group's hideout north of Manila, where they recovered a 27-year-old businessman chained to a window and three others being kept separately.

An anti-crime group which had helped authorities in tracking the suspects said the victims were treated like dogs.



Families scared of fresh jolts or aftershocks from the earthquake of January 26, try to sleep along a road in the early hours of yesterday in Ahmedabad. Indian troops and international relief teams are working frantically in an increasing fruitless search for survivors of the earthquake in which more than 20,000 were feared dead.

Indian killer earthquake causes cracks in history

AFP, New Delhi

As India focused on the horrific human and economic cost of the earthquake that devastated the western state of Gujarat, concerns grew over the damage to the country's cultural heritage.

Gujarat, which bore the brunt of the quake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale, is liberally dotted with historical monuments dating back centuries.

These include the famous temple of Somnath dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva, the Sabarmati "ashram" or hermitage of Mahatma Gandhi and a site dating back to the Indus valley civilisation, between 3000 and 4000 BC.

"These are just a few of the famous monuments... there are several lesser known ones. We know there has been damage to quite a few of them," said Harshad Kumari, convener of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, in Gujarat.

Kumari was hopeful the sea

would have acted as a buffer against the impact of the quake for the Somnath temple situated close to the coast.

The epicentre of Friday's earthquake was located 20 km northeast of the medieval town of Bhuj.

"I hear Bhuj was devastated and I think we have lost a hell of a lot of cultural monuments there... it is very, very sad," Kumari said.

"The trouble is the communication systems are not working and I cannot get across to my people there for any kind of an assessment of the damage caused," Kumari added.

The Press Trust of India said a 113-year old museum in Bhuj was completely levelled, destroying an important collection of artifacts, including a 7th century statue of Lord Buddha.

"Bhuj also had several temples, specially one devoted to 'the Nag Devta' or the snake god," Kumari said.

According to newspaper reports, the 500-year old Pokhran fort, 10 km

from where India conducted its nuclear tests in May 1998 in adjoining Rajasthan, was also damaged.

Other historical casualties included royal mansions famous for their stone carvings and chiselled work, built adjoining the palace in the desert town of Jaisalmer, 570 km from Rajasthan's provincial capital Jaipur.

The state and central government authorities, Kumari complained, were not helping with any information or support.

The government, however, argued that its priorities lay elsewhere.

"The problem is that in a calamity of this scale and magnitude, attention is naturally on search and rescue operations," a senior bureaucrat in India's culture ministry said.

"How can we talk about pulling out our staff to assess the damage to historical monuments in the face of such human agony?"

As many as 20,000 people were feared to have died in Gujarat, mak-

ing the quake one of India's worst-ever natural disasters.

A senior official of the Archaeological Survey of India, which supervises the maintenance and upkeep of some 5,000 monuments all over the country, was not prepared to say there had been any damage to any historical monuments in Gujarat.

"We are waiting for information. The lack of proper communication links is hampering the collection of details on any damage."

Harshad Kumari said there were several hundred big and small monuments which were in "a delicate stage" even before the earthquake.

"The Dwarkadesh temple (dedicated to the Hindu god Krishna) in the Saurashtra region (of Gujarat) was in a fragile condition, with not much ground to support it," Kumari said.

22 drowned as ship sinks

AFP, SIMFEROPOL, UKRAINE

Twenty-two people were reported dead and 29 missing after a private Ukrainian ship sank off the country's Black Sea coast, officials in the emergency situations ministry told the agency early Monday.

The 22 bodies were found Sunday in a raft near Ukraine's southernmost port Mys Sarych, said regional ministry chief Alexander Alexandrov.

Sources in the country's coast guard said that six of those reported missing, including the ship's captain, had been found alive.

A total of 51 people had been onboard the ship, known as the Mercury Memory, or Pamyat Merkuria, when it sank, a top government official told AFP.

The captain said the ship had sunk on Friday at 1652 GMT, but refused to say what had caused the incident, the Ukrainian coast guard said.

The 1,200-tonne ship, used for transporting cargo and passengers, was travelling from the Turkish port city of Istanbul.

Friend to tell all about Estrada's ill-gotten wealth

AFP, MANILA

A close friend of ex-president Joseph Estrada, wanted by the US authorities for fraud, has agreed to "tell all" about the deposed leader's alleged ill-gotten wealth, a report said Monday.

Businessman Mark Jimenez on Friday met with officials of the justice department who convinced him to turn against Estrada, who was ousted by a military-backed popular revolt on January 20, the Philippine Star reported.

"We have him," the newspaper quoted an unnamed source as saying. "The justice department is getting what he knows. He will tell all."

Jimenez, Estrada's former adviser on Latin American affairs, is sought by US authorities for alleged tax evasion, mail fraud and illegal campaign contributions to the US Democratic Party.

Washington formally asked for his extradition last year, but this has

been repeatedly delayed by technicalities and an order by the Supreme Court granting the suspect the right to have access to confidential details of the extradition process.

Jimenez was barred in October from leaving the Philippines.

The source did not reveal details of what Jimenez would divulge, although he is believed to have helped Estrada in brokering questionable deals involving several big corporations and a state pension fund.

Justice Secretary Hernani Perez on Monday said he was "shocked at what appeared in today's newspaper" but refused to either deny or confirm if the new witness he was referring to was Jimenez.

"It is true that we have a new witness, but we are not ready to reveal his identity because firstly, his security is being protected," Perez said, adding that the witness may back off if his name was prematurely disclosed.

US destroys nerve-gas weapons

AFP, DENVER

Experts from the US Army destroyed a small nerve gas bomb Sunday, one of six left over in a former chemical weapons manufacturing facility.

An official said the demolition was safely conducted, with no leakage of the deadly Sarin nerve gas.

"Based on this successful operation, we are confident that the destruction of the remaining bomblets will be completed in the same safe manner," said Charlie Schumann, the Army's project manager for the cleanup at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal site near here.

Destruction of the other five bomblets should take place in mid-February, army General John Coburn said.

The Rocky Mountain Arsenal, now a wildlife refuge, manufactured nerve-gas warheads for US missiles during the Cold War. The bomblets were found in a scrap pile and had not appeared on any inventory of chemical weapons, Coburn said.

The US stopped manufacturing chemical weapons in 1968 and is now undertaking the destruction of its stockpile of 31,496 tonnes of chemical warheads to comply with the demands of an international treaty requiring the destruction of all chemical weapons by 2007.

Beaming beauty



Twenty-one-year-old Celina Jaitley (C) is crowned Femina Miss India-India-Pacific 2001 at a ceremony in Bombay on Sunday. At left is 20-year-old Femina Miss India, Sara Corner, and right is Maheshwari Thyagrajan, Femina Miss India-Asia-Pacific 2001.

"আপনার রান্নার কাজ শেষে অবিলম্বে গ্যাসের চুলটি নিভিয়ে ফেলুন"

আমরা দেশের তৈল, গ্যাস ও খনিজ সম্পদ অনুসন্ধান, উন্নয়ন, উত্তোলন, বিতরণের কাজে নিয়োজিত।

দেশের জ্বালানী ও খনিজ সম্পদ অনুসন্ধান ও উত্তোলনের মাধ্যমে খনিজ ও জ্বালানী ক্ষেত্রে দেশকে স্বয়ংসম্পূর্ণ করাই আমাদের একমাত্র লক্ষ্য।

আমাদের অঙ্গ প্রতিষ্ঠানসমূহঃ

- * তিতাস গ্যাস টি এন্ড ডি কোম্পানী লিমিটেড
- * বাংলাদেশ গ্যাস ফিল্ডস্ কোম্পানী লিমিটেড
- * বাখরাবাদ গ্যাস সিস্টেমস লিমিটেড
- * সিলেট গ্যাস ফিল্ডস্ লিমিটেড
- * জালালাবাদ গ্যাস টি এন্ড ডি সিস্টেম লিমিটেড
- * রূপান্তরিত প্রাকৃতিক গ্যাস কোম্পানী লিমিটেড
- * বাংলাদেশ পেট্রোলিয়াম এক্সপ্লোরেশন এন্ড প্রোডাকশন কোং লিঃ
- * গ্যাস ট্রান্সমিশন কোম্পানী লিমিটেড
- * বড়পুকুরিয়া কোল মাইনিং কোম্পানী লিমিটেড
- * মধ্যপাড়া হার্ডরক মাইনিং কোম্পানী লিমিটেড
- * পশ্চিমাঞ্চল গ্যাস কোম্পানী লিমিটেড

(পেট্রোবাংলা)

বাংলাদেশ তৈল, গ্যাস ও খনিজ সম্পদ করপোরেশন
পেট্রোসেন্টার, ৩ কালুরান বাজার বা/ এ, ঢাকা- ১২১৫।

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