

NEWS DIGEST

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Habibie withdraws candidacy

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesia's president withdrew as a presidential candidate Wednesday (Tuesday CDT), local television news reported, hours after lawmakers rejected a speech in which he defended his 16 months in office.

In a session that dragged from Tuesday into the early hours of Wednesday morning, the 700-member People's Consultative Assembly also voted to recognize East Timor's vote for independence, paving the way for the half-island territory to become the world's newest nation.

SCTV television's report of President B.J. Habibie's decision not to seek re-election came a few hours before Indonesia's legislature convened to elect a new head of state.

Amien Rais, the speaker of the assembly, told SCTV that Habibie made the decision after meeting at his home early Wednesday with top politicians and that he would announce his decision to the nation before parliament reconvened later Wednesday for the election.

Shortly after midnight Tuesday, the legislature rejected in a close vote

Habibie's recent "accountability" speech about the successes and failures of his administration.

Although that did not exclude him from the election, many people expected that his party would have no choice but to seek a replacement candidate.

After the legislature's votes, supporters of Habibie's rival for the presidency, Megawati Sukarnoputri, marched jubilantly through the streets of the capital, Jakarta.

Some members of the assembly cheered as the 355-322 vote rejecting Habibie's speech was announced.

Habibie had been appointed to take over the presidency when his mentor, Suharto, stepped down last year in the face of violent protests against his rule.

Habibie's government implemented democratic reforms but has been plagued by economic hardship, scandals, protests and violence in some separatist sections of the country.

The assembly's decision to recognize former Portuguese colony's Aug. 30 vote for independence after 24

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years of Indonesian rule brought some closure for East Timor's 850,000 people.

The territory's overwhelming vote to break free of Indonesia led to a wave of killing, looting and arson by pro-Indonesian militias and their Indonesian military allies that continued until the deployment of an Australian-led multinational peace-keeping force.

The official handover of East Timor to a U.N. transitional team is expected by the end of the year.

In Washington, the Clinton administration welcomed the independence decision and said the United States is closely watching the vote for a new president.

“The assembly's unequivocal action shows respect for the will of

the people of East Timor,” President Clinton said in a statement.

“It is also an important step forward in Indonesia's own democratic transformation.”

Clinton called on the United Nations to establish a transition administration in East Timor and urged Indonesia to ensure the safe return of displaced East Timorese. He said the United States will help East Timor obtain legal recognition of independence and develop the necessary government institutions.

Habibie's withdrawal strengthened the presidential hopes of Megawati, the daughter of Indonesia's founding leader, Sukarno.

Megawati's party won the most — though not a majority — of the votes in June 7 parliamentary elections.

Ex-Pakistan leader in protective custody

■ Council that will rule the country will be named soon, official says.

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan (AP) — Deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will stay in “protective custody” while the military investigates corrupt practices after taking over Pakistan's government a week ago, a military spokesman said Tuesday.

Although where the former prime minister is being held is not known, Brig. Rashid Quereshi said he is in good health.

“No one has been ill-treated at all,” he said.

He also said it will likely be another week before Army Chief Gen. Pervez Musharraf announces the six-member National Security Council of army officers and civilians who will govern the country.

“I would guess it would not take more than one week,” before the new military-led government is known, he said.

“Each decision that is taken is going to be well-deliberated, well-studied, because if that amount of effort doesn't go into the initial stages, it is likely to go wrong.”

However, Quereshi said an investigation has already begun into the circumstances surrounding the Oct. 12 drama at Karachi Airport, when the aircraft returning Musharraf to Pakistan from Sri Lanka was not allowed to land.

The army takeover had begun when the aircraft carrying the army chief was denied landing rights, apparently on the orders of Sharif. It was kept in the air circling the country's largest city, using up fuel until the army gained control of the Karachi airport and allowed the plane, carrying Musharraf and 200 passengers, to land with 10 minutes of fuel remaining.

Musharraf earlier accused Sharif of endangering the lives of all the passengers on board. Some within the army have said it was an attempt to kill the army chief.

Filibuster halts ban on 'soft money'

WASHINGTON (AP) — Legislation to overhaul the nation's campaign finance laws fell to a Republican filibuster for the fourth straight year on Tuesday, despite concessions by supporters designed to build fresh momentum for the measure.

“We will persevere,” vowed Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., whose call to reduce the role of money in campaigns is a cornerstone of his bid for the GOP presidential nomination.

“The Senate did the country a favor” by keeping the bill bottled up, countered Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who contends the measure's ban on unlimited “soft money” contributions would violate the constitution's free speech protections.

Soft money contributions are unlimited donations that unions, corporations and some individuals give to the Republican and Democratic parties.

The bill's fate was sealed when the Senate twice fell short of the 60-vote majority needed to overcome the filibuster. All 45 Senate Democrats supported both efforts to free the measure, joined by a shifting group of Republicans.

Moments after the second vote, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott sought to remove the bill from Senate debate.

“It's dead for the year,” the Mississippi Republican later told reporters.

Democrats objected to Lott's decision to terminate debate on the bill, and McCain said he would look for opportunities in unrelated legislation to demand a vote on a soft money ban before year's end.

“Once again, a minority in the Senate has blocked bipartisan campaign finance reform,” President Clinton said in a written statement.

He said the Senate's action was “a victory for the politics of cynicism, and it leaves unchecked the influence of moneyed special interests.” Filibusters killed campaign finance legislation in 1996, 1997 and last year.

Republicans customarily raise more campaign funds than Democrats.

The day's first vote, 52-48, came on legislation patterned after a bill the

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House approved earlier this year.

The second vote, 53-47, came on a slimmed-down bill that McCain and Feingold decided to push this year in an attempt to thwart McConnell's annual filibuster.

That bill would have banned soft money and would have allowed nonunion members to stop labor unions from spending their mandatory dues on political activities.

But it had been stripped of one key element of last year's bill: a provision to restrict so-called “issue ads,” thinly veiled attacks on candidates paid for with soft money.

Lott's decision prompted a sharp attack from Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., who argued that majority Republicans had not followed through on commitments related to the bill.

McCain and Feingold decided in advance of debate to offer a slimmed-down bill in hopes they could surmount the threatened filibuster.

They also hoped they had won Lott's agreement to permit a traditional style of debate in which amendments were debated and voted on.

That way, they said, Republicans who previously have opposed the measure might be brought on board if their own provisions won approval.

That strategy quickly started to unravel, though.

Opponents of the measure consumed considerable time by demanding that McCain name the names of senators corrupted by soft money, as his campaign Web site appeared to claim.

World and Nation Datelines

■ Germany German police arrest alleged airplane hijacker

HAMBURG, Germany (AP) — German police arrested the alleged hijacker of an EgyptAir flight after he forced it to land Tuesday in Hamburg. Fifty-five others aboard were freed four hours after the plane was commandeered over Turkey.

A man armed with a knife seized control of Flight 838 shortly after it took off from Istanbul's Ataturk airport at 6:16 p.m. (10:16 a.m. CDT) en route to Cairo, authorities said.

In Hamburg, authorities persuaded the suspect to leave the plane by agreeing to review his request for asylum. Hamburg Police Chief Wolfgang Sielaff said the man, who has refused to give his identity, will be charged with hijacking in Germany.

■ Washington Social Security increases to begin in January

WASHINGTON (AP) — Retirees will get the biggest cost-of-living increase in their Social Security checks that they've seen in three years — an average \$19 a month — beginning in January.

The 2.4 percent benefits boost, announced by the Social Security Administration on Tuesday, will be nearly twice the 1.3 percent increase senior citizens got this year.

However, with overall inflation remaining relatively tame, the 2000 Social Security payment update will continue a 1990s trend of modest increases. The annual adjustment is tied to the government's estimate of increases in consumer prices.

■ New York Court rules benefits can't hinge on AIDS status

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York City can't require people with the AIDS virus to go through special personal and medical background checks to receive welfare benefits, the state's highest court ruled Tuesday.

The city's “eligibility verification review,” established in 1995, cannot be used as a hurdle to welfare benefits, the Court of Appeals said in a unanimous opinion.

The court said a 1997 ordinance approved by the City Council requires the city to make things as easy as possible for people with AIDS or HIV to get public assistance, the court said.

■ Colorado Debate doesn't stop case against 11-year-old

GOLDEN, Colo. (AP) — An 11-year-old boy accused of fondling his 5-year-old sister is at the center of an international debate over when childhood play crosses the line and becomes a criminal act.

The boy, who has dual Swiss-American citizenship and is known by his first name, Raoul, was placed in juvenile detention after his Aug. 30 arrest.

A neighbor had reported seeing him fondling his sister. According to court documents, the girl also told case workers of other incidents in which the boy molested her.

Prosecutors have charged the boy in juvenile court with incest, and a judge ruled Tuesday that the case can proceed.

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