

The Financial Times, 1 February 2007

Typhoons take toll on Philippine growth

The Philippines' economic growth fell to its lowest level in more than a year in the final quarter of 2006 as typhoons hit farm harvests, manufacturing activity weakened and mining output slumped. Economists forecast that the economy which grew at an annual rate of 4.8 per cent in the fourth quarter will remain sluggish in the first half of 2007 amid an expected slowdown in the US, the Philippines' biggest export market. But government officials say they expect growth to improve later in the year on the back of Manila's plans to boost infrastructure spending and expected falls in inflation and interest rates.

The Age, 1 February 2007

Outcry forces Thai deportation U-turn

THAILAND is embroiled in controversy over the botched deportation to Laos of 153 ethnic Hmong refugees who the UN had said would be vulnerable to persecution if forced to return. The decision to deport came despite some refugees having provisional approval to resettle in third countries, including Australia. The US, Canada and the Netherlands are also believed to have assessed members of the group for resettlement. A violent stand-off occurred on Tuesday when police tried to force the refugees onto buses in the border town of Nong Khai for the short trip across the Australian-funded Friendship Bridge between Thailand and Laos.

The Nation, 1 February 2007

Mahathir: Talk with exiled South leaders

Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad urged the Thai government to resume dialogue with exiled leaders from the Malay-speaking region in the country's deep South, saying any breakthrough could pave the way for the new generation of militants to follow them. Speaking to Nation Channel's Thep-chai Yong over the weekend, Mahathir said it would be a mistake to sideline the long-standing groups, including the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), and the Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (BIPP).

The Jakarta Post, 1 February 2007

Indonesia, Pakistan to mobilize support for Mideast solution

Indonesia and Pakistan have agreed to mobilize like-minded countries to find solutions to the crises that have bedeviled the Muslim world. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf said in a joint press conference after a meeting Wednesday that unity amongst Muslim countries was key to bringing resolution to conflicts in countries such as Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon and Afghanistan. "We have discussed the issue and concrete actions need to be taken against problems in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Palestine ... and unity amongst like-minded countries is important to resolving this conflict," Yudhoyono said.

Asia Times, 1 February 2007

Indonesian gas potential burns dimly

A series of contractual production-sharing and long-term-supply spats pitting the Indonesian government against multinational energy companies and big natural-gas importers in Japan has recently tarnished Indonesia's reputation as a reliable business partner. It has also undermined the gas sector's overall earning potential - crucially at a time when global prices have surged to near-record highs. Indonesia has some of the largest known pools of natural gas in the world, with total estimated reserves of 187 trillion standard cubic feet (scf), according to the Energy Ministry. Local gas production in 2006 amounted to 8.1 billion scf per day, of which 46% was dedicated to domestic demand for power generation, fertilizer production and other industries, while the rest was exported mainly as liquefied natural gas (LNG).

The Hindu, 2 February 2007

Malaysia backs Musharraf's W. Asia initiative

Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on Thursday endorsed Pakistan President

Pervez Musharraf's efforts to form a caucus of like-minded countries from within the Islamic bloc for devising ways to solve the worsening crises in West Asia. Gen. Musharraf on Wednesday received Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's backing for this initiative. After talks with Gen. Musharraf in Kuala Lumpur, Mr. Abdullah said: "It is my hope as well as his that we will be able to examine further the causes and whatever-it-is that is associated with the Middle East [West Asia]."

Hindustan Times, 2 February 2007

Khmer Rouge murders commemorated as tribunal falters

Nothing in this bare corn field at the foot of a mountain in southwest Cambodia betrayed the violence that occurred here 13 years ago when Khmer Rouge rebels killed and buried three young Westerners. Standing over three symbolic mounds of dirt where the bodies were later exhumed, some 100 villagers and diplomats remembered the murdered trio at a special ceremony, placing burning incense sticks into the earth.

The Manila Times, 2 February 2007

Malaysian energy project in Iran angers US solon

A key US lawmaker called on the administration of President George W. Bush to suspend free-trade talks with Malaysia in protest over its mega energy deal with nuclear renegade Iran. Tom Lantos, the head of the US House of Representatives' top foreign affairs panel, described as "abhorrent" the \$16-billion deal signed in January between the state-owned National Iranian Oil Co. and Malaysia's SKS Group. "That is why today I am sending a letter to our trade representative, Susan Schwab, requesting that all negotiations between the United States and Malaysia on a free trade agreement be suspended until Malaysia renounces this proposed deal," Lantos told a Congressional hearing.

The Nation, 2 February 2007

Deposed PM wishes to help restore peace to deep south

In his interview with the Time magazine's Feb 1 edition, Thaksin said he could help with the government's bid to heal the country. "If you want to have national reconciliation, it's like clapping hands. If you try to clap with one hand, and take another hand far away, is it possible. You have to bring that hand back. I have quit politics, don't worry, but I want to help with reconciliation," Thaksin government's tough policies in dealing with the violence in the south have been blamed for deaths of over 2,000 people, mostly in extra-judicial killings. Since his ousting from the government in September last year, Thaksin has been trotting around the globe to give interviews to foreign media, attacking the military junta and new government.

The Irrawaddy, 2 February 2007

Corruption Rises in Burma's Prisons, Rights Group Says

The Burmese government continues to allow torture and corruption in its prison system, and a plan to put prisons on a self-funding basis will encourage even more abuses, according to a human rights report released on Wednesday. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners [Burma] report titled "The Situation of Prisons in Burma as of 2006" claims the military regime plans to make prisons self-funded by 2009. Large portions of the report are based on interviews with prisoners, prison authorities and other knowledgeable sources.

The Star, 3 February 2007

PM: We will not bow to US and stop energy deal with Iran

Malaysia will not bow to pressure from the United States to stop its US\$16bil (RM56bil) energy deal with Iran. "We are a sovereign nation and we reserve the right to foster ties with any country to protect our interests," said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. He was responding to the US threat to suspend free trade agreement (FTA) talks with Malaysia over the matter. Abdullah said political issues should not be dragged into trade talks.

The Irrawaddy, 3 February 2007

More Rohingya Boat People Arrested in Thai Waters

A boatload of 92 Rohingya men from Burma were arrested on Thursday in southern coastal waters by Thai authorities who said the men were trying to enter Thailand illegally. The group included four boys under 18 years old. They were the latest in a series of Rohingya groups arrested in southern waters in the past three months. They were arrested by the local coastal guard as they approached Ranong, a port city on Thailand's western coast.

The Times of India, 3 February 2007

SBI, ICICI Bank face delay in Singapore

State Bank of India and ICICI Bank, it seems, will have to wait a little longer before the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) clears their qualified full bank (QFB) licence. This is despite Standard and Poor's revising India's rating. A QFB licence allows banks to access the retail market in Singapore. So far, India's 'speculative' rating was considered to be a major hurdle for these banks getting QFB status in Singapore.

The Financial Express, 3 February 2007

Malaysia threatens to pull out from free-trade talks with US

Malaysia's government threatened to halt free-trade talks with the US after House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Lantos demanded a Malaysian company scrap a contract to develop gas fields in Iran. Free-trade agreement "negotiations cannot be held hostage to any political demand, and cannot be conducted under such threats," the ministry of international trade and industry said in an e-mailed statement in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia is "ready to suspend negotiations if the situation warrants it.

The Economic Times, 4 February 2007

Will India go down the E Asia road

The economy has been growing at an impressive 7%-plus for five years in a row. Accompanying the economic boom is a boom in equity markets and in real estate. The current account deficit is widening, but is easily financed because private capital flows from abroad are buoyant. The currency is not appreciating against other currencies because central bank intervention is ensuring that the inflows are managed well. Does all of this sound like a description of India circa 2007. If it does, we should be worried. Because this is actually a description of the economies of countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and South Korea in the year before the Asian financial crisis hit them hard. In each of these economies, in 1996, the year before the crisis struck, there was little to suggest that a disaster was round the corner.

The Star, 5 February 2007

Mahathir criticises Bush, Blair

Former Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohamad accused George W. Bush and Tony Blair of being more evil and bigger murderers than Saddam Hussein and the Sept. 11 attackers. In some of his most provocative swipes at the U.S. and British leaders, Mahathir said Monday that their war in Iraq had caused worse terror than al-Qaida's suicide bombers around the world. "History should remember Blair and Bush as the killers of children, or as the lying prime minister and president," said Mahathir.

The Financial Express, 5 February 2007

Govt to spend \$100 million on linking Mizoram-Myanmar

As part of its efforts to form strategic alliances in the subcontinent, the government is planning to undertake a multimodal transport project from Mizoram to Myanmar. Requiring about \$1.1 billion in investment, the project would see the government spending about \$100 million and would also be liable for all cost over runs. The Myanmar government would pay \$10 million as well as provide free land for the project. Soft loans would be given to the Myanmar government to cover its contribution of \$10 million.

The Economic Times, 5 February 2007

Gail to convert Singapore unit into overseas investment arm

Singapore-based Gail Global is set to become Gail India's overseas investment arm, similar to

ONGC Videsh (OVL), which is the holding company for ONGC's assets abroad. 'We want to turn Gail Global (Singapore) into the company's overseas arm like OVL,' Gail India chairman & managing director UD Choubey told ET. As Gail is considering to route all its foreign investments through its Singapore-based wholly-owned subsidiary, it is also likely that all existing overseas assets would be transferred to Gail Global.

The Manila Times, 6 February 2007

Govt eyes disarming of MNLF guerrillas

Government peace panel chairman Jesus Dureza said on Monday that the weekend "crisis situation" in Sulu strained the relations between government peace panel and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) negotiators. At a news conference, Dureza said the government team would assess the situation and decide on appropriate moves. Among these, he said, could be a call for the MNLF to disarm once the two sides meet in a tripartite session with the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

The Irrawaddy, 6 February 2007

Burma Support's Iran's Right to Peaceful Nuclear Power

Burma's foreign minister, Nyan Win, said that his country supports Iran's right to pursue nuclear energy for peaceful purposes during a meeting with the Iranian Ambassador to Burma Mohsen Pak-Ayeen, according to a report from the Islamic Republic News Agency, Iran's official news outlet. Nyan Win added that all member nations of Asean support the right of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Mohsen Pak-Ayeen said during the meeting that "the Iranian government is duty-bound to support the Iranian nation's inalienable right to access nuclear energy for the country's development."

The Economic Times, 7 February 2007

Singapore questions SEZ freeze

The Singapore government has demanded an explanation from the Indian government for the current freeze on SEZ approvals and notifications. Singapore-based realty major Ascendas has \$1 bn of investments lined up for its two proposed multi-product SEZs in Tamil Nadu, which have now been put on hold. In a letter to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the ministry of external affairs, the Singapore High Commission has expressed its unhappiness about the uncertainty surrounding the future of SEZs in the country.

Hindustan Times, 7 February 2007

India to develop Myanmar port to benefit northeast

The Centre is contemplating a move to aid the development of Myanmar's Sittwe port at a cost of 103 million dollars to give the land-locked northeastern states access to the sea for trade and commerce. This will be done after developing Kaladan river, which connects the northeastern state of Mizoram with the Bay of Bengal, as a waterway, Union Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh has said.

The Star, 7 February 2007

Some consensus at Malaysia-US FTA talks

Malaysia and the US have come to a consensus on several areas but will iron out details for the remaining issues at the ongoing free trade agreement (FTA) talks. According to a source, the parties have come to an understanding on several issues, with indication that the meeting was on track. But the parties have to resolve some other issues that they have not reached an agreement on, he told reporters on Wednesday at the sidelines of the meetings held here, some 30km from Kota Kinabalu.

Hindustan Times, 7 February 2007

Days numbered for Myanmar's NLD: report

Myanmar's state-run media issued a veiled threat on Wednesday to the opposition party of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, suggesting its contacts with Western governments could lead to its demise. The New Light of Myanmar said the National League of Democracy relied too much on Western powers and had too close a connection with the United States and British

embassies in the country.

The Tribune, 7 February 2007

ULFA: India to seek Myanmar help

India is expected to again raise concerns over reports of rebel groups from the North-East operating from Myanmar when Union Secretaries of the two countries meet at Yangon next week. Union Home Secretary V.K. Duggal, who will be leading the Indian delegation to Myanmar beginning February 13, is also expected to seek enhanced cooperation from his counterpart in cracking down on arms and drug trafficking. While security issues such as border management are likely to figure in the 13th round of Home Secretary-level talks, New Delhi will seek a categorical assurance that Myanmar will not allow its territory to be used for activities detrimental to its interests.

The Manila Times, 8 February 2007

Myanmar junta denies suppressing Christians

Authorities here denied a British rights group's report accusing the junta of persecuting minority Christians, saying the country guarantees religious freedom for all. "It is evident that all the religious and the ethnic minority groups in Myanmar have experienced the freedom of worship and the right to express their faiths," the official New Light of Myanmar newspaper said, quoting a statement from the Yangon Young Men's Christian Association.

Asia Times, 8 February 2007

Singapore takes over Pakistani port

Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea in the southwestern Pakistani province of Balochistan has been handed over to a Singaporean firm, which will run it for 40 years. The concession agreement for handing over operating rights of the seaport to the Port of Singapore Authority was signed on Tuesday between the Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) and the concession-holder company (CHC), a subsidiary of PSA International. Under the deal, the first ship and cargo will be handled at Gwadar port next month.

The Jakarta Post, 8 February 2007

New Aceh still in need of Jakarta assistance

Putting decades of armed conflict and the devastating tsunami behind it, Aceh will embark on a new era when the new governor takes office Thursday. Outgoing acting governor Mustafa Abubakar talked to The Jakarta Post's Dwi Atmanta recently about the legacy of his administration and the landmark transfer of power, which he expects to lead the province to prosperity.

The Bangkok post, 8 February 2007

Idea to divert water from Burma

It is being proposed that water be diverted from rivers in Burma to make up for shortages in the northern provinces of Thailand. A meeting of about 200 officials discussed the nationwide water shortage, particularly in the Chao Phraya river basin, at a meeting in Chiang Rai this week. Under the water management project, participants proposed two water diversion systems to redirect water from rivers in Burma into rivers in Thailand.

The Statesman, 8 February 2007

Junta threat to Suu Kyi party

Myanmar's state-run media issued a veiled threat today to the Opposition party of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, suggesting its contacts with Western governments could lead to its demise. The New Light of Myanmar said the National League of Democracy relied too much on Western powers and had too close a connection with the US and British embassies in the country.

The Statesman, 8 February 2007

Face Myanmar to fix militants

WITH the Army crackdown on the United Liberation Front of Asom being stepped up, the government of India has shifted focus to Myanmar (and also Bangladesh). North-east militants are

known to have training camps and hideouts there, especially the jungles of northern Myanmar, from where they mount offensives on Indian soil. India and Myanmar share a 1,640-km porous border through which armed cadres sneak in and out of that country.

The Nation, 9 February 2007

FTA with EU may cut Burma out

A planned free-trade agreement (FTA) between Asean and the European Union hit a snag recently, as the EU might not sign if the agreement includes Burma, says a senior Thai official. Trade Negotiations Department deputy director-general Chana Kanaratanadilok said although the Asean delegates proposed to their EU counterparts that negotiations should be done on a region-to-region basis, the EU might not sign the agreement with some countries, such as Burma.

The Hindu, 9 February 2007

Sworn in Governor

The former rebel leader, Irwandi Yusuf, was inaugurated as the new Governor of Aceh province of Indonesia for the period of 2007 to 2012 on Thursday, national television TVRI reported here. Present at the inauguration were former top leader of the Separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) Malik Mahmud and foreign ambassadors. Mr. Yusuf and Mr. Nazar won the landmark first-direct gubernatorial election in the province on December 11 last by obtaining 38.20 per cent of total votes.

The Australian, 9 February 2007

Malaysia defends Mahathir praise for Iraqi insurgents

MALAYSIA yesterday defended a speech by former premier Mahathir Mohamad in which he congratulated Iraqi insurgents, saying he had the right to express his opinions. Dr Mahathir applauded the insurgents, urging them to ensure the US paid a "high price" for its invasion of Iraq and saying that the flow of body bags would "help Americans to change their minds" about the conflict. "I think (Dr Mahathir) has taken that approach and I would not say that the Government supports nor objects to it," Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said, adding that Dr Mahathir was free to express his views as a "citizen of Malaysia".

Asia Times, 9 February 2007

Thaksin's loss, US's gain

Thailand's unfolding political drama pitting exiled former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra against the military-run Council for National Security (CNS) that ousted him has cast the United States in an awkward but familiar position, where realpolitik imperatives now, as historically, have trumped Washington's stated public position of non-support to governments that seize power through anti-democratic means.

The Mizzima News, 9 February 2007

India's Home Secretary to take up ULFA issue with Burma

India's Home Secretary V K Duggal will be going on a five day visit to Burma beginning February 13, according to sources in the Home Ministry. During his trip, issues like the United Liberation Front of Asom, the Indian insurgents fighting against the Central government from bases in Burmese territory, drug trafficking and effective border management are high on the agenda. The Union Home Secretary will conclude his visit on February 17. Ahead of his visit, the Union Home Secretary chaired a meeting of senior Home Ministry officials to review the situation along the India-Burma border.

The Statesman, 10 February 2007

FTA with Asean soon: Pranab Mukherjee

The external affairs minister, Mr Pranab Mukherjee, has said India will soon conclude a free trade agreement with Asean. "Following the agreement reached at the Cebu (Asean-India) summit, we hope to soon conclude negotiations on a bilateral FTA with Asean," said Mr Mukherjee at an international conference on South-East Asia. India and the 10-member Association of South-East

Asian Nations announced at a regional summit in Cebu, the Philippines, last month that they would wrap up negotiations on an FTA by July.

The Financial Express, 10 February 2007

US, Malaysia trade talks falter near final hurdle

The United States and Malaysia failed on Friday to strike a free-trade deal despite five rounds of talks, and both sides held little hope of resolving differences before an end-March deadline. Washington's lead trade negotiator for Southeast Asia, Barbara Weisel, told reporters after a week of negotiations in Malaysia that a sixth round of talks had not been scheduled.

The Jakarta Post, 10 February 2007

Oil dumping in Malacca threatens environment

The head of a waste management group says the repeated dumping of oil in the waters near the Riau Islands is causing serious environmental damage. Tankers in the Malacca Strait are believed to dispose of the oil when cleaning their tanks. The chairman of the Association of Batam Toxic and Hazardous Waste Management Companies (Aspel B3), Kurniawan, told the Jakarta Post that waste from illegal tank cleaning activities in the waters between Indonesia and Singapore ended up polluting the province almost every year.

The Mizzima News, 10 February 2007

UN to grant

The United Nations will grant over US\$ 300,000 to assist humanitarian programmes in Burma, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said. The funds, part of the UN Central Emergency Response Fund's allocation of US\$ 85 million to "under funded emergencies" in 15 countries, will be given to UNAIDS programmes in Burma, the OCHA said on Wednesday. Margareta Wahlström, acting UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, while announcing the funding in New York on Wednesday acknowledged that the money is unlikely to meet the need of the countries.

The Manila Times, 10 February 2007

Call to move Indonesia's capital after deadly floods

A leading political party is calling for the Indonesian capital to be relocated following severe floods which have displaced hundreds of thousands of people and claimed 50 lives. The floods which have submerged much of Jakarta for the past week have triggered a torrent of demands and pressure on the government to ensure it never happens again. The National Awakening Party, the third largest in parliament, said the floods had shown how seriously government activities could be disrupted.

The Irrawaddy, 10 February 2007

US Gives Vietnam \$400,000 for Agent Orange Cleanup

The US government will give Vietnam US \$400,000 to plan a cleanup at a former American military base contaminated by the defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, the US ambassador said Friday. The grant marks an important symbolic step forward toward resolving an issue that has long divided the two former foes, whose relationship has warmed steadily in recent years. The money will help pay for a \$1 million study of ways to remove the highly toxic chemical dioxin from soil at a former US base at Danang, one of three Agent Orange hotspots recognized by the US government. The Vietnamese government and a nonprofit agency will fund the rest of the study.

The Times of India, 11 February 2007

India to ask Myanmar for ULFA crackdown

A fresh demand for a Bhutan Army-type operation against ULFA and other northeastern insurgent groups will be made to Myanmar during the upcoming visit of Union Home Secretary V K Duggal to Yangon. Issues like drug trafficking and effective border management will also figure high on the agenda during Duggal's visit from February 13 to 17, Home Ministry sources said.

The International Herald Tribune, 11 February 2007

Myanmar announces peace agreement with splinter group of Karen rebels

Myanmar announced a peace deal with a splinter group of ethnic Karen rebels on Sunday, though the pact is unlikely to end the fighting that rights groups say has forced thousands of people to flee their villages."The (KNU brigade) led by Brig. Gen. Htein Maung held a peace ceremony at Htokawhto village in Kawkareik Kawkareik township," an official from the information ministry said.

The Age, 12 February 2007

Former Thai leader seeks home in Sydney

Thailand's exiled former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra has plans to move to Sydney's prosperous eastern suburbs. The billionaire was deposed five months ago in a bloodless coup and has since engaged a Sydney property developer to find him a home.

The Star, 12 February 2007

Pak