

The Economic Times, 1 April 2008

East Asia faces uncertainty, slower 2008: World Bank

East Asia faces challenging times in 2008 as falling exports and reduced business spending result in slower economic growth at a time when rising food prices push up inflation rates, the World Bank said. In its semi-annual report released on Tuesday, the World Bank predicted 7.3 percent growth for East Asia, excluding Japan. Developing Asia, which also excludes Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, would expand 8.6 percent, which will be its lowest growth rate since 2002, and down from 10.2 percent in 2007, the fastest pace since the early 1990s.

Channel News Asia, 1 April 2008

Malaysia's UMNO party mulls open contest against PM Abdullah

Malaysia's UMNO party will consider an open contest for president against Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, a party leader said on Monday. Abdullah, who is president of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), has faced increasing calls to step down after leading the Barisan Nasional coalition to its worst ever performance in the March 8 polls. UMNO heavyweights have called for the scrapping of the current system, under which a candidate must have the support of nearly a third of the party's divisions before they are able to challenge the president, which is hard to do without the backing of the leadership.

Channel News Asia, 1 April 2008

Indonesians protest against Dutch anti-Islam film

Dozens of Indonesian demonstrators gathered outside the Dutch embassy here on Monday to protest against an anti-Islam film by a far-right Dutch lawmaker that was posted on the Internet last week. Protesters waved placards reading "Holland go to hell" and calling the film's maker Geert Wilders "the Christian terrorist", and they threw water and eggs at the embassy building, an AFP reporter at the scene said. Around 50 people turned up for the demonstration, organised by Muslim group FPI, or Islamic Defenders Front, with some calling for the death of Wilders.

The Manila Times, 1 April 2008

GMA strikes back at critics

Battling corruption, sustaining economic reforms, and encouraging more investments are her higher concerns in her last two years in office, President Gloria Arroyo told industry leaders in Hong Kong on Monday. President Arroyo told the global financial and business executives that the political noise in the Philippines will not stop her from further boosting the country's economy until her term expires in 2010. Apparently, she was referring to the ruckus being made by her critics over alleged instances of graft in her administration, among them in the aborted \$330-million national broadband deal. More recently, the political foes of the President blamed her for the supposed "rice crisis" that they said was caused in part by connivance between corrupt government officials and rice hoarders.

Mizzma News, 1 April 2008

Burmese MPs appeal to lawmakers across globe

Burmese parliamentarians today appealed to law makers around the world to exert pressure on the Burmese military regime to implement political reforms and force it to reject its planned roadmap to democracy. The parliamentarians, who were elected in Burma's last election in 1990, under the banner of Committee Representing Peoples Parliament (CRPP), on Monday urged parliamentarians across the world to stop the military junta from going ahead with its plans and reject its draft constitution, which the junta wants to put to a referendum in May

The Hindu, 2 April 2008

People's pact forged in Malaysia

A "People's Pact" nguaranteeing 'the rights' of all Malaysians including the ethnic Indian minority that feels "marginalised", has been fashioned by three opposition parties, under the leadership of the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. These parties, now striving to unseat Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who recently won re-election with a vastly reduced parliamentary majority, are Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Parti Islam Se-

Malaysia (PAS). Announcing the alliance styled "Pakatan Rakyat" (People's Pact), leaders of these parties pledged to "uphold the rights and interests of all Malaysians, regardless of religion or race, as [originally] enshrined in the Constitution".

Channel News Asia, 2 April 2008

MM Lee says S'pore needs to find new ways to stay ahead of competition

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew says Singapore has to move away from its current way of operation because other countries, learning its example, will catch up in the near future. This is why Singapore has invested heavily in new areas like life sciences, he said. Mr Lee was speaking at the Russia-Singapore Business Forum on Tuesday. Minister Mentor Lee, who visited Russia just last year, said that just from the snapshot he has had of Russia's development, he believes it is certainly a country on the move. This is especially when German auto makers and American banks have made their presence in Russia.

The Bangkok Post, 2 April 2008

Thai rice 'too expensive' for Singapore stalls

Hawkers and restaurant owners are switching to rice from Burma instead of more expensive imports from Thailand to cope with global increases in rice prices, news reports said Wednesday. "Supplies seem stable for now, but the world's demand is on Thailand's shoulders," The Straits Times quoted Saga Footstuffs managing director Goh Hock Ho as saying. His firm is expecting about 350 tonnes of white rice from Burma this month after buying none in March. The grain from Burma is about S\$200 (\$144, 4,500 baht) cheaper per 50 kilogramme bag than from Thailand (sic).

The Manila Times, 2 April 2008

WB cuts RP growth forecast

The World Bank on Tuesday cut its economic growth forecast for the Philippines, citing higher consumer prices and the US slowdown. In its East Asia and Pacific Update, the Washington-based lender downgraded its Philippine gross domestic product (GDP) forecast to 5.9 percent this year from the 6.2 percent estimate made last November. The government targets GDP growth of between 6.3 percent and 7 percent this year. This is lower than the three-decade high 7.3 percent expansion last year.

The Economic Times, 2 April 2008

DLF plans tie-up with Thai retail group as Carrefour talks fail

Talks between the DLF Group and French retail major Carrefour for a joint retail operation in India have fallen through. The Indian real estate major has moved on and is now in advanced negotiations with the largest retail and real estate company of Thailand, The Central Group. The family-controlled Central Group owns and operates stores of every possible format and product category under different brand names similar to what Reliance Retail is trying to do in India.

The Economic Times, 2 April 2008

Tourists seen extending a lifeline to Laos elephants

Laos, once known as the Land of a Million Elephants, faces warnings from conservationists that it could lose its herds within 50 years if it does not move quickly to protect them with tourism eyed as a possible saviour. Poaching and habitat loss from logging, agriculture and hydroelectric projects has caused a major decline in the number of both wild and domesticated Asian elephants in Communist Laos.

Mizzima News, 2 April 2008

Rights violation still rampant in Burma: Amnesty International

Amnesty International is of the opinion that Burma's military junta continues to commit deliberate and systematic human rights violations despite international condemnation. Mr. Mukul Sharma, India based AI Director said human rights violations by the Burmese regime continues to be visible and evidence indicates that the junta is engaging in various ways to commit violations. "What we are seeing is that human rights violation in Burma continues in different ways despite so much criticism

and international pressure. And the kind of security that restricts the Burmese population to preserve its human rights, we would like to see in one prison, it is not there in place," Sharma said.

The Economic Times, 3 April 2008

Air India to start operations to Kuala Lumpur, Abu Dhabi

Air India Express, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Air India, will soon start its services to Kuala Lumpur and Abu Dhabi from Tiruchirapalli, a top official has said. The operations would commence with 737-800 aircraft, National Aviation Company of India Ltd, Tiruchi, Manager R Nadarajan said at a function here last night. Simultaneously, the airlines would add six additional flights to Dubai in a week.

The Manila Times, 3 April 2008

RP no longer last in Asia

The Asian Development Bank reported that the Philippines is no longer the economic laggard in Southeast Asia but warned that Filipinos who are out of poverty may slip back into poverty. ADB Deputy Director General for Southeast Asia Thomas Crouch said so on Wednesday, adding that because of rising fuel and food prices, a number of Filipinos have already slipped back into poverty. The Philippine economy grew in 2007, despite the government's decreasing budget deficit to about 1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), Crouch said.

Bangkok Post, 3 April 2008

Burma: Just say 'No'

Rangoon - Pro-democracy backers of Aung San Suu Kyi on Wednesday urged the nation to be brave next month and vote against a constitution proposed by the military junta. The National League for Democracy (NLD) issued a statement calling on the public "to clearly and bravely vote 'No' when you mark your ballots." The party accused the junta of handpicking the drafters of the constitution, saying it was written without consulting any opposing voices.

Channel News Asia, 3 April 2008

Malaysia's Abdullah says he will not step down as PM

Malaysia's Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on Wednesday brushed off speculation that he would step down as Prime Minister, state-run Bernama news agency reported. There have been some calls for Abdullah to step down after the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) suffered its worst electoral setback in 50 years in the March 8 poll. The coalition conceded five states to the opposition and lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority. "I am here. They make all the speculations that I want to run away, I've resigned," the prime minister told Bernama.

Channel News Asia, 3 April 2008

Singapore to host Islamic Financial Services Board's 2009 summit

Singapore will host the annual summit of the Islamic Financial Services Board in May next year. It will be the first time the event will be held in Asia. Previous summits were held in London, Doha, Beirut and Dubai. This year's summit will be held in Amman. The annual summit is the single largest concentration of top financial regulators from IFSB member countries taking part in an industry-led event. Singapore will play host to central bank governors, top executives of securities and insurance regulators, and major private sector participants, who will discuss key issues and developments on the regulation and supervision of Islamic financial services.

Channel News Asia, 4 April 2008

Hindraf supporters vow to secure release of jailed leaders

Supporters of Malaysia's Hindu Rights Action Force have vowed to return to the streets, if their efforts to secure their leaders' release at the country's highest court fail. The five men have been held under the country's Internal Security Act (ISA) since December. They are accused of stirring racial hatred and suspected links with the Tamil Tigers rebel group in Sri Lanka. Malaysia's government is facing mounting pressures to free the Hindraf 5. The five men are allegedly behind a string of anti-discrimination rallies that rocked the capital last November.

Channel News Asia, 4 April 2008

Attorney general says detained Malaysian Indians a security threat

Malaysia's attorney general Thursday said five detained ethnic Indian activists should not be freed as they are a threat to national security. Abdul Gani Patail told the country's highest court that Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had ordered their arrest under the tough Internal Security Act (ISA) following a comprehensive investigation. "The prime minister... had ordered their arrest (last December) upon a thorough police investigation which deemed them as a threat to national security," he said. Abdul Gani was responding to arguments by the lawyer of the five, who said Wednesday that their detention was illegal and demanded their immediate release.

The Bangkok Post, 4 April 2008

Thaksin to return to Bangkok Friday morning

Ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra was scheduled to leave a hotel in Chiang Rai on Friday morning to pay respect to Prathat Chomkitti before returning to Bangkok at 11am. On Thursday night, Mr Thaksin went to celebrate birthday of House Speaker Yongyuth Tiyapairat on his 47th anniversary at his residence in Chiang Rai. Other people who were present included Prime Minister's Office Minister Jakrapob Penkair and Sompong Amornwiwat.

Mizzima News, 4 April 2008

Kachin and Muslim organizations urge 'NO' vote

The Myanmar Muslim Organization and the Kachin National Organization (KNO) are urging the entire population of Burma to cast a 'NO' vote in the upcoming constitutional referendum. The organizations argue that the new constitution does not represent the ethnic people of Burma and will only perpetuate the rule of the military regime. "If you go through the draft constitution, you will see it cannot protect Burmese people and Kachin people. And there are no democratic principles. So we urge the people to cast a 'NO' vote in the forthcoming constitutional referendum", said Duwar (Chieftain) Bawm Wam Layaw, Chairman of the exile-based KNO.

The Manila Times, 4 April 2008

Business leaders call for open skies policy at Clark

President Arroyo will visit this Freeport on the eve of her 61st birthday today (Friday) with various business and sectoral leaders in Luzon praying and hoping that the Chief Executive will sign a proposed executive order restoring open skies policy at Diosdado Macapagal International Airport (DMIA). Alex Cauquiran, executive vice-president of Clark International Airport Corp. (CIAC) stated in his press statement last February that the President has approved in principle EO 500-B allowing foreign airlines to apply for third and fourth freedom traffic rights at DMIA and the Subic International Airport, a privilege now allowed under EO 500-A.

The Economic Times, 4 April 2008

Zicom ties up with Singapore firm

Zicom Electronic Security Systems today said it has entered into a joint venture with Singapore-based CNA Group to offer integrated building management solutions in the country. In the joint venture entity, Zicom CNA Automation Ltd, Zicom would hold 51 per cent and CNA Group would pick up the remaining stake.

The Economic Times, 4 April 2008

India, Myanmar inks double taxation avoidance treaty

India and Myanmar have signed the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement, which will enable both nations to prevent tax evasion and ensure that business profits are taxed only in the country where the company has a permanent establishment. The agreement aims at avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion with respect to income on taxes. The Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) would cover income-tax and surcharge in the case of India and income tax and profit tax in the case of Myanmar, a Finance Ministry statement said.

The Economic Times, 5 April 2008

India keen to learn best practices from Singapore: Nath

India's economic engagement with the world is expected to touch \$550 billion in 2007-08, announced the country's Commerce and Industry Minister Kamal Nath on Friday while addressing the opening session of the Incredible India@60 campaign here. Stating that India is keen to learn and pick up the best practices from Singapore, Nath said that the city-state's institutions, regulatory frameworks and strong services were a role model for India.

The Economic Times, 5 April 2008

Jindal Drilling buys 49 pc in Singapore firm

Offshore oil services provider Jindal Drilling & Industries Ltd said on Friday it had bought 49 percent in Singapore-based Virtue Drilling Pte Ltd for 400 million rupees. Jindal Drilling, part of the DP Jindal group, bought the stake from Jindal Pipes, to consolidate its drilling business, Anil Jain, chief financial officer, said. The company also owns a 49 percent stake in another Singapore-based firm, Discovery Drilling, "so it made sense to buy Virtue from Jindal Pipes," Jain said.

The Hindu, 5 April 2008

India, China fastest growing economies: Lee

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Friday equated India with China as one of the two fastest growing economies in the world, while Union Commerce and Industry Minister Kamal Nath emphasised that the "incredible India" of evocative imagery was also an "incredible" economy on the move now. They were setting the tone for a series of events organised by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), in association with India's High Commission here, in the name and style of "Incredible India@60," as a sequel to similar celebrations in New York last year.

The Hindustan Times, 5 April 2008

Myanmar protester gets life imprisonment

Myanmar's military government has sentenced an activist to life in prison for holding up placards calling for parliament to open and for inflation to be curbed, his lawyer said on Friday. Ohn Than, believed to be in his 60s, was arrested on August 23 after he stood outside the US embassy in downtown Yangon and silently held up his signs. "He was sentenced on Wednesday at western district court to life imprisonment and a 1,000-kyat (90 cent) fine," his lawyer Aung Thein told AFP. "His sentence should not be like this," he added. Ohn Than staged his protest as other activists were beginning to hold demonstrations against a surprise hike in fuel prices.

Channel News Asia, 5 April 2008

Thaksin backs plans to change constitution

Former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra on Saturday threw his support behind the government's plan to amend Thailand's army-backed constitution. The ruling People Power Party (PPP) and its five coalition partners are considering a series of changes to the constitution, which was drafted by a panel installed by the junta that ousted Thaksin in 2006. The basic law was approved in a referendum last August, but critics say it empowers the military and bureaucracy at the expense of elected leaders. Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej wants to remove a clause that allows the disbanding of political parties convicted of vote fraud, saying the provision undermines the government's stability.

The Economic Times, 6 April 2008

Singaporean Minister appreciates Bollywood films

Appreciating Bollywood for showcasing India's history through films, senior Singaporean minister Lee Boon Yang, said he enjoyed the few Hindi movies he had seen. "Last week I was glued to the TV and saw some fine examples of cultural exports of movies from India. I had watched some of the Hindi movies on previous Sundays too," Lee, Singapore's Information, Communications and Arts Minister, told a gathering at a cultural extravaganza of incredibleindia@60 here last evening.

The Economic Times, 6 April 2008

Strategic dialogue set up between India, Singapore

Singapore said a strategic dialogue has been set up with India to further cement the strong ties between the two countries which has reached new peaks since the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA). The two sides involved in the strategic dialogue will meet in May, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said at a ceremony to mark Incredible India@60 campaign on Friday night.

Bangkok Post, 6 April 2008

Burma fears Songkran terror attacks

The Burmese junta warned of increased terrorist acts during the upcoming Water Festival and the national referendum, claiming two "terrorists" had been arrested last month, state media reports said Saturday. In an article in The New Light of Myanmar, the government mouthpiece, it was revealed that authorities had in March arrested a member of the National League for Democracy (NLD) opposition party who had attended "explosives courses in a neighbouring country."

Channel News Asia, 6 April 2008

Myanmar PM says new charter not for military's gain

Myanmar's prime minister said next month's referendum on a new constitution, which gives sweeping powers to the armed forces, was not designed to benefit the military, state media said Sunday. "The referendum is not for one person, the Tatmadaw (the military), one party and one association, but for seeking unanimous approval for a constitution," the prime minister, General Thein Sein, said. He told the official New Light of Myanmar newspaper the proposed basic law "is instrumental for building a new democratic nation that people long for."

Channel News Asia, 6 April 2008

Hundreds of Cambodians protest against inflation

About 300 people rallied Sunday outside Cambodia's parliament to protest against double-digit inflation and to demand wage increases to deal with soaring food costs. The protesters, led by Cambodia's main opposition Sam Rainsy Party, carried banners reading: "We want pay raises. Government must stop inflation." "The current government is unable to curb inflation... We are pushing them to reduce the prices of essential items or to increase salaries in line with inflation," opposition leader Sam Rainsy told reporters.

Channel News Asia, 7 April 2008

Malaysia's duelling leaders trade accusations over poll losses

Malaysia's past and present prime ministers on Sunday traded barbs and accusations over responsibility for the ruling party's disastrous performance in the recent general elections. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi accused his predecessor of abusing his influence to destroy the ruling party while former premier Mahathir Mohamad said he will not ease off until Abdullah steps down. Abdullah said Mahathir's recent attacks against the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) leadership could destroy the party and weaken the government.

The Star, 7 April 2008

Abdullah hits out at his critics

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has struck back by hitting out at Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim for their criticism of his leadership. Stressing that he was not a lembik (soft) Prime Minister, Abdullah said there were many things that were not right in the previous Prime Minister's reign, citing the 1987 Operasi Lalang crackdown, the erosion of confidence in the judiciary and lack of freedom in the media as examples. He also said Umno was deregistered under Dr Mahathir's leadership (in 1988) "but we never asked him to step down".

The Manila Times, 7 April 2008

Rice shortage grips Asia

President Gloria Arroyo convened a food summit with top officials and farm experts on Friday,

looking for ways to prevent the emerging rice crisis from severely affecting the world's biggest importer of rice. This came as the latest effort by the Philippine government to ensure food supplies and control soaring rice prices, which is also seen as a major task in other Asian countries, where rice is consumed daily by every household.

Vietnam News, 7 April 2008

ASEAN countries agree on enforcing community dream

The 12th ASEAN Finance Ministers' Meeting, which was opened by Viet Nam's Deputy Prime Minister, Nguyen Sinh Hung, and chaired by Finance Minister Vu Van Ninh, closed on Friday. In a 20-point joint statement issued at a press conference Friday evening, the ASEAN Finance ministers reaffirmed their commitments to boost financial co-operation in the region, and to realise the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2015, thereby meeting the target set by the AEC Plan of Action, approved by ASEAN leaders in November 2007 in Singapore.

Channel News Asia, 7 April 2008

Thai PM slams fortune teller over downfall prediction

Thailand's combative prime minister has lashed out at a famous fortune teller for predicting his new government's downfall in another military coup, local press reported on Monday. Samak Sundaravej used his Sunday TV show to criticise Varin Buaviratler, whose clients are rumoured to include ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra's wife, and the man who overthrew Thaksin, former army chief Sonthi Boonyaratglin. Varin last week predicted that the coalition government led by Samak would collapse in the coming months, resulting in political chaos and possible bloodshed, the English-language Bangkok Post and Nation newspapers reported.

Channel News Asia, 8 April 2008

Government to spend S\$1b on next generation broadband

The government has set aside up to S\$250 million as a grant to the winning bidder that will sell and direct bandwidth for the country's new broadband network. To meet the growing demand for online services in Singapore, the Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) is inviting companies to submit a proposal to design, build and operate the active infrastructure for the next generation of broadband network. This was announced on Monday when a second tender was called to develop the network, which will be rolled out islandwide by 2015.

Channel News Asia, 8 April 2008

Philippine coup plotters jailed for life

A Philippine court on Tuesday sentenced two junior army officers to life in prison for their part in a failed coup against President Gloria Arroyo in 2003. Seven other officers involved in the plot were given jail terms of up to 12 years, the court said. Army captains Gerardo Gambala and Milo Maestrocampo, who were among several ringleaders, stood silently and showed no emotion as the sentence was handed down by Judge Oscar Pimentel.

The Star, 8 April 2008

I won't overstay as PM, says Abdullah

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi says he has no intention of overstaying as Prime Minister but wants to put all things in order before retiring. Abdullah, the Umno president and Barisan Nasional chairman, wants to put the party and ruling coalition on a stronger footing first. "I will retire one day. I will not stay any longer than I should. But there are things I would like to do now. Of course, I cannot leave at a time when the party is in this condition," he said when asked if he had a succession plan in mind after naming Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak as his successor.

The Manila Times, 8 April 2008

GMA lifts quota on rice, corn

President Gloria Arroyo lifted the import quota on rice and corn but has not adjusted tariff rates in a bid to entice the private sector to participate in beefing up the country's grain supply. "The

lifting of the import quota will allow private importers to import rice and corn without limit as long as they won't hoard grains," Presidential Management Staff chief Cerge Remonde said. "Previously, we had a quota, but now the President has removed it. So anybody can import rice and corn." Because of increases in global rice prices, the Philippines last month paid more than double the usual amount for foreign rice through state importations.

The Jakarta Post, 8 April 2008

Indonesia-Japan bilateral relations on track, says envoy

Indonesian Ambassador to Japan Jusuf Anwar has gone on YouTube to showcase Indonesia-Japan relations in a 4:24-long video underscoring the friendship between the two countries. "I'm the only Indonesian ambassador to Japan so far who's used the Internet to show how much these relations matter. We're going all-out to max opportunities between the two countries, and I believe we're seeing good results out of it," he told The Jakarta Post here after the conclusion of a four-day meeting of Indonesian envoys posted overseas.

The Bangkok Post, 8 April 2008

Burma's trade reaches historic peak

Natural gas exports to Thailand alone last year earned the country 2.7 billion dollars. In 2007, Burma's total trade hit an historic peak of 8.7 billion dollars, split into 5.9 billion exports and 2.8 billion in imports, leaving the country with a trade surplus of 3.1 billion, said the Myanmar Times weekly, citing government officials. Burma's exports last year were driven primarily by natural gas, which earned the impoverished country 2.7 billion dollars, or 45 per cent of its total exports.

The Economic Times, 9 April 2008

Malaysia to review Visa-on-Arrival facility

Malaysia has said it was seeking a review of the Visa-on-Arrival (VOA) facility approved by the Cabinet last year for foreign visitors from several countries including India, as it had been abused with about 30 per cent of tourists overstaying in the country. Home Minister Hamid Albar has asked his officers to prepare a paper stating the 'pros and cons' of the VOA for him to bring up during the Cabinet meeting, reports here said.

The Economic Times, 9 April 2008

Thai AIS to launch new high speed Internet in May

Advanced Info Service, Thailand's top mobile operator, said on Wednesday it planned to launch a new high speed Internet using the HSPA (high speed packet access) technology in May. The first phase of the third generation mobile service would be launched in northern province of Chiang Mai next month and in Bangkok in June, chief executive Vikrom Sriprataks told the media. The HSPA technology will allow users to surf the Internet, make video calls and download data at 7,200 kilobits per second (kbps), 45 times faster than the 160 kbps offered by current high-speed services.

The Economic Times, 9 April 2008

ADB refocuses amid donor complaints

The Asian Development Bank on Wednesday launched a new strategy where it will lend money or provide aid to protect the environment and spread the fruits of breakneck economic growth. "Strategy 2020 will refocus ADB operations on three development agendas -- inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration," the Manila-based bank said in a statement.

Channel News Asia, 9 April 2008

Philippines lifts quotas on rice imports by private traders

Philippines : Philippine President Gloria Arroyo has ordered the lifting of quotas on rice imports by private traders, as part of the government's effort to ensure an adequate supply of affordable rice in the country. The Philippines was once a rice exporter, but has now become one of the world's top rice importers. During the Marcos administration, the country was still able to export a portion of its total produce while leaving the country with sufficient supply.

Channel News Asia, 9 April 2008

Southeast Asian nations brace for haze, vow to step up efforts to tackle forest fires

Southeast Asian countries are bracing for the return of choking haze as a drier season expected in the third quarter of this year may trigger an escalation of hotspots in Indonesia. Environment ministers from the region met on Tuesday to discuss how to reduce haze pollution. Speaking after the meeting in Putrajaya, Malaysia, environment ministers from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Thailand vowed to step up preventive and mitigation efforts to tackle land and forest fires.

The Hindu, 10 April 2008

Myanmar unveils draft statute

Myanmar's military rulers on Wednesday unveiled a draft Constitution, prompting pro-democracy activists to call for its outright rejection. The document is to be put to a referendum, scheduled for an unspecified date next month. U Win Nyan, spokesman for Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), told The Hindu over telephone from Yangon that the party, instead of boycotting the referendum, would ask the people to say "no" to this draft.

The Economic Times, 10 April 2008

Rice crisis to cost Philippines one percent of GDP: Study

Soaring food prices are likely to cost the Philippines nearly one percent of its economic output this year to ensure adequate supplies to the poor, Credit Suisse said on Wednesday. The government has announced plans to import up to 2.7 million tonnes this year even as prices soared to near-historical levels amid tight global supplies. President Gloria Arroyo has cited rising food prices as a threat to the Philippine economy, while analysts have warned major rice importers that soaring prices could lead to social unrest and pose security problems. The government has deployed police and military to crack down on rice hoarders.

The Times of India, 10 April 2008

EXL starts operations in Manila

Business process outsourcing firm ExlService Holdings on Tuesday said it has commenced operation at their first service delivery centre outside the country in Manila, Philippines entailing an investment of 8 million dollar. "This is the first delivery centre of EXL outside India. We have invested about 8.3 million dollar to set up the facility," a company spokesperson told reporters. The Philippines facility, which has a capacity of around 950 seats, has been built to meet the expanding demands of EXL's existing clients in multiple industry verticals as they spread their outsourcing operations globally, the company said in a statement.

The Times of India, 10 April 2008

Myanmar migrants suffocate while being smuggled into Thailand

54 Myanmar migrant workers suffocated to death as they were being smuggled into Thailand inside a cold storage container, police said on Thursday. The victims were among 121 people crammed inside a container that was six metres long and only 2.2 metres wide, said Colonel Kraithong Chanthongbai, commander of the local police station in the Thai border province of Ranong where the bodies were found late on Wednesday. Out of those inside the container, 21 persons suffered from a lack of oxygen inside the container and were taken for treatment, he said.

The Economic Times, 10 April 2008

Thai AIS to spend at least \$500 million on 3G

Advanced Info Service, Thailand's top mobile operator, said on Thursday it would spend an initial \$500 million on a third generation mobile service (3G). AIS has said it expected to get government approval for the service by the fourth quarter. Thailand's mobile subscriber base is expected to rise 20 per cent this year and the company planned to boost non-voice revenues to 10 billion baht this year, AIS Chief Executive Somprasong Boonyachai told a shareholder meeting.

The Economic Times, 10 April 2008

Mittal sees investment potential in Thailand

Lakshmi Mittal, chief executive of steel giant ArcelorMittal, said on Wednesday that Thailand has good investment potential but needs to work to boost productivity. Speaking at an economic conference organised by former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Mittal said he was willing to consider possible investments in Thailand by the world's largest steelmaker. "Thailand has lots of potential in investment and opportunities to participate in world business," Mittal said.

Channel News Asia, 10 April 2008

MAS continues to tighten Singapore's monetary policy

The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) further tightened monetary policy on Thursday in a bid to address a sharp rise in inflation, allowing the Singapore dollar to continue to rise against other currencies. The move sent the Singapore dollar to all-time highs at US\$1.3623 in morning trade, against 1.3810 late Wednesday. In its semi-annual policy statement, the MAS said consumer prices have risen sharply since the second half of last year, reflecting both external and domestic factors.

Channel News Asia, 11 April 2008

Singapore retailers positive about China's market prospects

Singapore retailers looking at business opportunities in China have made a trip to the mainland and they said the key to investing in China is strong branding, coupled with lots of creativity. Mphasis, one of several Singapore retailers hoping to break into the Chinese market, is positive about prospects there. The company's managing director, Mr Hensley Teh, believes the exposure to international fashion brands has made Chinese consumers more accepting of cosmopolitan designs. He said: "I think we will need to identify the right working partners' be it under joint venture (JV) or distributorship. This trip has allowed us to network with some of the local retailers and has helped us to understand what is required through a JV."

Channel News Asia, 11 April 2008

ASEAN hails appointment of US ambassador

The United States' appointment of an ambassador to ASEAN is a "significant gesture" in recognising the bloc's importance, the ASEAN Secretariat said Friday. Veteran diplomat Scot Marciel has been nominated as the first US ambassador to the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The impending appointment is "a manifestation of US recognition of the growing importance of ASEAN as a regional organisation," a statement from bloc's Jakarta-based Secretariat said.

Channel News Asia, 11 April 2008

Thai court jails Myanmar container survivors for three days

The survivors of a horrific people-smuggling accident which left 54 dead were sentenced to three days in jail after a Thai court Friday convicted them of illegal entry. Fourteen children have already been handed over to immigration authorities for repatriation, after surviving the deadly trip across the Thai border in an airtight seafood container. The 50 defendants were part of a group of 120 packed inside the container, measuring just six metres (20 feet) long by 2.2 metres wide, as they fled economic collapse at home in hope of finding work on the Thai resort island of Phuket.

Mizzima News, 11 April 2008

Chinese trucks to tow howitzer arrive on border

Over 50 Chinese trucks to tow howitzers, which were transferred to Burma, arrived on the Sino-Burma border town of Ruili on Friday morning, eyewitnesses said. Local residents in Ruili said they spotted the Chinese made howitzer towing trucks being parked at a car wash. "The trucks arrived this morning. There are more than 50 trucks. Many are now in car washing service shops," a local resident from Ruili said. The military trucks are said to have been produced by a Chinese company called 'Dong Feng' (East Wind) and are equipped with three axles (six wheels).

Mizzima News, 11 April 2008

Junta urges people to support constitution

Burma's ruling junta on Friday publicly encouraged citizens to support its draft constitution, for which it will seek approval on May 10. In an open campaign, the junta, in its mouthpiece Myanmar Ahlin Newspaper, urged the people of Burma to support the constitution, saying, "Democracy and freedom cannot be achieved through agitation and protests □?□ But only through supporting the constitution in the upcoming referendum in May." For the first time the junta revealed that it has been conducting comprehensive campaigns across the country in the form of conducting mock elections and mass gatherings.

Channel News Asia, 12 April 2008

Malaysian PM reportedly accepts partial blame for election losses

Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi says he is partly to blame for the ruling party's recent election losses amid mounting calls for his resignation, according to reports Saturday. Abdullah said he would discuss a transition of power to his deputy by year-end but that no deadline has been set. His admission comes after the opposition denied the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-led ruling coalition a two-thirds parliamentary majority and seized control of five states in Barisan Nasional's worst-ever poll performance in the March 8 elections.

Channel News Asia, 12 April 2008

FM Yeo says Myanmar's constitution will not be to the liking of many

Singapore's Foreign Affairs Minister George Yeo believes Myanmar's proposed constitution will not be to the liking of many. Speaking at a joint news conference with his Czech counterpart, Karel Schwazenberg in Prague on Saturday, he noted that next month's referendum will - unfortunately - not be supported by Myanmar's main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). He said the military in Myanmar will continue to have a strong role to play.

The Times of India, 12 April 2008

Inflation a worry for Asia-Pacific: IMF

The International Monetary Fund said on Friday the Asia-Pacific region faces a challenging year, having to cope with an expected global slowdown led by the United States and a sharp spike in inflation. It said growth will likely fall 1.25 percentage points to 6.2% as exports to the United States and the European Union weaken this year. "At the same time as growth is starting to slow, inflation is rising across the region," said David Burton, director of the IMF's Asia and Pacific Department. Burton said rising prices for food, especially rice, had begun pushing up headline figures and had also begun to produce "second-round effects" as inflation expectations became entrenched.

The Jakarta Post, 12 April 2008

Indonesia experiencing slow development in HIV/AIDS treatment

With shortages of imported medicines and a general lack of knowledge among the affected, only about 10 percent of the 200,000 Indonesians living with HIV/AIDS receive the recommended anti-retroviral (ARV) therapy, an official said Friday. Chairman of the Association of Indonesian Physicians Concerned about HIV/AIDS and coordinator of the HIV/AIDS clinic at the Cipto Mangunkusumo General Hospital (RSCM), Samsuridjal Djauzi, said in Jakarta on Friday only some 15,000 people with HIV/AIDS in Indonesia were currently receiving ARV therapy.

The Hindu, 12 April 2008

Don't politicise Olympics: Lee

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong cautioned the West on Friday against politicising the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Addressing a knowledge forum organised here by the London School of Economics, Mr. Lee said: "The Olympics is China's coming out party, to celebrate its progress and opening up to the world. They sent the Olympic torch overseas in what is described as a "journey of harmony". But not surprisingly, China's opponents see this as a golden opportunity to make their point".

Channel News Asia, 13 April 2008

Malaysian opposition leader Anwar marks end of political ban

Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim on Monday celebrates his official return to the political stage, as a ban from public office expires a decade after he was sacked as deputy prime minister. The lifting of the ban marks the end of an extraordinary saga that saw Anwar convicted on sex and corruption charges and spend six years in jail, before storming back to prominence in historic March elections. With Anwar at the helm, a reinvigorated opposition seized a third of parliamentary seats and five states in the worst-ever showing for the Barisan Nasional coalition that has ruled for half a century.

Channel News Asia, 13 April 2008

Malaysia's Mahathir urges PM to quit now to save reputation

Former Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohamad has called on Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to resign immediately, saying his reputation will be shredded if he insists on staying on in the top job. Mahathir renewed his campaign to oust Abdullah shortly after the prime minister reportedly told his party he would hold discussions after December internal party polls on a handover of power to his deputy Najib Razak. "For his own good he should step down now because then (the transition) will be very smooth but if you wait until the (party polls) you don't know what the people are going to say," Mahathir said late Saturday.

The Manila Times, 13 April 2008

Lack of power balance chokes RP democracy

As long as the discussion is confined to politics in purely materialistic, social science terms, stop blaming President Arroyo for the sudden disappearance of the political balance of power among the three branches of government. She and her allies including those honorable justices of the Supreme Court who voted to exalt her and Secretary Romulo Neri's executive privilege at the expense of the Senate's right to conduct an investigation of a government deal tainted with bribery and overpricing attempts have only been taking advantage of rules, laws and Constitutional provisions that give the Philippine presidency huge powers over the other two branches of government and the entire width and breadth of the executive department.

The Economic Times, 14 April 2008

Singapore Exchange Q3 profit up 14 pc

Singapore Exchange (SGX), Asia's second-biggest listed bourse, said on Monday its quarterly profit rose 14 percent, helped by higher revenue from derivatives trading. SGX posted net profit of S\$101.5 million (\$75 million) for the three months to March, up from S\$89 million a year ago and just below the S\$103 million forecast of four analysts polled by media. The Singapore bourse operator's third quarter profit was the smallest in four quarters as new listings plunged and trading volumes slowed amid a brutal global market sell-off.

The Economic Times, 14 April 2008

Singapore to award \$5.9 bn building, IT contracts

The Singapore government will award S\$8 billion (\$5.9 billion) worth of construction and information technology projects in the fiscal year 2008, the government said on Monday. The finance ministry said S\$5.8 billion of construction projects will be awarded to develop Singapore's central business district, where the country's first casino is set to open in 2009, and to maintain the island's highways. About S\$1.2 billion worth of contracts will be awarded for the purchase of goods and services such as automated toll systems at checkpoints, while the remaining S\$1 billion will be used to fund information technology projects, the ministry said.

The Economic Times, 14 April 2008

Indonesia's Q1 investment up around 80 pc

Indonesia's total foreign and domestic investment rose by around 80 per cent in the first quarter from the same period a year ago, the chairman of the investment coordinating agency said on Monday. Muhammad Lutfi did not give details.

The Economic Times, 14 April 2008

Vietnam's Oricombank says 2007 net jumps 62.6 pc

Vietnam's Oricombank, 10 per cent owned by France's BNP Paribas, said its net profit surged 62.6 percent last year to 168.59 billion dong (\$10.6 million) thanks to strong lending. The Ho Chi Minh City-based Oricombank, also known as Phuong Dong Commercial Bank, said its audited assets jumped 82.6 per cent last year to 11.76 trillion dong, of which loans rose 62.2 per cent to 7.56 trillion dong, it said in a statement.

The Economic Times, 14 April 2008

EU's Indonesia airline ban 'unfair': Ministry

Indonesia on Monday criticised the European Union's failure to remove any of its airlines from a flight blacklist as "unfair," saying much had been done to improve standards. Indonesia last year launched a programme to improve air safety standards after the EU in June banned the country's 51 airlines from flying in its airspace following a string of fatal accidents. The government has lobbied EU authorities to lift the ban on flag carrier Garuda Indonesia. But on Friday, the EU said that while Garuda had made some progress, it was not sufficient to warrant lifting the ban.

Channel News Asia, 14 April 2008

Japan, ASEAN finish signing free trade pact

Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations said on Monday they had finished signing a deal to tear down trade barriers between the world's second-largest economy and the 10-member bloc. The deal, which is set to come into effect later this year, was formally signed on Monday by Malaysia, the last of the 10 members of the ASEAN bloc to sign off. In a joint statement, Japan and the ASEAN said they looked forward to the early operation of the agreement, saying it would provide "a strong impetus for further invigoration of trade and investment in the region."

Channel News Asia, 14 April 2008

ASEAN countries urged to integrate to compete globally

The business community has been urged to be proactive in advocating ASEAN integration. Ambassador-at-Large Professor Tommy Koh made the call on Monday at a lecture series for business leaders, which was organised by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He said that integration among ASEAN member countries is important for the region to remain competitive. ASEAN countries are reaping the benefits of intra-regional agreements. About 72 percent of goods traded within member countries are either tax-free or are subject to tariffs of below 2 percent.

The Economic Times, 15 April 2008

Singapore sees inflation above 6.5% in H1 2008

Singapore's inflation will remain high in the first half of the year at above 6.5 percent, the country's trade minister said on Tuesday, despite the central bank tightening monetary policy last week to fight rising prices. "Our projection is that inflation will stay fairly high at this current level, above 6.5 percent for the first half of the year. And then we expect it to go down in the second half of the year," Trade Minister Lim Hng Kiang told reporters on the sidelines of a conference.

The Manila Times, 15 April 2008

President wants JPEPA ratified by next week

President Gloria Arroyo urged the Senate to ratify the controversial Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) when Congress resumes its session next week. "We hope the Senate will ratify the JPEPA when Congress convenes next week," Mrs. Arroyo said after outlining the benefits of the treaty in a speech in Calamba in Laguna. Despite criticisms on the treaty, Mrs. Arroyo insisted that "JPEPA is worth it". "We cannot afford not to ratify, because with everyone else but us on board, Japan will bring business to other countries", she said.

Channel News Asia, 15 April 2008

Resurgent Anwar piles pressure on Malaysia PM

Malaysia's struggling leader faced a new and serious challenge Tuesday after opposition chief Anwar

Ibrahim's dramatic claim that he is supported by enough government defectors to seize power. Analysts said turmoil in Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's ruling coalition could hasten an exodus of lawmakers and propel Anwar to power after last month's stunning general election gains by the opposition alliance. Anwar, the former deputy prime minister who was sacked and jailed a decade ago, said at a rally late Monday that he had enough support to form a government but would not act until he had a more comfortable majority.

Channel News Asia, 15 April 2008

Vietnam battles cholera outbreak, over 130 infected

Vietnam, battling a cholera outbreak that has infected over 130 people, this week launches a month-long public hygiene drive while cracking down on dirty food stalls and dredging sewage-choked lakes. The epidemic of the dangerous bacterial disease - the country's third major outbreak since October - has spread in recent weeks from its epicentre in Hanoi to southern Ho Chi Minh City and 16 provinces, officials said. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, at a weekend crisis meeting, ordered state agencies in the communist country to quickly come to grips with the epidemic, which has also seen over 1,300 people hospitalised with acute diarrhoea.

Asia Times, 15 April 2008

Deadly struggle for migrants in Thailand

The death by suffocation last week of 54 migrant workers from Myanmar, while being transported in an enclosed container truck in southern Thailand, was a tragedy waiting to happen say labor rights activists. The victims, whose bodies were found when the cramped truck was opened late Wednesday night, were among a group of 122 people from Myanmar who had slipped into Thailand to secure jobs in the resort areas of Phang-nga and Phuket. The dead included 36 women, 17 men and an eight-year-old girl.

The Hindu, 16 April 2008

Anwar "ready" to form government

Malaysia's opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has declared that he and his allies 'are ready' to form an alternative government. His disqualification for elective office ended at the stroke of midnight on Monday. After that, Mr. Anwar told journalists in Kuala Lumpur that the "timing" of his bid to topple Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's coalition government would be decided through "consensus" among the three opposition parties in the People's Pact. Mr. Anwar said he would strike only after being sure of "a comfortable majority" in the new House of Representatives, where Mr. Abdullah's coalition has 140 seats, against 82 held by the People's Pact.

The Economic Times, 16 April 2008

Singapore to start mobile number portability in June

Mobile phones users in Singapore will be able to switch service providers without changing their numbers from June 13, the Singapore government said on Wednesday. The mobile number portability service will mean subscribers can more easily switch between Singapore's three mobile phone service providers: Singapore Telecommunications, StarHub and MobileOne.

The Australian, 16 April 2008

Alarm at China's influence in Timor

Impoverished East Timor has signed a \$28 million deal with China to buy two advanced patrol boats in a move that will alarm Australia and Indonesia about increasing Chinese influence in the struggling nation. The deal was signed on April 12 by Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, Secretary of State for Defence Julio Pinto and Hao Yantan from the Chinese defence company Poly-Technic. China has been steadily increasing its presence in East Timor. It is involved in oil and gas exploration and was responsible for compiling a geological survey of the half-island state. China has also recently built a massi