

The Hindu, 1 February 2008

Verdict on Hindraf plea set for February 26

The High Court in Kuala Lumpur has set February 26 for delivering the judgment on a batch of habeas corpus petitions for the release of five detained leaders of the Hindu Rights Action Force. The five, P. Uthayakumar, V. Ganapati Rao, M. Manoharan, R. Kengadharan, and T. Vasanthakumar were detained on December 13 last year for a period of two years under Malaysia's Internal Security Act (ISA). They are being held without charges and trial as permissible under the ISA on grounds of national security "concerns". These five Hindraf leaders, and the group's chairman P. Waytha Moorthy, now camping in London, had spearheaded a mass protest rally in Kuala Lumpur on November 25 last year.

The Economic Times, 1 February 2008

Singapore completes free trade talks with Arab states

Trade-dependent Singapore has completed negotiations of a free trade pact with the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council, the government said on Thursday. The trade agreement, which covers areas such as financial services and e-commerce, will allow Singapore and the six Arab states to have tax-free access into each others' markets, Singapore's Trade Ministry said in a statement. It said officials will begin to pore over the legal details of the agreement.

The Times of India, 1 February 2008

India agrees to work with UN on Myanmar

India doesn't want sanctions in Myanmar. But keeping bilateral relations intact, the government has agreed to work on the Myanmar military regime for national reconciliation and dialogue. On his most recent visit to India, Ibrahim Gambari, UN secretary general's special envoy on Myanmar, requested the government to take on additional responsibilities on Myanmar. After meeting PM Manmohan Singh, foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee and foreign secretary Shiv Shankar Menon, Gambari said, "I am very encouraged." Clearly, it's not enough any more to offer verbal support to the UN's work.

The Times of India, 1 February 2008

UN envoy on Myanmar ends visit to India

India said Thursday it was "worried" Myanmar was not moving fast enough on democratic reforms, although New Delhi remained opposed to imposing sanctions on the regime to speed up the process. A senior foreign ministry official made the comment as United Nations envoy on Myanmar Ibrahim Gambari ended a three-day visit to New Delhi for talks with Indian leaders on its military-run neighbour. "What worries us is that (Myanmar's) transition to democracy has not made rapid progress. It has not moved as fast as we would want," said the official who did not wish to be identified.

Bangkok Post, 1 February 2008

PPP hints at early return for Thaksin

The People Power party's deputy secretary-general, Noppadon Pattama, has hinted at the possibility of Mr Thaksin Shinawatra returning before the planned November date. Elaborating on rumours that the ousted premier is timing his return home after the PPP leader Mr Samak Sundaravej is sworn in as the new prime minister, Mr Noppadon said Mr Thaksin "may not be back immediately after the new prime minister is officially sworn in but most probably before November". Mr Noppadon, tipped to become the new foreign minister in the Samak administration, said his job would have initially entailed sorting out Thailand's extradition treaty with the UK, but this may no longer be the case.

The Manila Times, 1 February 2008

US woes boon to BPO, realty

The US economic slowdown will be a boon to the Philippine business process outsourcing (BPO) and property industries since lower profitability of American companies would drive them to off shore and outsource this year, a real-estate consulting firm said. In a briefing, CB Richard Ellis

(CBRE) Philippines Inc. said emerging markets, especially in Southeast Asia, would experience a rush of funds seeking higher yields as the volatility of the dollar will push investors to consider alternatives like investment-grade real estate. Moreover, belt-tightening of US companies would force them to outsource and offshore back-office jobs this year. Growth for the call center or voice segment of the BPO industry would be smaller this year but would be compensated by the rise in the back-office or nonvoice component, Joey Radovan, CBRE vice-chairman, said.

The Economic Times, 2 February 2008

First budget flights take off for KL-Singapore

Budget airlines began flying the Singapore-Kuala Lumpur route Friday, ending 30 years of dominance by the national carriers and, observers say, opening the way for wider liberalisation of the region's air corridors. Malaysia-based AirAsia, which pioneered regional low-cost travel more than six years ago, was the first to make the 55-minute journey, with a morning departure from Kuala Lumpur (KL).

The Jakarta Post, 2 February 2008

Govt to require airlines to buy, rather than lease, planes

With only a few domestic airlines possessing ownership of aircraft, the Transportation Ministry is drafting a revision to a ministerial decree on airline services, requiring domestic airlines to own at least two planes, an official said Friday. Most airlines in the country lease aircraft. "Initially the new regulation will apply only to new companies applying for permits, but after a year, it will also apply to all domestic airline companies," said Hemi Pamuraharjo, the domestic flights section-head at the Ministry. The draft is currently under review by a ministry legal team and is expected to be in force by March.

Bangkok Post, 2 February 2008

PM loses army reshuffle powers

A new Defence Ministry law that comes into force today will strip the prime minister and the defence minister of their power to make unilateral decisions in military reshuffles. The law was passed by the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) on Dec 20 and comes into effect today after being published in the Royal Gazette yesterday. The new law, regulating the Defence Ministry's administration, requires a military reshuffle concerning high-ranking officers to be vetted by a committee, whose members include all chiefs of the armed forces, according to a member of the NLA which endorsed the law.

International Herald Tribune, 2 February 2008

Earnings at Singapore Airlines beat expectations

Singapore Airlines beat market expectations Friday by reporting a 51 percent rise in quarterly operating profit, lifted by strong demand in global travel and higher ticket prices. But the airline also warned of an uncertain outlook because of turmoil in financial markets. Singapore Airlines took delivery of the first of 19 Airbus A380 superjumbo jets in October after a two-year delay. The airline has been able to charge ticket premiums of up to 20 percent on the daily Singapore-Sydney route and will start a daily flight to London from the middle of March after receiving its third A380. But analysts warn that premium business travel will be cut sharply this year because of chaos in world financial markets and a possible U.S. recession.

The Times of India, 2 February 2008

Malaysian court to try 66 ethnic Indians for holding illegal rally

A total of 66 ethnic Indians will be tried by a Malaysian court on charges of participating in an illegal rally organised by a Hindu rights group against the alleged marginalisation of the community and causing mischief. The 66 include the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) Supreme Council member N Gobalakrishnan. All have been charged with being involved in unlawful assembly in front of the Sri Subramaniam Temple in Batu Caves on November 25 last year, which was organised by the non-governmental Hindu Rights Action Forum (Hindraf).

The Statesman, 3 February 2008

Badawi thinks Ethnic Indians may not vote

Ethnic Indians complaining of racial inequality may vote against the ruling party in the general elections, according to Malaysian Premier Mr Abdullah Badawi. His comments came in the backdrop of protests by the community, including a huge rally of over 20,000 people in November last year declared illegal by the government, against its alleged marginalisation organised by the non-governmental Hindu Rights Action Forum (Hindraf). The government has denied the allegations. "I have given instructions that whatever grouses they (the ethnic Indians) have should be attended to. We take these matters seriously and I have even made time to listen to them," Mr Abdullah told the local Star daily in an interview published today.

Bangkok Times, 3 February 2008

Samak hits out at new defence law

Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej yesterday hit out at a new law which sharply curtailed the powers of the government leader and defence minister over reshuffling positions of military generals in the armed forces. He described the law, which took effect yesterday, as a move to "slam the door in my face", as he is set to take the helm as both prime minister and defence minister.

The Hindu, 4 February 2008

Temple demolition: Malaysia apologises

Malaysia on Sunday apologised for the demolition of a Hindu temple on the eve of Deepavali last year. This was widely believed to have been a major factor that sparked the current unrest among ethnic Indians. Describing the demolition of the temple in Klang last November as "wrong" Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak said, "We are sorry for that". Addressing the press after inaugurating a special convention of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) in Kuala Lumpur, Mr. Najib said such an event should not be repeated. The government would ensure orderly practices in relocating temples that might have been built without proper authorisation.

The Hindu, 4 February 2008

Khmer Rouge leader to appear in court

The former Khmer Rouge leader, Nuon Chea, will appeal against his detention on war crimes charges when he makes his first appearance before Cambodia's U.N.-backed genocide tribunal on Monday, his lawyer said. Nuon Chea, a Khmer Rouge ideologist and a top leader of the murderous movement, is scheduled to appear before the tribunal's pre-trial chamber. The tribunal has detained Nuon Chea since last year on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity for his alleged role in the Khmer Rouge atrocities that led to the deaths of some 1.7 million people when the communist movement held power in Cambodia in 1975-79. The 81-year-old is one of five former Khmer Rouge leaders pending trial, which is expected to start later this year.

The Economic Times, 4 February 2008

Singapore PM sees inflation at 5%

Singapore's inflation rate could exceed five percent this year, the prime minister was quoted as saying on Monday. "Last year, inflation was about two percent. This year, it could be five per cent, maybe even more," The Business Times quoted Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as telling a Lunar New Year gathering. Lee was speaking in the lead-up to the national budget, which is to be delivered on February 15. The newspaper quoted him as saying rising prices are a global phenomenon caused by factors including increased demand, disease and adverse weather.

The Economic Times, 4 February 2008

Malaysia's UBG to buy stakes in builders

Malaysia's UBG Bhd agreed to buy stakes in two local builders for 457 million ringgit (\$141.3 million) and plans to buy up the remaining shares. UBG, formerly known as Utama Banking Group, said it would buy 49.2% of Putrajaya Perdana Bhd and 37.6% of Loh & Loh Corp Bhd. UBG also plans to buy the remaining shares in Putrajaya Perdana and Loh & Loh at 4.85 ringgit each. Shares of Putrajaya Perdana last traded at 4.24 ringgit and Loh & Loh at 4.34 ringgit. UBG is controlled by

the family of the chief minister of eastern Sarawak state. It had cash of 2.2 billion ringgit as at end-September 2007.

The Times of India, 4 February 2008

Bangladesh mulls gas import from Myanmar

Bangladesh's interim government is planning to import gas from Myanmar to meet its immediate demands, a step which is also likely to help it achieve its target to overcome the gas deficit by 2009. "We are thinking of buying gas from Myanmar as it is the only country around us with gas surplus," Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser on Energy and Mineral resources ministry M Tamim said on Sunday. He said the government has already received a proposal from Myanmar suggesting that it would export gas to Bangladesh if a portion of the fertiliser produced in Chittagong is shared with them.

The Hindu, 5 February 2008

ECEL ties up with Singapore company

Escorts Construction Equipment Ltd. (ECEL) on Monday announced a tie-up with Singapore Technology Kinetics (STK), a part of the Singapore Government's investment arm, Temasek, to market the LeeBoy brand of road construction equipment in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. ECEL would sell motor graders, hydrostatic pavers and pothole patchers from STK's range and would in the process complement its existing product portfolio.

The Economic Times, 5 February 2008

SingTel net profit down 4.2 per cent in Q3

Singapore Telecommunications, Southeast Asia's largest telecoms firm, on Tuesday said its third-quarter net profit fell 4.2 per cent compared with a year earlier when it booked exceptional gains. Net profit for the quarter ended December 31 totalled 952 million Singapore dollars (673 million US) compared with 994 million dollars a year earlier, the company said. Excluding exceptional items, underlying net profit grew 21.7 per cent to 931 million dollars, it said.

The Jakarta Post, 5 February 2008

China lifts RI seafood ban

China has lifted a six-month-old embargo on Indonesia's seafood products after officials from both countries held a series of negotiations. "We received information from our embassy in Beijing that the Chinese government has lifted the ban on all our seafood imports since Monday," Fisheries and Maritime Affairs Ministry spokesman Saut P. Hutagalung told The Jakarta Post on Monday. The Chinese government, according to Saut, agreed to revoke the ban after the country's team of experts found late last month that Indonesia had met its standards.

The Manila Times, 5 February 2008

DBS sees peso surging further this year

Development Bank of Singapore (DBS) Group Research projects the peso would surge further until the end of the year and the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas would maintain its current benchmark interest rates. DBS in its latest market research said the local currency could strengthen up to P38 against the greenback this year from the prevailing P40.3 exchange rate. It said the peso is likely to average at 41 in the first three months of the year before picking up at 38 to a dollar in April to December period. At the Philippine Dealing System, the peso closed at 40.68 against the US dollar Monday from the previous finish of 40.50. Total volume traded reached \$395.5 million.

The Hindu, 6 February 2008

India, Malaysia firm up army-related dialogue

India and Malaysia on Monday diversified their defence cooperation by firming up modalities for enhanced interaction between their armies. The issues to be covered under the new mechanism of army-to-army staff talks, being launched this year, range from counter-terrorism and border management to peace-keeping operations and disaster management. These and other aspects of military cooperation were discussed by Chief of Army Staff Deepak Kapoor and his Malaysian

counterpart Mohammed Ismail in Kuala Lumpur on Monday. Lieutenant General Kapoor also called on Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Najib Tun Razak. Official sources said the army-to-army dialogue, sequel to a similar mechanism that was launched last year between the navies of Malaysia and India, would be followed by a framework for closer cooperation between their air forces later this year.

The Economic Times, 6 February 2008

India, Malaysia free-trade deal set for March 2009

Malaysia and India have agreed to try to finalise a free-trade agreement by March 2009, Indian officials said Wednesday after the first round of talks. The two-day negotiations in the Malaysian capital established a roadmap for the deal which is aimed at "forging a long-term, comprehensive and dynamic economic partnership between the two countries", they said. "Both sides will endeavour to complete the negotiations by March 2009," the Indian High Commission (embassy) said in a statement.

The Economic Times, 6 February 2008

Exxon still hopeful for deal on Indonesia's Natuna gas field

ExxonMobil Corp was hopeful that it could still reach an agreement with Indonesia over its contract to manage a major gas field despite the government saying talks had stopped, a spokeswoman said Wednesday. The head of the government's negotiating team, Kardaya Warnika, said on Monday that talks over the Natuna-D block had been halted with the US oil giant and he had informed the government that no agreement could be reached. Indonesia terminated a production sharing contract with Exxon for the field off the west coast of Borneo in 2006 claiming the company had failed to push ahead with its development, in a move that alarmed foreign investors.

Asia Times, 6 February 2008

Malaysia's Hindus show political muscle

A new political force - right wing Hindu activism - has strongly emerged in multi-ethnic Malaysia, adding volatility in an election year to the country's already religiously charged political arena dominated by the majority Malay Muslims. Across the country, ethnic Indians, who make up about 8% of the country's 26 million people, are mobilizing to protest against alleged socio-economic neglect and discrimination in employment, education and business at the hands of the ethnic Malay majority. It represents an increasingly vocal ethnic awakening with which opposition political parties are angling to join forces. Last November 25, ethnic Indians took to the streets en masse to protest against alleged discrimination, a protest that resulted in a government crackdown and the indefinite detention of five the Hindu Rights Action Force's, or Hindraf's, top leaders.

The Hindu, 7 February 2008

Child to step up Hindraf campaign

The Hindu Rights Action Force on Wednesday appealed to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia to help uphold the practice of peaceful protest. Hindraf fielded a five-year-old child, Vaishnavi Waytha Moorthy, to submit her hand-written letter to the Commission and ask its Chairman Abu Talib to join her in a peaceful march to Parliament on February 16. The march will demand "justice" for the ethnic Indian minority. The same child, daughter of Hindraf Chairman Waytha Moorthy, was fielded by Hindraf on January 22 to petition Mr. Abdullah. On that day, her hand-written letter, requesting the Prime Minister to receive a bouquet of roses from her and other children on February 16, was delivered to his Private Secretary.

The Times of India, 7 February 2008

Foreign secretary on Myanmar visit

India is taking its Myanmar responsibilities seriously. Days after Ibrahim Gambari, UN's special envoy, asked India to lean on Myanmar's ruling junta, foreign secretary Shiv Shankar Menon is in Myanmar this week for crucial talks with the government. India is very clear that it doesn't want UN sanctions in Myanmar. In a way, the UN too may be veering round to that position, though it continues to hold the threat of sanctions. As a matter of fact, diplomatic sources said Myanmar

exiles are also beginning to oppose the sanctions demand that has also been endorsed by Aung San Suu Kyi. For instance, it has been seen that the recent ban on jewellery exports by the EU has not hit the government, but the small jewellery traders, a point of view India has held for some time.

The Statesman, 7 February 2008

Three Myanmar fishermen detained

Three fishermen from Myanmar were detained after being rescued from the deep sea in Gopalpur-on-sea near here, police said today. We have intimated to the director of intelligence about the rescue of the Myanmar fishermen and further course of action will be taken in consultation with the concerned authorities, Superintendent of Police Nitinjeet Singh said. The three were rescued from the deep sea by the rescue team of police with the help of local fishermen, he said adding the Myanmar fishermen were on a bamboo raft and sought help by waving their hands. The trio, according to police, had set into the sea for fishing towards the end of November last year from their own country, but failed to return to their homeland due to cyclonic weather.

Asia Times, 7 February 2008

UN as India, Myanmar matchmaker

India has quietly undertaken a charm offensive with Myanmar's ruling junta, just months after New Delhi had publicly joined hands with Western governments to chastise the military regime for cracking down brutally against protesting monks and pro-democracy agitators in the old capital of Yangon. Despite widespread criticism of its diplomatic and commercial gambit, India's conciliatory approach now has the backing of the United Nations, which is leading so far unsuccessful mediation efforts between the junta and the pro-democracy opposition led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

The Jakarta Post, 7 February 2008

House divided over ASEAN Charter

Members of the House of Representatives are entering a tough battle over whether to ratify the newly signed ASEAN Charter, with some lawmakers expressing support for the charter a day after others questioned its benefits for Indonesia. Lawmaker Marzuki Darusman, who represents Golkar, said his party would ratify the charter as it believed ASEAN needed legally binding rules to face new challenges. "Despite its shortcomings, the charter has given ASEAN a legal entity, and legal basis for interactions among its members. Golkar knows ASEAN, and has no problems ratifying (the charter)," he told The Jakarta Post on Tuesday.

The Manila Times, 7 February 2008

Stock market falls in Asia-wide rout

share prices closed sharply lower on Wednesday, after Wall Street slumped overnight on continued fears the US economy has slipped into recession, dealers said. Negative leads at home also weighed on sentiment, with Manila Electric Co (Meralco) taking a hit from President Arroyo's announcement Tuesday that the government would move to bring down electricity costs. The composite index fell 54.72 points to close at 3,228.84, its weakest finish in almost a week. The broader all-share index dropped 26.35 points to 1,970.47.

The Economic Times, 8 February 2008

Nifty futures hit