

TERRAVIVA

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INDIA GAINS POLITICAL GROUND WITH ALLY'S VICTORY

by Ranjit Devraj

NEW DELHI, Nov 18 (IPS) - Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has drawn a parallel between the Northern Alliance's victory in Afghanistan and the Hindu festival of lights or 'Diwali', which falls this week and which celebrates the "triumph of good over evil" at the end of a mythological war. India, which has backed the Northern Alliance of President Burhanuddin Rabbani, has every reason to celebrate its military victory in Afghanistan and the expulsion of the Taliban from Kabul. The only time New Delhi officially dealt with the Taliban was when an Indian Airlines plane with more than 155 passengers on board was hijacked in Dec. 1999 to Kandahar, the Pashtun tribal-dominated, Taliban stronghold.

India secured the release of plane and passengers in exchange for the release from jail and delivery in Kandahar of three top jihadist leaders, including Maulana Mohammed Azhar, chief of the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed jihadist group. On Friday, Kandahar remained the only major Afghan city retained by the Taliban in the face of a relentless week-long sweep across the north of the country by the forces of the Northern Alliance assisted by heavy aerial bombing by the United States. Rabbani, who was ousted by the Taliban from Kabul in a 1996 coup, has already ruled out an involvement of the Taliban in a future dispensation that is expected to take shape in Kabul under United Nations supervision.

That is a stand welcomed by India and also Russia, which has militarily backed the Northern Alliance. The Central Asian countries north of Afghanistan have ethnic links with the Tajik and Uzbek tribes which make up most of the alliance along with the Hazaras who are

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CITING TERRORISM, GROUPS URGE END TO NUKES

by Danielle Knight

WASHINGTON, Nov 18 (IPS) - Terrorist use of nuclear material is likely unless nations take action to reduce the threat of nuclear conflict and rid the world of nuclear weapons, disarmament and medical experts said Wednesday. International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), the Centre for Defence Information, and other U.S. non-governmental groups praised Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin for pledging to reduce their stockpiles of nuclear warheads. Bush said the United States would unilaterally reduce its nuclear arsenal to between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads. Putin indicated he would cut Russia's arsenal to about 1,500. Both countries have more than 6,000 strategic nuclear warheads. But even with these new cuts, groups said nuclear weapons and materials would remain a threat and could end up in the hands of terrorists.

"Bush and Putin need to go much further," said Ira Helfand, a doctor with Physicians for Social Responsibility. "This round of arms cuts must be the first of many moves toward the ultimate goal of total abolition of nuclear weapons." Groups urged both governments to ban the manufacture, transfer, and sale of all fissile materials; immediately take their missiles off high alert status; fund programmes to destroy or render useless all known

stocks of nuclear materials; and abandon plans to develop and deploy a U.S. National Missile Defence (NMD) shield. "Unless radical steps are taken immediately, it will not be a question of whether terrorists can acquire or build a nuclear device, but when," said Mary-Wynne Ashford, co-president of IPPNW.

Groups also called for the development of a Nuclear Weapons Convention, a

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treaty that would parallel the Biological Weapons Convention and ban the testing, stockpiling, manufacture, and use of nuclear weapons. "Unless we abolish nuclear weapons, the threat of nuclear annihilation will always loom over us," said Jonathan Schell, a prominent author on nuclear issues. Groups also rallied for an increase in funding for joint Russian- U.S. programmes already under way to help secure Russia's aging and under-funded nuclear weapons storage facilities. "Ironically, just prior to the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration proposed to cut 100 million dollars from the Russian-American Cooperative Threat Reduction Programme, which seeks to secure nuclear materials in the former Soviet Union," said John Pastore, a physician who served with the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Bruce Blair, president of the Centre for Defence Information, said there is considerable concern that Osama bin Laden or members of his al-Qaeda terrorist network might be able to obtain nuclear material through insiders at nuclear facilities in Pakistan and the former Soviet Union. Officials in those countries have denied any such possibility. The International Atomic Energy Agency recently concluded that al- Qaeda is "actively seeking" an atomic bomb and in a recent videotaped message, bin Laden stated that acquiring nuclear weapons is a "religious duty." Blair, a former nuclear missile launch control officer, said there is no credible evidence that bin Laden has acquired a nuclear bomb. But, he added, "it is very plausible that he has obtained nuclear waste."

Such waste, he said, could be used to build a "dirty bomb", an explosive device that disperses nuclear radiation. Blair said that the amount of radioactive material and the amount of explosive for such bombs could vary greatly. The arrest and questioning by authorities in Pakistan of three leading scientists in that country, two of them veterans of its nuclear weapons programme, with suspected sympathies for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, heightened concerns about the transfer of nuclear knowledge or materials to terrorists. "Pakistan's nuclear weapons are known to lack many of the technical safeguards needed to prevent unauthorised detonation," IPPNW said in a report.

As Bush and Putin began their three-day meeting here Tuesday, the U.S. administration signalled it wanted to expand assistance to help Russia improve security for its nuclear material and to dismantle nuclear warheads. Disarmament advocates warned, however, that Bush's push to develop and deploy NMD would further undermine international security by stimulating a new nuclear arms race. Missile defence, said Helfand, creates the illusion that the United States is protected against terrorism. However, it "does not defend the United States against the things terrorists are likely to do," such as using car bombs or, as in the Sep. 11 attacks, using aeroplanes as weapons.

The tens of billions of dollars to be spent on missile defence and currently spent on maintaining the large nuclear arsenal, added Blair, could be more effectively used to strengthen domestic security. While concerns over nuclear terrorism have increased since the Sep. 11 attacks on the United States, the call to rid the world of nuclear weapons is hardly novel. In 1998, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former Soviet Presi-

dent Mikhail Gorbachev topped a list of more than 100 ex-heads of state calling for immediate steps to reduce the threat of nuclear conflict and eventually rid the world of nuclear weapons. A similar call was made in 1996 by 50 generals and admirals from around the world. ■

AGRICULTURE TO FEEL IMPACT OF WTO'S DOHA DECLARATION

by Gustavo Capdevila

GENEVA, Nov 18 (IPS) - The new guidelines established at the Ministerial Conference in Qatar this week for negotiating the liberalisation of agricultural commerce will shape the debate at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting to be held here the first week of December. The WTO Agriculture Committee is slated to meet Dec 3-7 to continue the negotiations begun in January 2000 on reforming the agreement that regulates global farm trade. Until now, the talks had followed the framework established in Article 20 of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), which proposes the long-term objective of a substantial and progressive reduction of state protection for the farming sector. The subsidies for the production and export of agricultural goods, which play an important role in most industrialised countries, are at the core of the agricultural trade problem.

But since the conclusion of the Doha ministerial conference Wednesday the negotiating climate has changed, because the final declaration signed in the Qatar capital incorporates more ambitious goals than those laid out in the AoA's Article 20. The new objectives agreed in Doha by the more than 140 trade ministers gathered for the WTO conference consecrate what have been dubbed the "three pillars" of the talks on agriculture. The ministers committed themselves to achieving substantial improvements in market access, the reduction of all forms of farm export subsidies - with an eye to phasing them out -, and cutbacks on market-distorting government aid to the agricultural sector.

The Cairns Group, made up of 18 countries that promote international free trade in farm products, lobbied hard for the incorporation of the three pillars into the ministerial declaration. The Cairns members point out that export subsidies for agricultural commodities have increased since the AoA was approved at the conclusion of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade talks (1986-1994). A World Bank report indicates export subsidies for wheat in 1998 represented 25 percent of trade in that grain, marking a seven-percent hike compared to the 1995 figure. In the same period, subsidies for sugar grew from 19 percent to 31 percent, according to the World Bank study.

The European Union (EU), which maintains a costly system of agricultural support - through import restrictions, export subsidies, and direct aid -, pressed for modifications of the

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WTO text in Doha that included the aspirations of the Cairns Group. In a last-minute proposal, the Europeans were able to push through a compromise, so that the talks on these three areas would be established "without prejudging the outcome of the negotiations." The EU's farm commissioner, Franz Fischler, celebrated the inclusion of the phrase in the final declaration signed by the trade ministers in Doha as a major victory. But the members of the Group of Cairns maintain that the addition of the phrase would have little effect, because reference to the outcome lays conditions for reforms, not the objectives.

William Ehlers, a trade negotiator for Uruguay, one of the 18 Cairns nations, said his bloc had got what it wanted in Doha. Roberto Lavagna, representing Argentina, another Cairns member, said that negotiators often turn to "cosmetic measures" that allow them to present results in a more favourable light to the interested parties. The Cairns Group's position is that the addition of the EU's phrase does not represent a profound change to the text, said Lavagna. The Cairns negotiators conceded that the EU was able to include the matter of non-trade agricultural concerns in the ministerial declaration, but that the related text lacks the force of the three pillars this bloc defends. The EU's Fischler, however, stressed that the text clearly outlines the non-trade concerns, which refer to several aspects of the farming sector, such as protections for the rural landscape, environment and employment, and that they continue to deserve state support. ■

FOOD ANTI-PATENT PACT HAILED DESPITE WEAKNESSES

by Emad Mekay

WASHINGTON, Nov 18 (IPS) - A new convention that discourages private crop patents will breathe new life into agricultural research in developing countries, where subsistence farming remains the norm, say experts. The object of their optimism is the keenly awaited International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, agreed last week in Rome by delegates from 116 countries. "What the treaty will do primarily is facilitate the free flow of genetic material to plant breeders who have found that the rush to patent has limited their access in recent years," says Peter Rosset co-director of the U.S.-based non-governmental organisation Food First. "When breeders feel that material is patentable, they won't share it. The hope is that as a result of the treaty, people will once again share these genetic resources," he adds. "This is a boon to public sector plant breeders and to farmers and we hope it will somewhat put the brakes on patenting by private companies."

The agreement seeks to shield a list of food crops from patenting although, according to Rosset, heavy U.S. lobbying succeeded in watering down the pact's language so it amounts to

less than an outright prohibition on patenting of critical food crops. Ultimately, the United States and Japan abstained from voting on the treaty. Nevertheless, says Ian Johnson, chairman of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), the treaty is a definite safeguard mechanism for global biodiversity. "Plant breeders all over the world rely on existing diversity to create new varieties of plants with higher yields and increased resistance to pests and diseases, while for many small farmers in developing countries, diversity is the basis of food security and income," says Johnson, who also is a vice president at the World Bank. The treaty comes at a critical moment, according to its supporters. Issues such as food security are being eclipsed by counter-terrorism and international financial institutions are preoccupied with recession.

Aid for agriculture has been falling for well over a decade, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Wealthy countries cut their contributions by 15 percent during the 1990s and multilateral lenders like the World Bank trimmed theirs by 40 percent. The new convention, however, offers farmers and public agencies better access to genetic resources that could improve crop yields, diversity, and resistance to pests, drought, and disease. The treaty also will promote improve natural resource management in poor nations, where the FAO estimates some 835 million people live in hunger. "We think it is good that there now is a treaty, though a number of issues have been left unresolved and in some areas it is weaker than we would have hoped," says Rosset.

Among these weaknesses, he says, the treaty would only help to the extent that unresolved issues of farmers' rights and intellectual property rights are settled in the farmers' favour and uphold the principle that public resources should not be patented. "That would help guarantee the food security of poor farmers and of indigenous peoples," Rosset asserts. "If, however, these issues are resolved the wrong way, then much of the potential benefit of the treaty will be lost." Although the agreement also establishes a funding strategy, support for the gene banks of the world remains a problem, according to Geoffrey Hawtin of the CGIAR-supported International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI).

"The treaty calls on countries and CGIAR-supported centres to maintain genetic resources in perpetuity," Hawtin says in a statement. "The challenge is to mobilise financial resources and create an endowment to ensure these precious resources are kept in viable form well into the future." The U.S. angered activists by lobbying against portions of the treaty that it said would threaten intellectual property rights and thus endanger innovation and investment. Rosset, however, says he considers patenting a "form of shameless privatisation" and sees the U.S. stance on the treaty as "one more example of irresponsible private industry behaviour." CGIAR, an association of 58 public and private institutions, supports a network of 16 agricultural research centres worldwide. It played a major role in formulating the treaty. ■

17.5 MILLION CHILD WORKERS IN LATIN AMERICA

by Nefer Munoz

SAN JOSE, Nov 18 (IPS) - Some 17.5 million children under 15 form part of the labour market in Latin America as a consequence of a series of social problems afflicting the region, says the International Labour Organisation (ILO). ILO officials and human rights activists meeting in the Costa Rican capital are urging Latin American governments to apply the international conventions on eradicating child labour that most countries in the region have signed. They launched their appeal at a Central American conference of human rights officials and civil society representatives that ends Friday. The goal of the meeting has been to evaluate proposals for fighting the social problems that lead children to have to work. "There is no excuse. Putting children to work is a violation of human rights," says Carmen Moreno, coordinator for Central America and the Caribbean of the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC).

"The international rules in themselves do nothing. It is essential to take concrete steps towards reversing this problem," Moreno said in comments to IPS. Some of the jobs most commonly performed by Latin American children are extremely dangerous, such as mining, fireworks manufacturing, scavenging in garbage dumps, as well as work in the fishing and agricultural sectors, said Rigoberto Astorga, also with the ILO. There are approximately 17.5 million working children in Latin America, according to ILO figures, though the institution's most detailed statistics cover the 10 to 14 age group. According to the international agency, 14.9 percent of the 51.1 million Latin Americans ages 10 to 14 are working, in other words, 7.6 million children. This figure represents 15 percent of the region's economically active population.

Moreno stated that these numbers reflect a clear violation of the right of children to education, health and integral development. "We will only be able to halt this phenomenon by changing cultural patterns, improving the economic conditions of our countries and universalising education," she added. The Latin American nations with the most child workers ages 10 to 14 are Brazil, with 3.5 million and Mexico, with 1.2 million, while Peru has 800,000 children ages six to 14 in its workforce. But as far as percentage of total national population, Ecuador has the worst record, with 30.2 percent of its 10-to-14-year-olds working, followed by Guatemala (23.8 percent) and Brazil (20.5 percent). "We must break the vicious cycle that leads children to have to work," said the ILO's Astorga.

Among the high-risk jobs children perform, the expert listed fireworks manufacturing in El Salvador and Guatemala, fishing in Costa Rica's mangroves, and brick making in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. The ILO is also concerned about thousands of children in Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Peru who work scavenging rubbish, and in some cases live in the garbage dumps themselves. The

workday of many children is longer than that averaged by adults, and three out of four child workers abandon school, according to the studies Astorga cited. "We estimate that child workers lose an average of two years of schooling, which represents a salary 20 percent lower than the average when they reach adulthood," said the expert.

The objective of two ILO conventions currently in force is to eliminate child labour. The first, Convention 138, was approved in 1973 and requires the signatory nations to set a minimum age for legal employment. The second, Convention 182, approved in 1999, defines the worst forms of child labour and establishes mechanisms for governments to prohibit such practices. Both conventions have been ratified - or are in the process of being ratified - by most Latin American countries. "The problem has not been approval of these conventions, The great challenge that lies ahead is for the countries to adapt the requirements of these agreements to their national laws," said Astorga.

Child labour is not a new phenomenon, but the problem has not been given the attention it deserves because the related economic, social and cultural rights have been minimised, say activists. This tolerance or indifference is attributed to the widely held belief that child labour is intrinsically linked to poverty and, as a result, will persist until greater development is achieved. Moreno and Astorga agree that poverty is a factor, but it is not the only one in a range of elements that include the lack of access to education, lack of opportunities, and lack of awareness. As a result, the problem must be approached from the perspective of protecting children and the right to education, they said. Worldwide, there are an estimated 250 million working children ages five to 14, with nearly half working at least a full eight-hour day. ■

NATIVE PEOPLE ATE TAINTED FISH WHILE CANADA KEPT QUIET

OTTAWA, Nov 18 (IPS) - Natives of a remote aboriginal community in Quebec ate fish with high levels of toxic heavy metals for two years, even though the Quebec government knew the fish were contaminated with carcinogens. The Quebec government has admitted it knew for two years that the people of the remote Cree community of Ouje-Bougoumou were eating fish contaminated with potentially dangerous levels of arsenic, lead, and mercury. The metals are suspected to come from tailings from three mines near the Cree settlement. The government waited until just one month ago - Oct. 16 - to tell the community children younger than six and women who are pregnant or trying to get pregnant should stop eating fish caught in two nearby lakes because they are contaminated by mercury. However, officials said they began finding contaminated fish in Lake Chibougamau and Lake aux Dores in 1999. "Why didn't they tell anybody about it?" Paul Wertman, an adviser to the Cree, said in a telephone interview from the isolated community
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about 500 kilometres north of the city of Montreal.

Even the notice the government sent the Cree presented a somewhat cheery picture. It began: "Fish is an excellent source of protein and contains little saturated fat," before telling the 700 people of the community to eat no more than two fish a month. For years, Cree fishers, who catch most of the community's food, suspected there was a problem with the three lakes that they use. They reported catching fish with strange defects, lacking fins and eyes. The government did not admit to the pollution problem until the Cree band, or tribal, council hired U.S. researchers Christopher Covell and Roger Masters to investigate. The pair found high levels of arsenic, cyanide, lead, and mercury in fish caught by Cree fishers. "The study confirms what we knew already," Quebec environment minister Andre Boicclair admitted at a press conference after the Cree released

their findings. He said Quebec inspectors began finding contaminated fish in 1999 and continued their studies in 2000. "This is a situation that we are taking seriously, but it is also a situation that is under control," the minister said. "We'll do whatever necessary studies that must be done, but before announcing any new measures, I want to discuss them with the representatives of the Cree nation. I want to respect their wishes and I want to make sure that we have a good understanding with the Cree nation." The Cree have yet to decide whether they want the community moved or if they will demand financial compensation that will allow them to diversify their economy. Cree leaders said they are leaning toward a request that the community be relocated to a region where the fish are not contaminated. They also are demanding funding for an independent epidemiological study. ■

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supported by Iran. Pakistan, the only country which advocates inclusion of what it calls "moderate Taliban," in a future government and its military ruler Pervez Musharraf, has suggested a peacekeeping force drawn from Islamic countries to take over Kabul pending the formation of a government. But the Northern Alliance is firmly in place and its ambassador in India, Masoud Khalili has opposed any move to bring in a peacekeeping force. He has pointed out that Rabbani enjoys legitimacy and is already recognised by the United Nations as President.

The UN Security Council has unanimously endorsed an Afghan political plan that envisages a two-year interim government bringing all ethnic groups under one umbrella with a multinational security force to protect them. Although the UN's preferred option is an all-Afghan force, the world body acknowledges that this is not expected to materialise primarily because of the factionalism among the country's main ethnic groups: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. Meanwhile, 40 countries are reported to have so far have volunteered troops for a proposed multinational force. These include Turkey, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jordan, New Zealand, Pakistan, Canada and Denmark. But the reality on the ground is that the essentially anti-Pakistan Northern Alliance is now in a position to decide which of the groups it wants to share power with and also to what extent. "There is no need for any Islamic peacekeeping force. We are suspicious of anything that comes from Musharraf," Khalili told the Asian Age newspaper in an interview published on Friday.

Musharraf has also demanded the exclusion of India from the international consultative process on a new Afghanistan on the grounds that India does not have a common border with that country. However, following hectic counter-diplomacy by Prime Minister Vajpayee, India has now been invited to a 20-nation consultative process that is to begin deliberations in New York on Friday to decide on a transitional government in Kabul.

While New Delhi's animus to the Taliban is understandable, leading observers such as Raja Mohan, strategic analyst for the 'Hindu' newspaper have warned against the dangers of excluding the majority Pushtuns, even if the community had formed the backbone of the now discredited Taliban movement.

Indeed the victories of the Northern Alliance have had the effect of turning the Pushtuns against the Taliban leadership and there are now news reports of fighting breaking out between Pashtun warlords and the Taliban in Kandahar. Ambassador Khalili has repeatedly said that Pakistan ought to have no future role in Afghanistan because that country's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) was responsible for the creation of the Taliban and the present chaos in his country. "We did not come this far to hand over Afghanistan to Pakistan again," he said. Khalili predicted growing uprisings against the Taliban in southern Afghanistan simply because the insular Afghans never liked the Pakistanis and other foreigners they had brought in and who are now the object of lynchings across the country.

Pakistan's strategic importance to the U.S.-led global coalition against terrorism is now growing more limited with bridgeheads operational in the Central Asian republics and bases in northern Afghanistan now available to them. "With the vast strategic space opening up in Afghanistan, the Americans can now carry a smaller carrot but a bigger stick in handling Pakistan," writes Brahma Chellaney in an editorial page article in the Hindustan Times on Friday. Chellaney is among Indian analysts who think that Pakistan's attention will now be drawn away from Kashmir and to the blurred boundary it shares with Afghanistan and whose legitimacy has long been challenged by the Pushtuns who straddle it.

The boundary, called the Durand Line, was drawn up by the British during colonial times and its validity expired in 1993. Even the Taliban at the height of its friendship with Pakistan rejected Islamabad's plea to renew the original agreement under which the border was drawn up. Historically, Afghanistan has claimed territory up to the Indus river and even opposed the admission of Pakistan into the United Nations until the border question was first settled. Anticipating trouble from its former allies, Islamabad has already fortified the once porous Pakistan-Afghanistan border and even moved troops and tanks to it. ■

NEWSBRIEFS

SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT CLEARED OF ARMS-DEAL CHARGES

JOHANNESBURG, Nov 18 (IPS) - A report by three independent agencies has cleared the South African government of charges of widespread corruption in the awarding of contracts in a multi-billion dollar arms deal - but, investigations into the activities of senior officials who may be guilty of criminal conduct are continuing. "It is evident from the investigation that the perception of widespread corruption within the government is without justification. While there may be certain individuals and officials who used their position to derive some form of benefit from the acquisition process which might render them criminally liable, the integrity of government is unquestionable," says the head of South Africa's National Directorate of Public Prosecutions (NDPP), Bulelani Ngcuka. He also indicated that the directorate was continuing to investigate the shareholders of companies that have benefited from the arms deal, and the receipt of gifts and conflicts of interests of officials involved in the procurement process. A number of senior politicians and government officials have already been named in the media for allegedly personally benefiting from the deal, which has a contract price of over R30 billion (3.2 billion U.S. dollars). The NDPP, along with South Africa's Auditor-General and Public Prosecutor, has been tasked with investigating allegations of corruption in the awarding of contracts to supply South Africa with an estimated R43 billion (4.6 billion U.S. dollars) worth of arms. Their report was released on Nov 15. Ngcuka has already charged Tony Yengeni, the former Chief Parliamentary Whip of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), with fraud and corruption - after he allegedly promised the arms manufacturer, the European Aeronautics Defence System (EADS) that he would influence the procurement process in their favour. The case is due to come up in court again, early next year. Michael Woerfel, former head of EADS in southern Africa, has been charged with Yengeni. German prosecutors are also investigating whether he broke that country's anti-corruption laws. The South African minister of Justice, Penuell Maduna, says he will offer his assistance if the German prosecutors ask his help with their investigation. The investigation also fingers the Head of Acquisitions for the South African Department of Defence, "Chippy" Shaik for a "conflict of interest". The report concludes that "Chippy" Shaik, whose brother, Schabir Shaik, has interests in the French arms manufacturer, Thales and the local company African Defence System (ADS) did not "recluse himself properly" from the procurement for weapons suites for the navy's new ships. Shaik served on some of the committees that awarded the defence contracts to ADS. Schabir Shaik was arrested on Friday by the NDPP on charges relating to the theft of government documents, which are alleged to have given him inside information on bidding for the government's multi-billion dollar arms procurement deal.

Besides clearing the arms deal of widespread corruption, the report also says the government's costing of the package and its procurement procedures were sufficient and compared favourably with other country's. It warns that the government should get further legal opinion on how to hold arms companies to the promises of investment in South Africa, that they made in return for being awarded contracts...

GROUPS SUE US OVER MINING RULES

WASHINGTON, Nov 18 (IPS) - Environmental groups filed a federal suit Friday against the government in an attempt to overturn new hard-rock mining regulations critics consider too weak. Advocacy groups argued that hard-rock mining rules drawn up last month by Interior Secretary Gale Norton violated the Federal Land Policy and Management Act's mandate to "prevent undue degradation" of public lands. A spokesperson said the Interior Department could not comment on the matter as it involved pending litigation. In October, Norton reversed regulations enacted last year by former President Bill Clinton's administration. These would have imposed more rigorous environmental standards on mining operations. Norton argued they were unjustifiably restrictive. Lexi Shultz, legislative director at the Washington-based Mineral Policy Centre, one of the plaintiffs in the case filed Friday, said the mining industry's track record demonstrates that unsupervised mining unlawfully damages public lands. "Secretary Norton turned her back on communities and the environment when she decided to gut strong environmental mining rules," said Shultz. The plaintiffs - also including Great Basin Mine Watch, based in the state of Nevada and Guardians of Our Rural Environment, based in the state of Arizona - further petitioned the court to prevent the new mining rules from taking effect while the case is being considered. The Clinton regulations gave federal officials new authority to block mines deemed likely to cause "substantial irreparable harm" to water resources. If left in place, advocacy groups said, these rules would have protected the environment by establishing standards to protect groundwater and wildlife habitat. Mining companies, however, have argued that the disposal of mining wastes already is strictly regulated through the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, the Water Act, and various state laws. Jack Gerard, president and chief executive of the National Mining Association, said last year's rules would reduce the company's output and could mean the loss of mining jobs in rural communities. Conservationists countered that the public favours strong environmental rules. Before Norton issued the new policy late last month, the Bureau of Land Management, a unit of the Interior Department, said it received 49,000 public comments on the new rules, 47,000 of which urged her to keep the strong mining rules. According to the government's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the mining industry is one of the country's top watershed polluters....