

Myanmar skips

Asean chair

Vientiane, July 26 (Reuters): Army-ruled Myanmar will skip its turn as Asean chairman in 2006, defusing a simmering row between the southeast Asian bloc and the West over the junta's lack of democratic reform and detention of Aung San Suu Kyi.

"We agreed that once Myanmar is ready to take its turn to be the Asean chair, it can do so," Lao foreign minister Somsavat Lengsavad said today, reading out a joint statement by the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean).

Myanmar wanted to focus its full attention on efforts at national reconciliation and restoring democracy after more than four decades of military rule, the statement said. "We expressed our sincere appreciation to the government of Myanmar for not allowing its national preoccupation to affect Asean solidarity and cohesiveness," Somsavat said, adding that 2006 would be a "critical year" for the former Burma.

Few western governments believe Yangon's democracy rhetoric, especially while Nobel laureate Suu Kyi — whose National League for Democracy won a landslide election victory in 1990 only to be denied power by the army — remains under house arrest. On the eve of the Asean meeting in Vientiane, British foreign office minister Ian Pearson had repeated US and European threats to boycott Asean proceedings in 2006 if the generals took up the reins without embracing any meaningful political reform.

The Philippines will now become chairman after Malaysia finishes its stint in mid-2006. Singapore foreign minister George Yeo said the decision removed a "thorny problem", although the group would have supported Yangon if it had insisted on assuming the chair.

27 JUL 2006

Arroyo for parliamentary democracy

S. B. ...
Associated Press

MANILA, July 25. — The scandal-plagued Philippines President Mrs Gloria Macapagal Arroyo today urged Congress to change the constitution to shift to a parliamentary form of government to ease the country's constant political instability.

A parliamentary system where lawmakers can vote out a sitting government - would ease the upheaval that accompanies ousting a leader who has lost the ability to govern.

The first "people power" revolt that ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 was widely hailed, but the

second that forced out Arroyo's predecessor, Mr Joseph Estrada, in 2001 came under criticism for setting the bar too low to throw out an elected government.

Referring indirectly to the two "people power" revolts that have forced out two presidents since 1986 and a constant rash of coup attempts and takeover rumours, Arroyo said in the 20-minute speech that her nation had become too polarised to make the changes it needs to meet the challenges of the 21st century. "Ours is a country divided," said Mrs Arroyo, who has come under pressure to quit over allegations of rigged last year's election.



Philippine riot police position themselves behind a barricade as they block off thousands of protesters on Monday in Manila. — AFP

2 F JUL 2

THE STATESMAN

Philippine President wants constitution changed

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Manila, July 25

SCANDAL-PLAGUED President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo on Monday urged Congress to change the constitution to shift to a parliamentary form of government to ease the Philippines' constant political instability.

"The system clearly needs fundamental change — and the sooner, the better," Arroyo, the subject of an impeachment complaint filed earlier in the day, said in her annual state of the nation address to a joint session of Congress.

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criticism for setting the bar too low to throw out an elected government. Referring indirectly to the two "people power" revolts that have forced out two presidents since 1986 and a constant rash of coup attempts and takeover rumors, Arroyo said in the 20-minute speech that her nation had become too polarised to make the changes it needs to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

"Ours is a country divided," said Arroyo, who has come under pressure to quit with nearly five years left in her term over allegations that she rigged last year's election. "One is a Philippines whose economy is now poised for takeoff. The other has become a hindrance to progress."

She suggested that Congress set up a constituent assembly to tackle the issue of charter change, but she made no mention of a time frame or whether she would be willing to step down early. Former President Fidel Ramos has called for making the



Protester during a rally near the Philippine Congress at suburban Quezon city to coincide with the address by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo on Monday.

changes in time for a referendum early next year, followed by new elections in May. Speaking hours after opposi-

tion legislators filed an impeachment complaint against her in the latest move to force her out, Arroyo briefly

outlined a 10-point "phase 2" of her ambitious economic reform program to ease poverty, create jobs and attract foreign investment.

Arroyo, looking tired with bags under her eyes after dealing with the two-month-old scandal, touted her administration's accomplishments in generating 4 million jobs over the last four years, fighting drugs, curtailing kidnappings and easing a bloody Muslim separatist insurgency in the south.

She said the economy grew more than 6 per cent last year and continues to expand despite high oil prices.

While some opposition members boycotted the address, Arroyo got a long ovation as she approached the podium, dressed in a long blue gown that was owned by her mother, former first lady Evangelina Macapagal.

Pro-impeachment congressmen had peach roses on their desks, while Arroyo supporters had lemon plants, which are often used in the Philippines to keep some annoying insects away.

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6 JUL 2005 THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Besieged Arroyo in survival speech

Manila, July 24 (Reuters): President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo must give the speech of her political life tomorrow to convince Filipinos and foreign investors she can overcome scandals to deliver on her economic and social reforms.

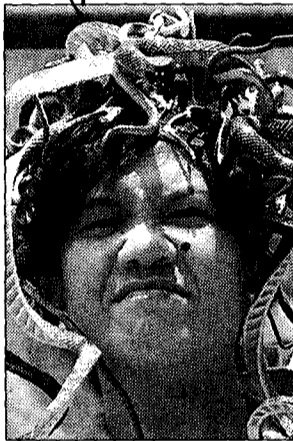
The achievements and plans set out in the annual state of the nation address will fall on deaf ears among enemies trying to impeach her in Congress and the Left, students, farmers and opposition groups planning street protests as she speaks.

Arroyo's message will be aimed at the rest of the 86 million people in the Philippines and investors who fear political turmoil will delay efforts to raise revenues, cut debt and develop an economy that trails much of Southeast Asia.

"I suspect she's going to try to calm everyone down, talk about her constitutional legitimacy, avoid talking about impeachment and emphasise she's getting back to business," Tom Green, executive director of risk consultancy Pacific Strategies & Assessments, said today.

"It'll probably ring rather hollow at this stage because everybody knows where she is focused."

Arroyo, defying calls that she step down, has ridden out



A woman wearing a head-dress of snakes at a rally in Manila on Sunday. (AFP)

resignations and defections that appeared to be pushing her four-year presidency to a quick end.

But her survival in office is far from certain.

Senator Miriam Santiago, an ally to the President, said yesterday that Arroyo would be conciliatory in her speech and ask Filipinos for a second chance.

The Opposition accuses Arroyo of cheating her way to a fresh term in last year's election and members of her family of taking kickbacks from a popular but illegal numbers game.

"Mrs Arroyo no longer has any credibility left in her body, so whatever she says will have no meaning for the people," said Senate minority leader Aquilino Pimentel, who has vowed to join a boycott of the speech by some opposition law-makers.

Arroyo's political pull also will be on the line tomorrow, when Congress returns from recess to consider an impeachment complaint against her based on charges of cheating, corruption and betraying the public trust.

The Opposition must get 79 votes, or one-third of the members of the lower house, to send the motion for trial by the 23 senators in the upper house. Conviction by two-thirds of the senators would effectively sack the President.

With alliances shifting during the crisis, analysts said the count in the lower house could be close. Some Opposition members said the number of votes was just shy of 79 but they would take the motion to the lower house's justice committee if it failed to win support on the floor.

The President's opponents are united in wanting her out but are otherwise fragmented and have offered few alternatives on how they would run the country.

25 JUL 2005 7:10 PM

Jakarta hospitals on bird flu alert

The disease has also devastated poultry stocks, leading to massive cull

80-15
277

JAKARTA: Hospitals nationwide have been put on alert to receive and treat bird flu patients, said the Health Minister on Thursday, hours after Indonesia recorded its first human deaths from the virus.

"We have to be prepared," Siti Fadilah Supari said, adding that 44 hospitals were taking part in the campaign. Indonesia joined a list of Asian nations on Wednesday that have seen the H5N1 strain of bird flu jump to humans, saying a 38-year-old Finance Ministry worker and his two daughters, 9 and 1, died of the disease.

That raised the number of persons killed by bird flu region-wide to 57, most of them in Vietnam and Thailand. The disease has also devastated poultry stocks, killing or forcing the cull of tens of millions of chickens and ducks.

Indonesia, which so far has only been killing sick birds, said



CHECKING VIRUS SPREAD: A veterinarian vaccinates a chicken in Bogor, on Thursday. - PHOTO: AFP

on Thursday it was stepping up efforts to contain the virus' spread.

From now on all chickens liv-

sate farmers for losses incurred by mass slaughters.

"We can't take any risks now," he said. "If there is an animal on a farm that has contracted the virus, we will cull all livestock on the farm."

The three family members who died of bird flu earlier this month lived in a Jakarta suburb and did not have any chickens, initially raising concerns that the virus may have been transmitted from one person to another - a theory that has since been largely discounted.

Health officials were narrowing in on the source of infection, Ms. Supari said on Thursday, noting that a small pig and chicken farm near the family's home was hit by the deadly virus between February and April this year.

Birds that contracted the disease at the farm were culled, she said, but gave no more details. - AP

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22 JUL 2005

THE HINOU

Indonesia, Aceh rebels agree on peace deal

S. B. K. S.
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HELSINKI (FINLAND): Indonesia's Government and Aceh rebels have reached a peace deal to end a 29-year militancy in the province, a top Indonesian official said on Sunday.

A draft peace deal submitted by the rebel Free Aceh Movement was approved on Saturday by the Government in Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, said Indonesian Communications Minister Sofyan Djalil, one of the lead negotiators at peace talks in Finland.

The deal will facilitate the delivery of international reconstruction aid to the province of 4.1 million inhabitants devastated by the December 26 tsunami, which killed at least 130,000 people in nearly a dozen Indian Ocean countries.

Negotiators for the Indonesian Government and separatist rebels said on Saturday they had reached a tentative agreement to end one of the world's longest-running wars. The draft accord, which hinged on an agreement to allow the Free Aceh Movement to form its own political party, was sent to Jakarta for approval by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

"The President has agreed to the draft submitted by GAM about political parties" Mr. Djalil said on Sunday, referring to the Free Aceh Movement by its Indonesian initials. "Finally, we have reached common understanding about the issues we discussed."

The two sides on Sunday initialled the deal seen as the best chance yet of ending the three decades of fighting that has killed 15,000 people. — AP

8 JUL 2

THE HINDOO

Thai PM takes on new powers to fight unrest

Reuters
Bangkok, July 15

THAILAND'S CABINET passed emergency laws on Friday giving Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra the power to tap phones, censor newspapers and detain suspects without charge to tackle rising violence in the Muslim far south. The Emergency Powers Law replaces localised martial law already in place in the three southernmost provinces, where more than 800 people have died in the last 19 months. It brings responsibility for security directly into the PM's office.

"In the past seven days there have been signs that the situation will escalate," Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam told reporters after an emergency cabinet meeting prompted by a coordinated set of attacks on Thursday evening

in the provincial capital of Yala. "The last straw that prompted us to impose this law is what happened at Yala," he said.

In one of the most dramatic episodes of the southern unrest, suspected Muslim separatists set off a series of bombs, bringing down pylons outside electricity sub-stations and plunging the town into darkness for an hour. Two policeman were killed and 23 people injured in the ensuing chaos, as the militants went on a shooting spree in the normally quiet town of 30,000 people around 1,100 km south of Bangkok and near the Malaysian border.

The violence continued on Friday, with a small bomb blast at 11.30 am injuring four people in Yala, and unidentified gunmen shooting dead two teachers in neighbouring Narathiwat province.

The new law allows Thaksin to stop the sales of newspapers and magazines deemed "threatening to national security or causing public anxiety".

During Thursday's blackout in Yala, militants on motorcycles fired at random and tossed Molotov cocktails into shops and houses. Bombs hit a newly opened cinema complex, a hotel cafe, a karaoke restaurant and a convenience store. The militants scattered spikes on roads in an attempt to hinder the movement of security forces.

The government of Yala province, of which the town is the capital, appealed to people to stay at home as 1,000 soldiers and police were deployed. Five policemen and three "bandits" were seriously wounded in the clashes, public health minister Suchai Charoenrattanakul told Channel 9 television.

16 JUL 2005

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

Arroyo searching for options

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Growing signs of popular pressure

P. S. Suryanarayana

SINGAPORE: The resurgence of mass protest rallies in Manila against Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has surprised her and the political managers in her camp.

Ms. Arroyo has repeatedly emphasised that she will fight back and not allow herself to be forced out of office through what could be the third "people power" campaign in the Philippines.

However, there are growing signs that she is struggling for new options to ward off the possibility of having to bow to popular pressure, according to regional diplomats and political

observers. Her main refrain in recent weeks has centred on the argument that any new version of "people power" campaign would be not only anti-democratic but also a blot on the country's ability to run its affairs with semblance of stability.

"People's power"

In her reckoning, however, the international community, which appreciated the original "people power" movement in 1986, later "tolerated" the second enactment of such tactics in 2001, which incidentally brought her to office in the place of a duly elected President.

The earlier versions of "people power" campaigns were

staged mainly through mass rallies that the church and some powerful sections of the military establishment supported. Some of the reasons cited by those two groups then were even incompatible.

The first such campaign led to the overthrow of dictator Ferdinand Marcos and a democratic election that brought Corazon Aquino to power.

The second enactment in 2001, however, was riddled with questions over the propriety of using street demonstrations as an expression of "people's will" to get rid of an elected leader, Joseph Estrada who had overwhelmed his opponents in the presidential poll. In fact, the legality of Ms. Arroyo's accession to power then, having been the

Vice-President under Mr. Estrada, required a judicial pronouncement.

Questions re-emerge

Now, with Ms. Arroyo having come under political fire for her alleged "electoral fraud" that secured her "re-election" in 2004, the old questions about the legitimacy of her original accession to power have come back to haunt her.

The story doing the rounds among her opponents and critics is that she not only "stole" the presidency from Mr. Estrada but also resorted to "electoral malpractice" to win "re-election."

While her presidential apple cart has not been upset as a result, the crisis remains.

16 JUL 2

THE HINDU

Philippines political crisis deepens

Arroyo refuses to quit over charges of electoral fraud

P. S. Suryanarayana 10-15
SINGAPORE: With the embattled Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo continuing to maintain that she would not bow to pressure and resign, the political crisis in Manila, over the allegations of an electoral fraud by her, deepened on Friday.

While 10 of her Cabinet Ministers, led by Finance Secretary Cesar Purisima, were reported to have resigned and asked her to do so likewise to save the country of a new political storm, it became clear that they were not really responding to her call to the entire Cabinet to resign so that she could then get a "free hand to reorganise" it.

Special meeting

In contrast to her own demand that the entire Cabinet go, it was officially stated in Manila on Friday that a "special Cabinet meeting" was indeed held.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo said after the session that the United States, China, the European Union, the Organisation of Islamic Confer-

ence and Japan had "expressed support" for the beleaguered President. The Government acknowledged, in the same context, that the President's critics at home had indeed asked her to quit office. Defence and Interior Secretaries were prominent among those listed by the President's office as being on her side.

While an independent confirmation of the claims of external support for Ms. Arroyo was not immediately possible, Joseph Mussoneli, top U.S. diplomat in Manila, had said, at the beginning of the current crisis nearly a month ago, that "we believe that Gloria Arroyo is the duly elected President" and that "virtually the entire international community deemed those [2004] elections credible".

The crux of the Opposition's demand, now backed by some of her political associates, is that she had "rigged" those elections so as to retain her hold on power. The U.S. diplomat did not, however, explicitly or publicly back her continuance in office in the evolving Filipino domestic context.



BREWING STORM: Protesters call for the resignation of Philippines President Gloria Arroyo during a rally in Manila on Friday. - PHOTO: REUTERS

Arroyo asks entire Cabinet to resign ⁴¹⁰⁻¹⁶

I will not quit, says the President ⁸⁷⁷

MANILA: Fighting for her political life, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said on Thursday she was being unfairly demonised and asked her entire Cabinet to resign.

The comments in a radio address were another pre-emptive move by the increasingly desperate Ms. Arroyo, who is trying to fend off allegations that she fixed last year's election.

Rumours emerged earlier in the day that at least two, and perhaps a dozen, of her Cabinet members were preparing to resign, so Ms. Arroyo clearly took the offensive to forestall a sense that efforts to force her out were turning into an avalanche.

"First of all, I am not resigning my office," Ms. Arroyo said. "At the same time, I will restructure and strengthen the Cabinet. I am asking the entire Cabinet to tender their resignations. This is neither political ploy or gimmick. This will be a legacy."

While she again denied that she did anything wrong in talking to an election official about protecting a million-vote lead during the ballot count, she said it was nearly impossible to be a Philippine politician and avoid corruption. "Our political system has degenerated to such an

^{SB Ana - Philippine}
"Our political system has degenerated to such an extent that it is very difficult to live within the system with hands totally untainted," she said.

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She said her new Cabinet would have a free hand in governance while she focuses on fundamental changes to the constitution and the political system.

The late dictator Ferdinand Marcos was ousted by a "people power" revolt in 1986, a model used by pro-democracy movements around the world.

Ms. Arroyo took office in "people power 2," which forced President Joseph Estrada out in 2001 but led to criticism that ousting a leader was becoming too easy.

Ms. Arroyo warned that a third incarnation of "people power" would "condemn the Philippines as a country whose political system is hopelessly unstable." — AP

OFFICIAL QUIT'S CABINET ■ HUSBAND LEAVES FOR HK

Troubled times for Arroyo

S B Arroyo
- Philippine

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Philippine Daily Inquirer/
ANN & AP

MANILA, June 30. — President Ms Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's scramble to recover public trust after allegations that she rigged last year's election gained steam today when her Cabinet shed a top official facing tax-evasion charges.

Agriculture secretary Mr Arthur Yap said he was stepping down to clear his name and spare the President additional damage, as the Opposition urged her to resign following her admission that she discussed the vote count in the May 2004 presidential polls with a top election official.

Separate accusations that Ms Arroyo's relatives — including her husband — took kickbacks from illegal gambling have deepened the political scandal that has buffeted her administration, causing the stock market and the peso to slide and raising concerns that the country could fall into chaos.

In a related development, the President's husband, Mr Jose Miguel Arroyo, departed for Hong Kong this evening. The First Gentleman left on



The Philippines President has been accused of using her position to influence the May 2004 presidential election. — AFP

Philippine Airlines flight PR 310. He was accompanied by his son Dato, Dato's wife and their child.

Ms Arroyo yesterday announced that her husband would leave the country to help protect her reputation, part of a series of public-relations exercises that so far have failed to defuse a public outcry calling for her resignation.

The family refused to talk to

reporters who caught up with them before they boarded a Philippine Airlines flight. It was unclear whether Ms Arroyo's husband was to stay in Hong Kong or take a connecting flight.

Ms Arroyo on Monday acknowledged in a televised speech that she talked to an election official about protecting a million-vote victory margin in the election — as leaked wiretap recordings had suggested. But while she apologised for the lapse, she denied rigging the polls and said she won't resign.

In making a public apology, the President and her advisers apparently hoped that the Filipino people would give more weight to her demonstration of humility and repentance than the gravity of her transgressions. But by trying to gloss over her offence, she only cast doubt on the sincerity of her plea for forgiveness.

Police in Manila went on alert today as about 2,000 left-wing protesters and supporters of ousted President Joseph Estrada demanded Ms Arroyo's resignation, calling her a "fraudulent President".