

HEALTH ALERT

PRODUCED BY THE HEALTH ACTION INFORMATION NETWORK, 9 CABANATUAN ROAD, PHILAM HOMES, QUEZON CITY

ANTI-BIOTECH COALITION FORMED

After being convinced of the health and environmental dangers surrounding biotechnology, concerned citizens and several non-government organizations have formed the Anti-Biotech Coalition (ABC), a group which will deal with issues concerning biotechnology, the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) and patents on life.

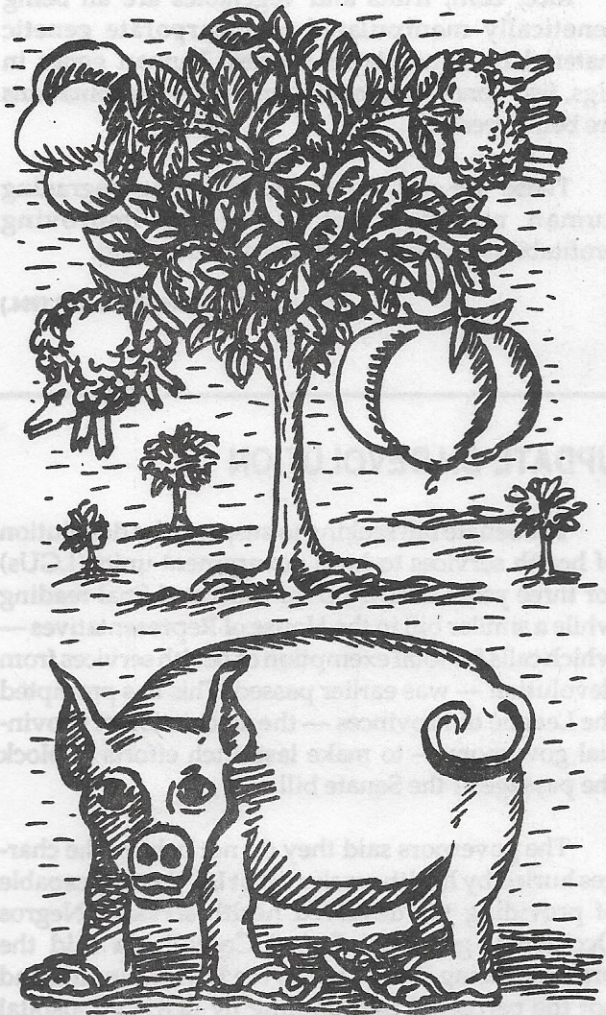
ABC was formed after a week-long seminar examining the international biotechnology revolution, including the science of molecular biology and genetic engineering. After forming the coalition, its members issued a citizens' declaration outlining their position rejecting technology packages which view life as simply a biochemical machine to be manipulated, bought and sold for profit.

Scientists and environmentalists fear that GATT may open the floodgates to free trade in biotechnological products that have negative impact on health and environment.

Nicanor Perlas, president of the Center for Alternative Development Initiative (CADI), said the dangers of genetic engineering are real, warning about the unknown health dangers of consuming these biotech products and unforeseen ecological impacts of these genetically-engineered plants and animals.

"Unlike chemical substances which can be cleaned up, biotech products have a life of their own," Perlas said.

Critics have been wary of the creation of new life forms, charging those who do so with playing god



and tinkering with processes which are still insufficiently understood. The existing regulation of the biotech industry has also been questioned.

"With biotech scientists sitting on company boards and on regulatory bodies, how can the public

ISSUE 165

INSIDE: Update on Devolution ♦ Exercise Can Reduce Breast Cancer Risk ♦ Nicotine is Addictive ♦ Fear, Denial and HIV

be assured of unbiased assessments?," asked Perlas.

Perlas noted that researches on a wide range of biotech foodstuffs and medicines include bizarre recombinations of plants and animal genes to produce so-called transgenic varieties.

Rice, corn, fruits and vegetables are all being genetically manipulated to incorporate genetic material from unrelated species. Human genes in pigs, fish genes in tomatoes and other combinations are being created.

These are not, however, aimed at upgrading human nutrition but rather for improving profitability in the food industry, Perlas said.

(Sources: MB, Sept. 14; PDI, Aug. 28, 1994.)

UPDATE ON DEVOLUTION

The Senate bill seeking to suspend the devolution of health services to local government units (LGUs) for three years is now up for third and final reading while a similar bill in the House of Representatives — which calls for total exemption of health services from devolution — was earlier passed. This has prompted the League of Provinces — the association of provincial governors — to make last ditch efforts to block the passage of the Senate bill.

The governors said they do not believe the charges hurled by health workers that LGUs are incapable of providing the devolved health services. Negros Occidental governor Rafael Coscolluela said the problem facing devolution is the lack of funding and not the perceived mishandling by LGUs of hospital and other devolved services. He also said the governors think Congress has never really been sympathetic to the devolution because it diminished the clout of congressmen and senators.

Coscolluela pointed out that the management of health services by LGUs has been in place for almost two years and suspending it now "is like stopping a vehicle in the middle of a bridge because it is about to run out of gas."

HEALTH ALERT is produced every two weeks by the Health Action Information Network (HAIN), a non-government, non-profit organization. The newsletter provides news on health-related issues, as well as economic and political developments that shape the health care situation. It also includes activities and announcements from health groups, while providing a forum for diverse views and opinions on health issues.

Articles and letters are welcomed. We reserve the right to edit or reject. Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-stamped envelope. Unsigned articles will not be used for publication. You may request anonymity but must provide a real name and address.

All articles in **HEALTH ALERT** may be reproduced as long as acknowledgment is given to the author and/or HAIN. Please send us a copy of any material you reprint.

You can get details on the issues featured by writing to HAIN or visiting our resource center which is open to the public on Tuesday to Friday from 10 am to 5 pm and on Saturday from 9 am to 12 midday.

STAFFERS:

Michael L Tan, Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, Mercedes B Apilado, Ian Victoriano, Tonette Veloso, Bernard Tomas, Henri de la Cruz, Boy Dominguez, Ed Reyes, Lando Veloso, E R Montecillo

EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICES:

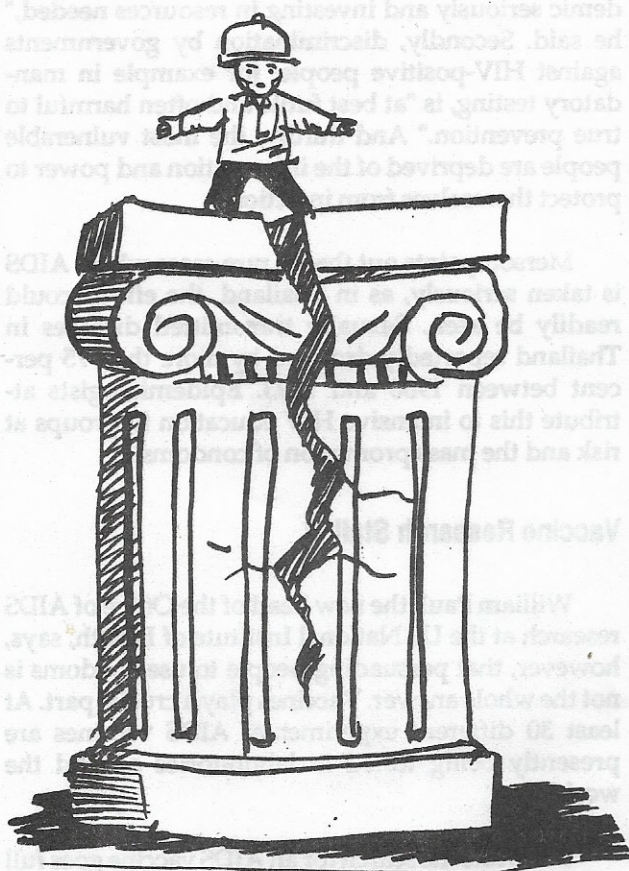
9 Cabanatuan Road, Philam Homes, QC./ PO Box 1665, Central Post Office, QC

Entered as second class mail at the Quezon City Post Office dated August 15, 1987 under Permit No 92.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES:

Domestic P200.00/year
Foreign: US\$36.00/year (First World)
US\$30.00/year (Third World)

For provincial subscribers, please send money order. International subscribers may send check or money order. Please make all checks payable to HAIN.



Meanwhile, four senators expressed opposition to the Senate bill. Senators Nikki Coseteng, Arturo Tolentino, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Orlando Mercado assailed the bill as contrary to the spirit of local autonomy.

Coseteng echoes the position of the League of Provinces, saying that the reason why local government units encounter financial difficulties in absorbing the devolved services was because the devolution was not accompanied with appropriate funds.

Arroyo said that the devolution of health services must be made "optional" depending on the capability of LGUs to handle these devolved functions.

On the other hand, the Philippine Medical Association (PMA) asked President Fidel Ramos to reject Republic Act 7160 which stipulates the devolution of health services. The PMA also appealed for the return of all Department of Health (DOH) hospitals, field public workers and all their facilities to the DOH for proper maintenance, integration and coordination.

The PMA said many private doctors are against the devolution of health care.

The medical association said LGUs are not financially, politically and technically prepared to assume the responsibility that involves people's lives and welfare.

Health Secretary Juan Flavio, who earlier signed a memorandum requesting President Ramos to veto all proposed bills seeking to return the devolved health services to the national government, said he made a mistake in doing so. This came after criticisms from Senate health committee chairman Freddie Webb who is urging Flavio to wait for the results of a survey assessing the impact of the devolution of health services before taking any action.

Flavio earlier signed a joint memorandum with the Department of Budget and Management, Local Government, and League of Provinces and Municipalities telling the president that devolution guarantees a more efficient delivery of basic services. "A reversal of devolution at this point would be costly, counterproductive and impractical," the memo said.

(Sources: TODAY, Aug.28; MB, Sept.19; PDI, Sept.15,16, 1994.)

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON UNSUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

Southern non-governmental organizations feel that while it is commendable that northern countries were pressed to discuss urgent global issues during the recently concluded International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the exercise also has its downside.

Martin Khor of the Penang-based Third World Network said that by focusing on population, the media projects an image of the South, which is home to 80% of the world's population and the center of population explosion in the years to come, as the source of global environmental pressure.

Khor sees this as an attempt of the North to push the burden of adjustment on the South, so that rich

countries will not have to change their consumption-oriented lifestyles.

"The fear is that by focusing on population, the ICPD is in danger of losing sight of the fact that 30% of the world's population consume about 80% of its resources," he said.

The solution, said the Southern NGO Development Forum, a coalition of 75 NGOs from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, is for the United Nations to hold an international conference on unsustainable consumption. The coalition said the ICPD would have made better sense if counterbalanced by an international conference on unsustainable consumption.

"There is an urgent need to restore a fair balance between the population issue and the consumption-lifestyle issue on the global agenda," the coalition said.

Several Northern NGOs were also critical of the fact that consumption was being increasingly left out of the global population agenda. Sally Ethelston of the Washington-based Population Action International (PAI) said the consumption issue was something "very, very difficult to discuss in the United States."

Just before the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, then US President George Bush said the US lifestyle was not up for negotiations.

(Source: MC, Sept.14,1994)

FEAR, DENIAL AND HIV

Despite the best efforts of health educators and researchers, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports that more people were infected with HIV in the past 12 months than in any previous year. The estimated total number of infections has jumped from 14 million last year to 17 million this year. In China, an HIV epidemic looms. The number of people infected with other sexually transmitted diseases has climbed sharply as the economy booms and millions of people migrate for new jobs.

If so much has now been known about preventing HIV infection, why is the epidemic continuing to expand?

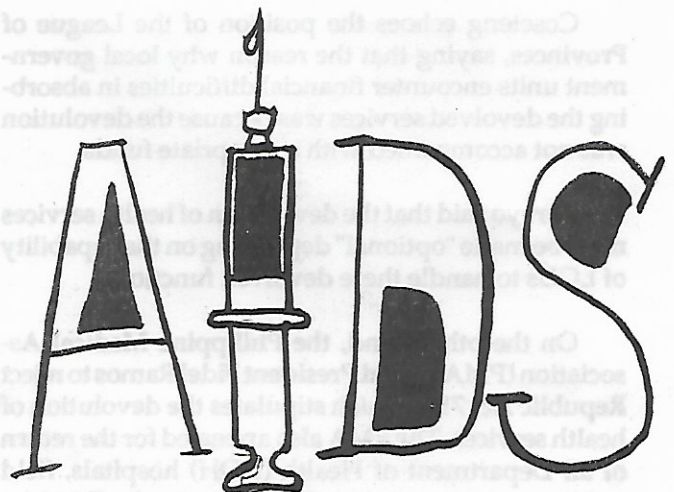
Michael Merson, head of the WHO's global programme on AIDS, suggests three reasons. "Denial is what keeps society's leaders from taking the pandemic seriously and investing in resources needed," he said. Secondly, discrimination by governments against HIV-positive people, for example in mandatory testing, is "at best futile and often harmful to true prevention." And thirdly, the most vulnerable people are deprived of the information and power to protect themselves from infection.

Merson points out that in rare cases where AIDS is taken seriously, as in Thailand, the effects could readily be seen. Sexually transmitted diseases in Thailand reportedly dropped by more than 75 percent between 1986 and 1993. Epidemiologists attribute this to intensive HIV education in groups at risk and the mass promotion of condoms."

Vaccine Research Stalled

William Paul, the new head of the Office of AIDS research at the US National Institute of Health, says, however, that persuading people to use condoms is not the whole answer. Vaccines play a crucial part. At least 30 different experimental AIDS vaccines are presently being tested in laboratories around the world.

But while the search for an AIDS vaccine goes full blast, AIDS activists and public health experts recently persuaded the US government that it is too early for large scale vaccine trials. They cautioned government not to spend millions of dollars on a trial just because they are under pressure to "do something" in



the face of the epidemic, and bowing to the power of the pharmaceutical industry.

Since there is still lack of evidence regarding the usefulness of the first generation of AIDS vaccines developed over the past five years, AIDS activists feel the trials may do more harm than good.

They warned that launching a trial of a vaccine that offered only partial protection could deepen the mistrust of science in the communities most affected by AIDS.

(Sources: New Scientist, June 25; Aug. 13, 1994.)

EXERCISE REDUCES BREAST CANCER RISK

A study by researchers at the University of Southern California revealed that regular exercise can substantially reduce the risk of breast cancer in women. The study was the first specifically designed to investigate the effects of physical activity on breast cancer.

Dr. Leslie Bernstein, professor of preventive medicine at USC and head of the study group, said their data indicate that women who participate in four or more hours of physical activity per week during their reproductive years reduce their risk of



breast cancer by 60 percent relative to inactive women.

"Even one to three hours of physical exercise a week reduces a woman's risk of breast cancer by about 30 percent," Bernstein said.

The researchers interviewed 1,090 women 40 years old and under, 545 of whom were newly diagnosed with breast cancer and 545 who were breast cancer free. Lifetime histories of regular exercise were collected, as was information on risk factors such as family history of breast cancer and a number of pregnancies.

Bernstein said a woman's cumulative exposure to the ovarian hormones estradiol and progesterone during menstruation was believed to be a strong indicator of her breast cancer risk. Physical exercise changes the length of a woman's menstrual cycle and her overall exposure to ovarian hormones is reduced, Bernstein explained.

"The protective effect of regular physical activity empowers women to positively affect their health by modifying their lifestyles," she said.

(Source: MB, Sept. 23, 1994)

NICOTINE IS ADDICTIVE

An advisory panel to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently agreed with the 1988 US Surgeon General's findings that nicotine is addictive and that it was the chief reason people smoke cigarettes. This development is expected to boost an ongoing campaign waged by FDA commissioner David Kessler for tobacco to be regulated like many other drugs.

The decision came after two days of testimony from experts on nicotine and addiction, some of whom told the panel that regularly smoking five cigarettes a day is enough to cause addiction in some people. The Drug Abuse Advisory Committee was convened to settle the issue between Kessler's claims that nicotine is addictive and the tobacco industry's assertion that it is not.

In 1988, the US Surgeon general concluded in a report on tobacco that nicotine is addictive in the fullest sense of the word. It is psychoactive, having a direct effect on the brain; it is reinforcing, meaning that users will keep using the drug; it is used compulsively despite harmful effects; the desire to smoke takes precedence over other important priorities, such as health, and smokers become physically dependent on nicotine.

Both the WHO and the American Psychological Association also define nicotine as addictive, but scientists working for the tobacco industry say the term is misused. They say that cigarettes can, at most, be called habituating: they are hard to give up but not because of any effect nicotine has on the brain. They also said they believed addiction was a term that should be reserved for intoxicating drugs, like heroin and cocaine.

John Robinson, a scientist who works for the tobacco giant R.J. Reynolds, said cigarettes are a habit, like coffee-drinking. They may be hard to stop, but are not the same as addictions to substances such as heroin or cocaine.

Another scientist, Robert Cancro, head of the department of Psychiatry at the New York University Medical School, said a person who seeks pleasure from smoking is different from a person 'strung out' on drugs. The former may enjoy the activity and

pursue it; but the latter will reshape his life to obtain the drug.

Other scientists, however, think they misrepresent what constitutes an addiction.

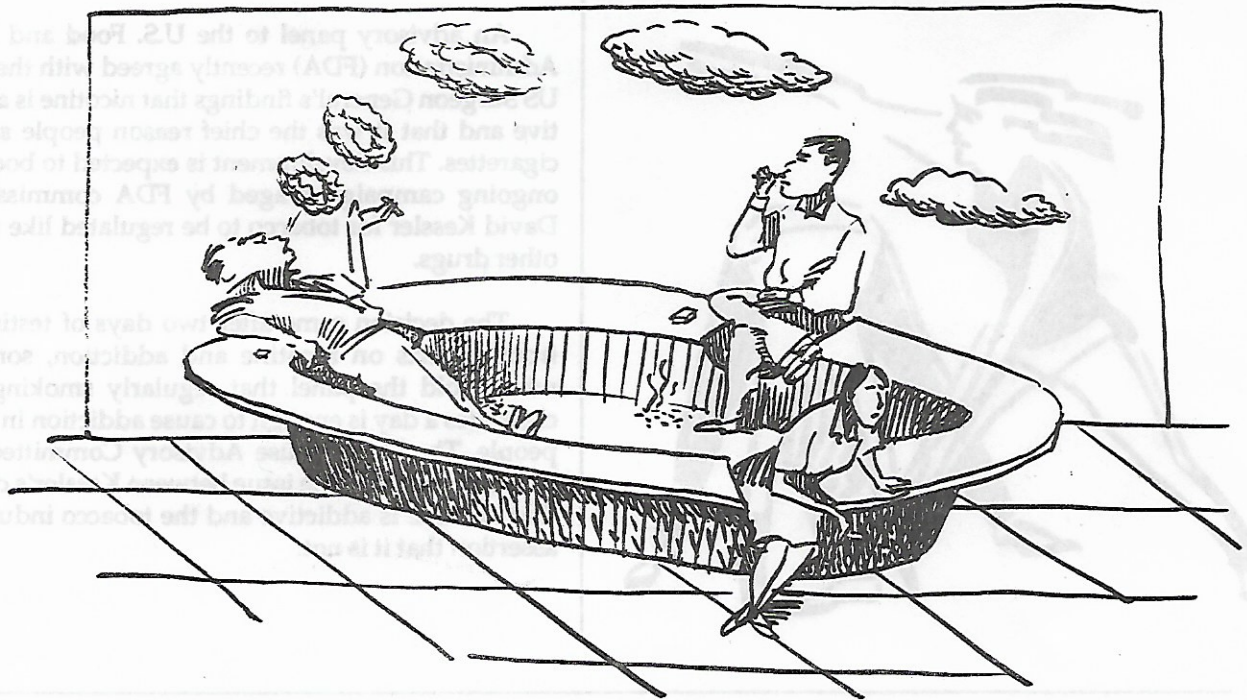
Jack Henningfield, chief of the pharmacology branch at the National Institute on Drug Abuse Addiction Research Center, rejects most of the alleged differences between nicotine and other drugs. He said the fact that smokers do not turn to crime to feed their addiction has more to do with the ready supply of cigarettes than a lack of addictiveness.

Several expert witnesses suggested that the tobacco industry reduce the nicotine in cigarettes over 10 to 20 years to a non-addictive level.

They proposed requiring tobacco companies to include nicotine that would allow people to smoke 20 to 30 cigarettes a day without inhaling more than 5 milligrams of nicotine. They said this was a level at which few if any people would be addicted.

But scientists testifying on behalf of the tobacco industry said such a level would produce a cigarette similar to a low-nicotine Philip Morris brand called Next, which was taken off the market because it was unpopular.

(Sources: IHT, Aug. 4; New Scientist, Aug. 13, 1994.)



A SENSE OF HISTORY

By Ed Aurelio C. Reyes

State, Church Tangle on Contraception

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of Catholics heeded the call made by Manila Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin and converged at the Rizal Park in Manila in the afternoon of August 14, to demonstrate support for the Church's stand on artificial means of population control. The prelate's call was accompanied by memoranda issued to heads of Catholic schools requiring them to bring their students to the rally as an equivalent of a class day. Masses at Catholic parish churches were suspended and parishioners were asked to hear mass at the Rizal Park demonstration, instead.

The Catholic leadership claimed an attendance figure of one million, but statisticians among police officers and journalists said the estimate was too high.

Two days later, President Ramos signed a joint accord against abortion and homosexual marriage as means to curb a high birth rate. The agreement was contained in a seven-point statement to be presented by the Philippines to the Cairo conference. The Palace also reportedly silenced Health Secretary Juan Flavio Velasco who had earlier been trading barbs with Cardinal Sin on the population issue.

Kidnaps in Mindanao, Manila

ABU SAYYAF guerrillas freed Fr. Cirilo Nacorda last August 8, 61 days after he was abducted with a group of Christian teachers and other civilians in Basilan province. The teachers were slain.

It was supposedly the dying wish of the Abu Sayyaf leader that the priest be released. Negotiators said no ransom was paid.

In Metro Manila, Meneleo Carlos Jr., a multi-millionaire industrialist and business leader, was snatched on August 23 by four armed men outside his house in a plush subdivision in Pasig.

The Philippine National Police said a well-financed syndicate with "military background" may have been behind the businessman's kidnapping.

However, a PNP officer who asked not to be identified, said it may also be the urban guerrilla group Alex Boncayao Brigade that is holding Carlos.

Earlier, three elementary school students of Ateneo de Manila, all surnamed Bellosillo, were kidnapped along with their househelp in Diliman, but were released after ransom was paid.

Three days before Carlos was abducted, an Adamson University professor was kidnapped at the parking lot of Ayala Center in Makati as she was loading groceries into her car. She was released later with her abductors' explanation and apologies that she was taken "by mistake."

Even as Carlos' family insisted that he had not really been kidnapped, President Ramos ordered the police and the military to rescue the industrialist. (Late word had it that Carlos "escaped" his captors shortly before this issue of Health Alert went to press. But speculations that his family had paid ransom could not be squelched.)

In North Cotabato, armed men identified as guerrillas of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front claimed to be "providing security" for a Korea-funded irrigation project. Eight Korean engineers were reportedly



trapped in a tense standoff between government troops and the MILF men who said they were hired by the Koreans themselves as project security personnel. The engineers refused to leave, saying they wanted to insure the safety of the expensive equipment they are responsible for.



Easy Exit of 11 Indians Scored

SEN. ERNESTO Herrera said the eleven Indians deported by the Bureau of Immigration and Deportation were part of an international drug syndicate. BID chief Zafiro Respicio blamed the National Bureau of Investigation, headed by Epimaco Velasco, for failure to file any charges if they had solid evidence against the Indians for using or pushing dangerous drugs.

Respicio said the Indians were deported because they were undocumented aliens, and not because they were facing any charges involving dangerous drugs. The NBI countered by saying the BID had actually helped the Indians to escape prosecution.

Both Velasco and Respicio offered their resignations to President Ramos. The chief executive accepted the resignation of Respicio, but kept Velasco at the NBI. Bello, meanwhile, resigned as presidential assistant for political affairs and Lakas deputy secretary general. He had been implicated by witnesses as having pressured Respicio to deport the Indians.

Ombudsman Conrado Vasquez vowed there would be no whitewash on the case. Vasquez has started studying the report submitted to him by a special investigating panel.

The Indian embassy asked the Philippine government to prove that the deported aliens were indeed

Indians by presenting their passports. "Indian names are being maligned," an embassy consul said.

Comelec Man Denies Sexual Harassment

COMELEC COMMISSIONER Manolo Gorospe denied the accusation that he had maliciously stolen a kiss from a colleague, Commissioner Remedios Salazar Fernando. Gorospe dared Fernando to file criminal charges against him, instead of "using the Comelec as venue." He said "sexual harassment" has no place in the Revised Penal Code. He also filed a libel suit against Comelec Chairman Christian Monsod for allegedly calling him a "pedophile." Monsod said the case was "plain harassment."

Meanwhile, an official of the Civil Service Commission said that while no crime of "sexual harassment" exists in the law books, Gorospe could still be charged for violating the code of ethics for public officials and employees.

SC Okays VAT; GATT Debates Mount

THE SUPREME Court upheld on August 25 the legality of Republic Act No. 7716, otherwise known as the Expanded VAT Law, which intends to raise an additional P8 billion a year for government.

Internal Revenue Commissioner Liwayway V. Chato said the government will start VAT collection on October 1. The measure imposes a 10-percent tax on a wide variety of goods and services at every phase of production up to retail.

After a series of deadlocks, the high court voted 9-6 to dismiss nine petitions challenging the tax law's validity.

In the wake of the High Tribunal's ruling on the VAT law, groups opposing the tax law have started formulating plans to continue their crusade. Senators Arturo Tolentino and Raul Roco, both VAT oppositors, said the only remedy left now is for Congress itself to change the law. For his part, Renato Constantino Jr., spokesman of the Kilusan Laban sa VAT (KILLVAT), urged business enterprises to boycott VAT registration, which means an annual fee of P1,000 for many firms, big or small, including those not covered by VAT. Constantino also said the op-

position may also opt to launch a "people's initiative" process to repeal the VAT law.

Meanwhile, debates on the Uruguay Round of the General Agreements on Tariff and Trade (GATT) have mounted, pitting technocrats and politicians, on the one hand, in debate with non-government and people's organizations, on the other.

Senate President Edgardo Angara told a Senate public hearing on GATT that failure of the Philippines to ratify the document would make the country an "outcast" worldwide. Warnings on the dire consequences of GATT ratification on local producers and the national economy have been aired by IBON Databank, Senators Wigberto Tañada and Raul Roco, and Dr. Walden Bello.

Writing as a UP professor, Bello came out with a three-part series explaining that the ratification of the GATT document by the Philippine Senate would put the country at a gross disadvantage, including the possibility of having local agricultural products wiped out by foreign competition. Bello, a prominent economic analyst who had exposed the effects of World Bank-IMF-imposed policies being implemented by the Marcos dictatorship, compared the Philippine economy "to a rickety jalopy that is inexorably edging toward a railroad crossing where it will have its fatal rendezvous with the GATT bullet train."



August 21 Mysteries Remain

FORMER PRESIDENT Corazon Aquino pressed her estranged cousin Eduardo Cojuangco to reveal the mastermind behind her husband's assassination eleven years ago. Mrs. Aquino made the call after a Mass that marked the August 21, 1983 assassination of former Sen. Benigno Aquino Jr. She said Cojuangco, a businessman who heads the opposition Nationalist People's Coalition party, is withholding information from her and the people.

A spokesman for Cojuangco denied Mrs. Aquino's charge, even as Sen. Agapito Aquino said he was sure the late dictator himself had masterminded the killing.

The Aquino assassination was investigated by a special commission headed by former Judge Rosie Agrava. In 1985, the Sandiganbayan found soldiers of the now defunct Aviation Security Command (Avsecom) guilty of killing Aquino and a "fall-guy," one Rolando Galman. However, public clamor for justice demanded that the masterminds be revealed and punished, and were not contented with the formal ruling handed down by the court.

Meanwhile, former Senator Jovito Salonga said he was convinced beyond reasonable doubt that self-exiled Communist Party chief Jose Ma. Sison was behind the Plaza Miranda bombing of a major Liberal Party rally on August 21, 1971. Salonga's statement was immediately answered by Sison who repeated his denial of involvement.

No Pay for Japan's Sex Slaves

JAPANESE Prime Minister Tomichi Murayama told President Ramos in Manila that Japan has "a firm determination not to repeat the mistakes of the past," but his deputy press secretary doused all hopes of Filipino "comfort women" and the Japanese-Filipino children born out of wedlock that they would be compensated. The spokesman, Kisichiro Amae, said Tokyo was "seriously considering" to give compensation, but that this would be in the form of funding for projects such as a proposed vocational training center for Filipino women.

In a subsequent development, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad told Murayama that

the latter's government should apologize for World War II and forget about compensation for its victims.

Lakas, Laban Parties Coalesce

THE ADMINISTRATION Lakas-NUCD and the Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP), the two most powerful political parties of the country, have jointly approved the formation of a common slate of senatorial candidates for 1995. President Ramos, who announced this development with Senate and LDP President Edgardo Angara and House Speaker Jose de Venecia, heads the still-unnamed coalition.

Executive Secretary Teofisto Guingona said the coalition arrangement would insure the Senate nod on the Uruguay Round of GATT. "GATT is part of (our) common agenda," he said. This was, however, denied by Angara and Senator Orlando Mercado, both of the Laban party.

HEALTH ACTION INFORMATION NETWORK
PO BOX 1665
CENTRAL POST OFFICE
QUEZON CITY
PHILIPPINES

Zambo: RP's Worst Coal Pit Mishap

CASUALTIES were estimated at about a hundred miners an explosion rocked a coal mine in Malangas, Zamboanga del Sur, owned by the Philippine National Oil Company on August 29. It was the country's worst coal mining disaster, after 27 miners perished in a coal mine explosion in Cebu in 1983. Most of the deaths were due to asphyxiation by poisonous gas, suffocation by earth and mud, drowning, or burns. Officials said there were 170 employees working when the blast occurred, in tunnels that range from 150 to 240 meters below the ground.

Abbreviation of Periodicals:

MB, Manila Bulletin; MC, Manila Chronicle; MS, Manila Standard; MT, Manila Times; PS, Philippine Star; PDI, Philippine Daily Inquirer.

