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Big 'win' for Bryant in rape case

- A 7



Love in a world of politics

- B 1



On Monday The Times will devote a special section to the SONA

Noli drops DSWD bid



FRACTURED FACADE

A huge section of the façade of a building on Rada Street in Divisoria, Manila, has been ripped off after being scraped by the building across that collapsed Friday afternoon. No one was hurt as the building came crashing down, but city hall has ordered an investigation.

PHOTO BY REM ZAMORA

Decision made after consulting President

In a surprise move, Vice President Noli de Castro on Saturday announced he was declining his appointment as secretary of Social Welfare and Development.

In a statement sent by his office to media organizations, de Castro said: "After consulting with the President, I have decided to politely decline her offer to appoint me as secretary of social welfare and development."

He said Social Welfare and Development Secretary Corazon Soliman would remain head of the department, and that he would continue to assist President Arroyo as alternate chair of the National Antipoverty Commission (NAPC).

The Vice President did not fully explain why he was declining the position, which he had eagerly pursued. "I believe this will be good for our people," was all he said.

In his statement he hinted at the need for a "harmonious working relationship" with other leaders of the government.

"I would want very much for President Arroyo's administration to succeed. A key factor to that success is the harmonious working relation-



de Castro

ship with other leaders in our government and especially among members of her official family," de Castro said in his statement.

Malacañang had no immediate comment on de Castro's statement. Soliman issued her own statement, saying the Vice President "has shown his leadership and selflessness in putting the unity and harmony of the government above his preference."

She said she would wait for the President's instruction.

SEE NOLI/A6

Egyptian first envoy abducted in Baghdad

BAGHDAD, Iraq—Black-clad militants took a senior Egyptian diplomat hostage Friday and demanded his country give up any plans to send security experts to support Iraq's new government, according to a video broadcast on the al-Jazeera television station.

In a separate video another militant group holding seven foreign truck drivers hostage announced a new set of demands, insisting their Kuwaiti employer compensate the families of those killed by US forces in the city of Fallujah.

In recent months militants in Iraq have kidnapped roughly 70 foreigners, many of them poorly guarded truck drivers, in an effort to force countries to pull out their troops and to scare away foreign contractors working here.

But Mohammed Mamdouh Helmi Qutb, the kidnapped Egyptian, was the first diplomat seized, and his capture signaled that insurgents were getting bolder and aiming for top officials.

An Egyptian diplomat in Baghdad, who declined to be identified, confirmed that Qutb had been taken Friday.

"Where was the Islam? He was going out of the mosque, and they kidnapped him," the diplomat said.

SEE EGYPTIAN/A6

Palace sure rift from pullout will heal soon

THE United States and other allies of the Philippines will eventually accept President Arroyo's controversial decision to withdraw troops from Iraq to save a hostage's life, her spokesman said Saturday.

The President's spokesman, Ignacio Bunye, said the Philippines would "continue to do its part in the war against terrorism" despite the withdrawal.

"We are confident that our allies

will eventually appreciate the unique Philippine experience and situation that compelled us to withdraw our contingent," Bunye said in a statement.

In a radio interview Bunye compared the controversy to a minor quarrel among siblings, "but in the end, they are all members of the same family."

He was referring to Mrs. Arroyo's decision to pull the 43-

man Philippine mission out of Iraq after militants kidnapped the truck driver Angelo de la Cruz and threatened to behead him unless the troops withdrew.

The President gave in to their demands and the troops left Iraq a month early, resulting in the release of de la Cruz who returned home to a hero's welcome on Thursday.

The United States and Australia deplored Mrs. Arroyo's decision,

saying she was giving in to terrorism and encouraging further attacks in Iraq without guaranteeing the safety of the 3,000 Filipino civilians still working there.

Bunye said, "Even the most stable international relationships can follow divergent paths at a certain point, but these paths always meet again."

"We travel the same road of democracy and share the same bur-

den of global security."

He cited Manila's continued fight against domestic Muslim extremists linked to the al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah terror networks.

Analysts said the President acted to save de la Cruz in order to placate the seven million Filipinos working overseas, who are a formidable political constituency and a major source of foreign exchange.

SEE PALACE/A6

• OPINION •

Comelec-Mega Pacific Consortium deal stinks

DANTE A. ANG

SOME people never learn. Hardly had President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo squeezed through what I thought was a political nightmare when some "businessmen" were at it again.

Were it not for Sen. Aquilino Pimentel Jr. we would not have known that the Commission on Elections is trying "to enter into a compromise deal with Mega Pacific Consortium," barely five months after the Supreme Court voided the automation of the May 10 election. The Court also ordered the return of the P1.3 billion that Mega Pacific Consortium had collected from the Comelec.

The compromise move stinks. In the first place, the Comelec's award of the counting machines to Mega Pacific was highly irregular. So

why should there be a compromise? A compromise with a thief? First, the thief takes your money and then you enter into a compromise agreement with him so that he can keep your money? What b.s. is that?

Very briefly, the Mega Pacific Consortium did not take part in the bidding. It was Mega Pacific eSolutions Inc. that joined the bidding, but it did not meet the eligibility requirements. It should have been disqualified.

In short, the Comelec awarded the contract to a phantom company. The fact is, for a while the notices could not be served on the consortium.

The counting machines—the subject of the bidding—were the same ones used in the May 11, 1998, election in the Autonomous Region of Mindanao.

SEE OPINION/A6

Seamen gear up with new 'enhancers'

PATRICIA ESTEVES
Reporter

WHEN it comes to pleasing their sexual partners, Filipino seamen are literally and figuratively a cut above the rest.

Some seafarers have "decorated" their sexual organs with a "hump" or a "butterfly," the better to satisfy a woman, notes Dr. Laured Hernandez, research associate of Center for Multidisciplinary Studies on Health and Development, a nongovernment organization advo-

ating HIV awareness.

These two "performance enhancers" are skin grafts attached to the penis through a surgical procedure simple enough to be performed by the ship's second mate, Hernandez said.

"You've got to hand it to Filipino ingenuity," he said. Hernandez stumbled upon the enhancers while doing research on the sexual behavior of seafarers and why they top the list of overseas workers afflicted with HIV.

Of the 2,021 HIV-positive pa-

tients in the study, 651 were migrant workers, of whom 243 were seamen.

"It was not our intention to do research on these things but in the course of our research and interviews, seafarers bragged about their manhood and even said *bolita* are already a thing of the past," Hernandez said.

A *bolita* is a metal ball the size of a mango bean surgically inserted under the skin of the penis. Seamen were supposed to be the first to use them.

SEE SEAMEN/A6

Kampi: Ally or counterforce?

MARICEL V. CRUZ
Reporter

THE sudden revival of President Arroyo's old political party—the Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (Kampi)—has made it an instant contender as the dominant political party and a looming threat to the ruling Lakas-Christian-Muslim Democrats.

The leaders of Kampi—the President's son, Rep. Juan Miguel "Mikey" Arroyo of Pampanga, brother-in-law Rep. Ignacio

Arroyo of Negros Occidental and Rep. Ronaldo Puno of Antipolo City, a political strategist who helped Mrs. Arroyo in her latest election campaign—have affirmed support for her and her programs at the House.

Many see Kampi as having the potential to become influential and powerful enough to wrest control in the House.

But Lakas stalwart Rep. Robert Ace Barbers of Surigao does not see it that way. Barbers said the return of Kampi is just "a mani-

festation of an active democracy in the country" and that Kampi embraces the same ideology as that of Lakas, its ally.

"I don't see any hidden political agenda with the revival of Kampi. Maybe, Kampi members would just want to introduce [new ideas] in the House. They are becoming active so their voices can be heard," said Barbers, who is being groomed as the House majority leader in the Thirteenth Congress.

SEE KAMPI/A6



Lt. Gen. Alberto Braganza, National Capital Region Command chief, and his police counterpart, Chief Supt Ricardo de Leon, survey the session hall at the Batasang Pambansa in Quezon City, where President Arroyo will deliver her State of the Nation address Monday. Protesters are expected to march to the Batasan, which will be secured by more than 5,000 soldiers and policemen.

PHOTO BY MAX PASION