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Briefing

Indonesia To Investigate Corruption Agency Case

JAKARTA - Indonesia's president on Monday ordered an investigation into an alleged plot against the country's anti-corruption agency, considered a key weapon in the fight against graft and efforts to attract investment. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was re-elected in July to a second, five-year term partly on the back of the agency's success in fighting endemic graft and his promises to continue to clean up one of the most corrupt countries in the world. The success of the Corruption Eradication Commission, or KPK, has helped revive investor interest in Southeast Asia's biggest economy. But the agency, which has helped put scores of officials in prison, has made many enemies among the elite in business and politics, and has come under threat after police detained two senior officials widely thought to have been framed. Yudhoyono will issue a presidential decree to set up the independent team that will investigate the detention of the two KPK officials, Security and Political Affairs Minister Djoko Suyanto said. (Reuters)



Firemen and local officials stand beside charred bodies after a fire broke out and killed 14 people in Bacolod City, southern Philippines, yesterday. Investigators are still probing the cause of the fire that burned some 50 houses.

Typhoon Halts Coffee Drying, Death Toll Up

REUTERS

HANOI - Typhoon Mirinae brought strong wind to Vietnam's central coast and heavy rain to the nearby coffee region yesterday, disrupting early harvesting, after killing 16 people and destroying thousands of houses in the Philippines.

The typhoon uprooted trees as it made landfall on the coastal provinces of Binh Dinh and Phu Yen, state-run Vietnam Television reported. The government said nearly 8,000 people had been evacuated in the central region before the typhoon arrived.

Rain fell in Daklak and Lam Dong yesterday morning, Vietnam's largest coffee-growing provinces, disrupting farmers' drying of beans, residents said.

The harvesting peaks from late this month.

"Strong wind and heavy rain struck us two hours ago," said a resident in Dalat city, the capital of Lam Dong.

A resident in neighbouring Daklak said rain had been falling there since early yesterday.

"If it rains like this for days, farmers won't be able to go picking cherries," she said.

Persistent rain would prevent farmers from drying their beans outdoors in the sun, a coffee trader said.

"The fear is that if rain lasts for several days, growers will have to dry beans over their wood-fired ovens, and that will make the beans dark," the trader said.

Dark beans are counted as a defect in exportable beans.

The national weather bureau forecast rain in the next 24 hours in the southern part of the Central Highlands coffee belt as the typhoon weakens to a tropical low pressure system and moves west-southwest toward Cambodia.

Vietnam is the world's second-largest coffee producer after Brazil.

Wide areas south of Manila on the main island of Luzon are still without electricity and most roads were either buried by landslides or submerged by floods, said Lieutenant-Colonel Ernesto Torres, spokesman for the disaster agency.

He said most of the people who died had drowned in flash floods.

Burma's Neighbors Advance Pipeline Project

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

HSPAW, Burma - China and its neighbors are moving ahead on a multibillion-dollar oil-and-gas pipeline project that promises to greatly enhance the financial strength of Burma's military regime and boost its political clout in Asia.

That promise comes as the US is seeking new ways to weaken Burma's regime, which has used force and imprisonment to subdue political opposition and ethnic separatists over the years, and which some analysts fear could someday pose a threat to other countries as it builds up its military. Past strategies, including the use of economic sanctions to hobble Burma's junta, have largely failed.

Many details of the project remain a mystery. Burma's highly secretive military government has disclosed little, and the main foreign companies involved, including China National Petroleum Corp

and Daewoo International Corp of South Korea, have said little in recent months aside from some general outlines and cost estimates of their plans.

But activity is ramping up along the proposed route, residents say. In September, a crew of two-dozen Chinese engineers showed up to survey the path through this once-quiet mountain town, which is becoming a major crossroads for trade with China, a few hours' drive away.

"It's very hard work, in the mountains," said one of the workers, as he ate fried eggs and papaya one morning in a local guesthouse. The man, who didn't give his name, said he worked for an arm of CNPC.

When completed, the pipeline will help unlock large untapped deposits of natural gas off Burma's coast and carry it hundreds of kilometers to southern China, expanding Burma's role as one of Asia's

important energy exporters and enhancing its influence over other countries that rely on its supplies.

As a new multibillion-dollar pipeline to China gets under way, the quiet mountain town of Hsipaw may never be the same again.

The project also is expected to include a port that can take deliveries of oil from the Middle East and Africa before transferring them to China. That will give China a new route for oil that bypasses the congested Strait of Malacca near Singapore, which handles a large portion of China's imported crude today.

All this should improve China's energy security while generating about \$1 billion or more in annual revenue for Burma's government over 30 years, according to estimates by advocacy groups tracking the project, including the Shwe Gas Movement, based in Thailand. It is an annual payday equivalent to

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REGIONAL

In Aceh, Stranded Ships a Reminder of the 2004 Tsunami

By JOHN GLIONNA
LOS ANGELES TIMES

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia - They are the ships that fell from the sky; two immovable objects, their very presence defying reason.

Residents call them acts of God. Most cannot fathom that the two ocean vessels were transported kilometers inland by floodwaters of the 2004 tsunami that ravaged this small city on Sumatra's northern tip.

Kilometers apart, both have been left intact as memorials to the 170,000 residents of Aceh province who either died or disappeared in the disaster.

Five years after the waters rose to biblical heights, the city continues to rebuild, constructing schools, clinics, roads and villages in coastal areas that had been wiped clean by the invading ocean.

"Acehnese people have moved on with their lives. Most of them have returned to their homes," said Yusriadi, a tourism office spokesman who goes by one name. "Aceh is back to normal."

Not for everyone. Some say Banda Aceh is forever changed, harboring a newfound respect for the natural forces that surround it. Dotted the city are boats of all shapes and sizes that rode the rush of water far from their ocean habitat.

None elicit more amazement than the two behemoths.

One is revered as "Noah's Ark," a 30-meter wooden boat that crashed on top of a house, provid-

ing a refuge for 59 terrified people who say they would have died without its shelter.

The other is stranger still—a colossal vessel weighing 2,360 tons that plopped down 3.2 km inland, like Dorothy's Kansas farmhouse crash-landing in Oz.

It's also a graveyard: Neighbors say a dozen bodies from the tsunami may still languish beneath the ship.

One tourist from Jakarta, the Indonesian capital, snapped photographs of the iron vessel, called the Apung, which he said was a warning that man cannot always undo what God and nature have accomplished.

"Who among us could ever move this big ship?" said Sugiono, who also goes by one name. "God can bring it here from the sea, but we just don't have the ability to bring it back."

The tsunami cut a swath around the Indian Ocean, devastating coastal towns and villages in Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

Triggered by a massive deep-sea earthquake 129 km off the coast of Banda Aceh, the wall of water hit at 8 am on Dec 26, 2004, leaving death and wreckage in its wake.

One survivor who runs a market in the shadow of the larger ship lost his 5-year-old daughter in the panic.

Bustamam, 45, was at home with family when the earthquake hit. Within moments, he heard the cries from neighbors.

"The water is coming! The water

is coming!" they shouted.

"We were all running in fear when the first wave came," he recalled. "I was holding my 5-year-old as tightly as I could. But my head was hit by a piece of wood.

"I don't remember what happened next. But when I came to my senses, my little girl was gone."

His wife, Ani Maulani, said she and their other two children were swept to the roof of a house 91 meters away.

When the tsunami subsided, she took a breath to consider her new surroundings. And there it was, towering 18 meters above the poor, low-lying neighborhood.

"At first, I thought it was some big house," she recalled while sitting in her market, resting her bare feet on a case of bottled water. "I didn't think it was a ship. I thought, 'How could it be?'"

The Apung, a power-generating ship owned by the local electrical company, had crashed down atop two houses, killing the inhabitants.

Now it's one of Banda Aceh's biggest tourist attractions. Passing souvenir shops, visitors climb a series of metal gangplanks to the top of the craft, covered with red-and-white Indonesian flags and advertisements for shampoo and cigarettes.

One cloudy afternoon, Bustamam boarded the ship. Standing by a blue air duct dotted with graffiti, he pointed to the sea.

"Over there," he said of the boat. "That's where it came from."

His wife said she has no inten-

tion of ever boarding the monster. There are just too many memories.

"I know it will give me a heart attack and make me think of my lost daughter," she said. "I'm already sad enough."

Several kilometers away, in another tsunami-stricken neighborhood, officials left the so-called Noah's Ark ship in its new landlocked mooring out of a sense of reverence.

The wooden boat now resembles a discarded children's toy, cocked at an angle atop a forlorn house.

On a recent morning, workers scraped and painted the ship's exterior, a refurbishment project leading up to the upcoming fifth anniversary ceremony.

Next door, sitting on a porch cradling her grandson, Basyariah Nurdin recalled the day the boat dropped down on Banda Aceh. She and her neighbors were running from the flood, taking shelter on the second floor of a house. But soon the waters rose to their necks, she said.

Suddenly, they heard a sound "like thunder." Moments later, fearing they were about to drown, they broke through the ceiling in an effort to reach the safety of the roof.

Instead of finding daylight, they found a boat.

"We stayed there for seven hours, until the waters went down," Nurdin said. "It really was Noah's Ark. I don't think we would be here today if it weren't for that boat."

Pipeline...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

roughly a third of the country's existing foreign-exchange reserves.

The project is an important part of China's wider strategy to diversify energy sources and reduce its reliance on supplies that could be blocked easily by foreign powers or pirates.

Chinese media reported this year that full-scale construction of the Burma pipeline would begin in September, but an official at a pipeline division of CNPC said work had been delayed by ethnic tensions along the pipeline route. An official at Daewoo said work on the gas portion should begin by year's end.

Daewoo has said the overall investment, which includes developing the offshore gas with other partners, including Burma Oil & Gas Enterprise, Korea Gas Corp., Oil & Natural Gas Corp. of India

and GAIL (India) Ltd., will cost at least \$3 billion. Other partners have put the total at nearly double that amount.

The project will likely make it harder for U.S. officials to achieve their goal of weakening the regime. The U.S. and Europe imposed tough sanctions on Burma after its ruling junta ignored a 1990 national election won by supporters of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who remains under house arrest.

Many analysts argue sanctions have only pushed Burma, formerly known as Burma, deeper into the arms of Asian countries, such as China and North Korea, that still do business with the regime. In September, the U.S. government decided it would step up dialogue with Burma military officials to rebuild U.S. influence there, though it says sanctions will remain in place for now.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and a deputy are expected to travel to Burma

Tuesday for a two-day visit, as part of the new initiative.

The pipeline project isn't without risks, especially for China. The route traverses border regions, including areas near Hsipaw, rife with ethnic tensions. Many residents in the area say they detest China's growing influence. In August, Burma military forces clashed with local rebels near the pipeline route, killing more than 30 and sending 30,000 residents fleeing into China, resulting in a rare public rebuke of Burma leaders from China.

Burma experts say further violence is possible, if not likely, in advance of a national election scheduled for next year — the first such vote since 1990.

The project also has attracted the ire of human-rights groups that say any project built in Burma will lack sufficient environmental and social safeguards. Daewoo and CNPC declined to comment on those concerns.

The advocates point to the other major pipeline project in Burma — the Yadana project developed by Total SA, Unocal Corp. and others in the 1990s — that carries gas to neighboring Thailand for its power grid, even as much of Burma suffers from daily power outages.

International advocacy groups alleged a host of human-rights abuses with the project, including forced labor and land confiscations. In September, a Washington-based group called EarthRights International said Burma's military had siphoned off \$4.8 billion in revenue from the project, storing much in foreign banks.

An official at Burma's public-relations department declined to comment and referred questions to another ministry whose staff wasn't available to respond. Total and Chevron Corp., which later bought Unocal, have said they weren't connected to any abuses and that their investments are benefiting local residents.

INTERNATIONAL

Oil and Gas Price Increases Meet Opposition in Philippines

BY CARLOS CONDE
THE NEW YORK TIMES

MANILA - When the three largest oil companies in the Philippines increased the pump prices of diesel, gasoline and kerosene on Oct 20, they set off more than the usual grumbling from consumers and transport groups. With millions of Filipinos still reeling from the effects of successive typhoons, the corporations were criticized as greedy, insensitive, callous and predatory.

The companies—Royal Dutch Shell, Petron and Chevron (known in the Philippines under the brand Caltex)—increased the per-liter prices of diesel by about \$0.04, an increase of about 6.7 percent. Gasoline and kerosene prices each went up about \$0.03. According to the Ibon Foundation, an independent economic research group, the increases were the biggest of the year. The companies insist the increases reflect world oil prices; crude has risen from as low as \$32.40 in December to about \$79 at the end of October.

Changes in the price of fuel have been a touchy subject since 1998, when the government passed the Oil Deregulation Law. In addition to taking away government control of pricing and opening the industry to foreign investment, the law removed longstanding government subsidies of oil products. Although the deregulation has been unpopular with voters, the government has not back-

tracked—until now.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo issued Executive Order 839 at the end of October, demanding that the oil companies reduce their prices on the main island, Luzon, or face penalties.

Many consumers praised the decision and her “political will” and said the decree could help millions of Filipinos recover from the recent calamities. But economists, business groups and industry analysts said the unprecedented intervention could scare investors away from the country, and create fuel shortages and a new black market.

“This government seems to have lost its sense of what it should be doing,” said Peter Wallace, founder of the Wallace Business Forum, a consulting group that advises some of the largest multinational companies in the Philippines. The country, he said, “is attracting the lowest level of foreign investments among major countries in Asia. So you have to ask the question why it issued the executive order.”

Wallace said if the government wanted to reduce the cost of fuel for consumers, it could have given out discount coupons to those directly affected by the typhoons. As it is, he said, “those with SUVs are the ones that will benefit from the price controls, not the poor people.”

Except for Shell and Petron, which refine oil in the Philippines, all oil companies here import their

finished products. Because the prices of these refined products are tied to world markets, the companies now might think twice about importing more, given the possibility of losses, said Benjamin Diokno, an economist and former budget secretary.

“The wisdom of EO 839 will come to its severest test once oil product supply is disrupted,” Diokno wrote in *BusinessWorld*, a Manila newspaper. “For the oil firms who were enticed by the downstream oil industry deregulation law, this recent EO is a nightmare.”

The oil companies have complied with the order, and rolled back prices. But they warned that the order might have grave consequences, among them “supply disruptions and negative impact on the investment climate in our country,” according to Roberto Kanapi, a Shell spokesman.

Just days after the order was announced, the oil companies were saying that their losses stemming from the directive will be large, with Petron alone estimating a \$315 million loss in the fourth quarter. The government has not indicated when it might lift the executive order.

Oil consumers, meanwhile, have welcomed the decree. Raul Concepcion, a Filipino industrialist who heads the nonprofit Consumer and Oil Price Watch, said the oil companies had it coming. The companies’ “predatory pricing” in the years

since the Oil Deregulation Law was passed created the conditions that prompted the reimposition of price controls, he said.

“If there was total transparency in the pricing of oil products, then the oil companies would not be suspected of predatory pricing,” Concepcion said. Ralph Recto, Arroyo’s economic planning secretary, had accused the oil companies of overpricing by as much as \$0.17 per liter of gasoline, a charge the companies denied.

The companies have insisted, now and in the past, that their prices are dictated by the market. None have been prosecuted for predatory pricing, despite allegations from groups including Concepcion’s. But because prices at the pump tend to move all at once, and because the companies have refused to open their books to scrutiny, suspicion has grown among the public.

Some people are urging the government to expand the price freezes nationwide. “Why impose the price controls only in Luzon? The other islands should also be covered, especially because the price of oil in the Visayas and Mindanao is [\$0.11] to [\$0.15] more expensive compared to Luzon,” said George San Mateo, secretary general of Piston, the country’s largest group of public-transport operators and drivers. Visayas and Mindanao are the two other main island groups in the archipelago.

70% of Japan Medical Facilities Want Exam Changes for Indonesians

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

TOKYO - More than 70 percent of medical facilities with Indonesian nurse and caregiver trainees believe the national qualification exams should be changed for those lacking fluency in Japanese, an Asahi Shimbun survey showed.

Thirty-seven percent of the hospitals and nursing-care facilities said furigana pronunciations for kanji should be used in the exam questions, the most commonly cited recommendation, while 33 percent said the trainees should be allowed to take the exams in their native language or in English.

Nearly 59 percent said they were “satisfied” or “relatively satisfied” with the specialized job skills obtained by the trainees, but less than 20 percent of those surveyed believe the trainees would be able to pass the exams.

Those who pass their exams are allowed to stay on, while those who fail must return to Indonesia.

An official at the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare rejected suggestions that special considerations be made, saying that both Japan and Indonesia agreed that the trainees would “attain the required qualifications in line with Japanese law under the [economic partnership] agreement. “We have no intention of lowering the standard of the exams,” the official said.

The survey was conducted between late September and early October and involved 47 hospitals and 53 nursing-care facilities. Valid responses were obtained from 86 of them.

The first group of 208 Indonesian trainees came to Japan last summer. After receiving basic training, they have been working

as novices at hospitals and nursing-care facilities. Nurse trainees have three chances to pass the national exam during their maximum three-year stay in Japan.

Caregiver trainees have only one shot at passing their exam during their four-year stay period.

Many of the trainees are either qualified to practice in Indonesia or have undergone training there. The difficulty in learning Japanese for the exam has been cited as their biggest obstacle in passing the national examinations.

Thirty hospitals and 41 nursing-care facilities sought some kind of change to the exams, including eased language requirements.

Fifty-eight percent said they hoped the government would extend the permitted stay period to allow trainees more opportunities to take the exam.

The most commonly cited reason for seeking a change con-

cerning Japanese language in the exams was that it was difficult to understand complicated kanji and technical terms used to describe common symptoms, such as bedsores or a patient’s posture.

Thirteen respondents, including nine hospitals, said they did not think any special treatment should be given to the trainees, citing the need to maintain fairness or prevent accidents.

Regarding Japanese language proficiency, 56 percent of the respondents said they were either “dissatisfied” or “greatly dissatisfied” with the trainees’ abilities, while 45 percent said the trainees lacked ample time to study the language.

They also cited a lack of staff members capable of teaching the Japanese language.

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OPINION

Dissident Suu Kyi Can Distract From Burma's Wider Crises

BY FRANCIS WADE
THE GUARDIAN

As the most senior level US delegation to visit Burma in decades is soon to touch down, it is worth reminding ourselves of the many problems in Burma that Washington's new policy needs to address.

Much of the rhetoric surrounding the recent US policy shift has focused on Aung San Suu Kyi and the 2,100 political prisoners in Burma; indeed, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon flagged this up in July as the most important obstacle to democracy in the country. Their plight, illuminated by the captivating Suu Kyi, is what grabs headlines across the world, but they are merely a taster of Burma's wider ruin.

Many are skeptical about the effect a shift toward greater dialogue between the generals and Washington will have. Will it be able to tackle entrenched corruption in Burmese society, or draw the junta away from a myopic focus on its military to the pitifully undernourished health and education sectors? Will it address what the US said this week were ongoing restrictions against religious freedom in the country?

The administration of US President Barack Obama has made comparatively little mention of ongoing crises in Burma's remote ethnic regions that lie

well beyond the Rangoon-to-Naypyidaw diplomatic corridor, and that underlie the country's fragile state. Low-intensity conflict has steadily eaten away at these regions for decades, with groups sparring with the government for autonomy. A US health academic, Chris Beyrer, testifying recently to the US House Foreign Affairs Committee, relegated this issue to "the second major cause for concern in Burma today."

The comment would have come as a blow to the millions of ethnic Burmese that for decades have been ousted, just like Suu Kyi, from any part of Burma's political decision-making process. Beyrer cited research that found that more than a quarter of families in Shan state, which borders China, had been forcibly relocated by government troops in the past year, while 24 percent had had one family member taken by the army for forced labor.

Since independence in 1948, successive military governments dominated by the majority Burman ethnicity have enacted a kind of racial supremacy, meting out a particularly violent brand of the minority treatment to all other ethnic groups. The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, which represents the interests of the estimated 6 million Burmese Shan, came one place behind Suu Kyi's party in the 1990 elections. Its leader,

Khun Htun Oo, was sentenced in 2005 to 93 years imprisonment on defamation charges, but the subject of his release remains conspicuously absent from any of the stated US goals for the country.

Burma's fragile border regions are another cause for concern, nearly all of which have at one point or another in recent months been sites of major flare-ups. In June, 5,000 refugees poured across the border from Karen state into Thailand following fighting between government troops and the ethnic Karen National Union. In August and September, an exodus of some 37,000 ethnic Shan fled into China after troops launched an offensive against an ethnic Kokang army. The Muslim Rohingya community in eastern Burma continues to be pushed back and forth across the border with Bangladesh, with neither country wanting the impoverished and persecuted minority.

If the US had hoped to look for assistance from Burma's regional neighbors, it had better think again. While Thailand, as head of the regional bloc, has perhaps made the most noticeable strides in recent months toward pressuring the regime, its lip-service is less than convincing. Last week it oversaw the launch of the region's first human rights body which with no punitive powers, appears to be little more than a flimsy platform for further soft condemnation.

Thailand's indifference to the crisis is all the more perplexing given that it criticized the fighting near the border in June for its regional ramifications. Beyrer last week pointed out that one medical clinic in the Thai border town of Mae Sot had treated some 20,000 Burmese nationals in the past year, many of whom had suffered as a result of the fighting. These were people unable to find adequate treatment their own country, which spends around \$0.66 per person each year on health care. It's a statistic that alone provides ample evidence of the mountain the US has to climb when faced with a government that channels some 40 percent of its budget into the military, and was accused recently of siphoning \$9 billion out of state funds into private Singaporean banks.

Powerful symbolic rhetoric is what won Obama office, but it is yet to be seen whether that can translate into rounded, pragmatic diplomacy. The mass of issues that don't make headlines need to be factored into the engagement process on a par with negotiations over Suu Kyi's release. But her place at the top of the priority list, elevated way beyond the multitude of Burma's other pressing crises, may well be a sign of the new US administration's shortcomings.

Francis Wade is a journalist working for the Democratic Voice of Burma.

Japan Gov't Needs To Explain Tax-Funded Airlines Bailout

EDITORIAL
THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

After much wrangling, the government has decided to go to bat for Japan Airlines Corp to rehabilitate the debt-ridden carrier. A task force to assist JAL's rescue, set up Friday jointly by the relevant ministries, will lead the efforts to turn around the embattled airline under government supervision.

It is unusual for the government to go out on such a limb to help a private-sector company. Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, as well as transport minister Seiji Maehara, need to explain the government's reasoning for helping out the carrier and show what benefits the taxpayer bailout will bring to the public.

Cash-strapped JAL needs some \$2.2 billion in cash by the end of November to stay in business. But

its creditor banks are reluctant to extend additional loans. There is little hope for fresh lending from commercial banks unless the government provides loan guarantees.

JAL is also believed to need to bolster its capital by \$3.3 billion by March. A capital increase of this scale would be impossible without government aid.

Consequently, the government has decided to put the Enterprise

Turnaround Initiative Corp of Japan, a newly created public-private turnaround fund, in charge of JAL's salvation. The body will consider options like state-guaranteed loans and an injection of public funds for a capital increase.

In principle, pumping public funds into a private-sector business goes against established norms as it undermines management discipline. Also, government intervention

could undermine fair competition.

From this point of view, the government is right in trying to reduce JAL's pension liabilities, which total some \$8.9 billion and are putting a heavy financial burden on JAL. The government is considering special legislation to forcefully lower the level of pension benefits for retired JAL employees.

This is not a step that should be taken lightly. Even so, it is probably necessary, given that massive public funds will be injected into JAL, whose debts exceed its assets.

Restoring JAL's financial health and management stability will lead to the enhancement of the nation's air traffic network and improved services over the long term. The government has an obligation to present such a promising vision.

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