

Constitutional crisis created in Philippines by ouster

INTERNATIONAL
MANILA, Philippines (AP) — Joseph Estrada said today that he remains “the duly elected president” of the Philippines and that his ouster under the pressure of protests and defections of top officials has created a constitutional crisis.

“I am not disposed to leaving a legacy of a banana republic where presidents are changed on the basis of a coup d’etat or a withdrawal of support by the military,” he said in his first public appearance since moving out of the Malacanang presidential palace 11 days ago.

Estrada told cheering supporters he was “on leave, forced by events and circumstances beyond my control.” Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, sworn in as the packed to leave the palace, was only acting president, and any appointments she makes are temporary, he claimed.

While Estrada said he would pursue only legal remedies, his statements appeared to put him on a collision course with Macapagal-Arroyo, who went on live television Tuesday evening to say groups using ill-gotten wealth were trying to destabilize her government. She vowed to “crush” them.

NATIONAL
ATLANTA (AP) — A new Georgia flag awaits the approval of Gov. Roy Barnes, whose spirited pleas to change the current flag and its prominent Confederate battle emblem helped push the proposal through the Legislature.

The Senate voted 34-22 on Tuesday to approve the new flag, which reduces the Confederate emblem to one of five small historic flags on a ribbon below

the state seal. The vote virtually consigns to history a flag that some say symbolizes Southern valor but others contend represents slavery.

“This issue that has divided this state is over,” said Senate Majority Leader Charles Walker, the son of a sharecropper and the chamber’s highest-ranking black.

Barnes could sign the bill, which passed the House last week, as early as Thursday. He said he hopes Georgians can unite under the new flag and forget the heated debate surrounding the issue.

A fight over the Confederate battle flag that flew atop the South Carolina statehouse led to an economic boycott by civil rights groups. The flag was eventually moved to another site on the Capitol grounds, but some black leaders say it is still displayed too prominently.

Civil rights groups promised to call off any boycotts in Georgia if the new flag was approved.

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Pacific Gas & Electric Co. ignored months of warnings that California was headed toward an energy crisis, according to a report castigating the utility for not taking steps auditors say could have kept it from the brink of bankruptcy.

The state-ordered audit came on the eve of what was expected to be hours of debate among lawmakers today on proposed solutions to California’s energy crisis.

California could be out at least \$1.3 billion for emergency electricity before lawmakers find a fix to the state’s

botched deregulation program.

The state remained under a Stage 3 power alert for a record 16th consecutive day today, with electricity reserves precariously low and power managers scrambling to find sufficient energy to avoid mandatory blackouts.

PG&E and Southern California Edison, the state’s biggest utilities, report being \$12.7 billion in debt in part because of soaring wholesale power prices and the state’s 1996 deregulation law that bars them from recouping their costs from customers.

The independent audit confirmed PG&E’s warnings that it is about to go broke.

WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON — John Ashcroft’s confirmation as attorney general seemed assured as Democrats, abandoning a threat of delaying tactics, moved their attack on his record from committee to the full Senate.

The Senate Judiciary Committee voted 10-8 on Tuesday to send the Ashcroft nomination to the floor, where the political landscape changed when Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., dropped consideration of a filibuster.

Instead of 60 votes that would be needed to end the delaying tactic, Ashcroft supporters only need a simple majority of the 100-member Senate to send Ashcroft to the Justice Department.

ment.

None of the Senate’s 50 Republicans have wavered in their support of Ashcroft, and several Democrats have announced their backing for the former Missouri senator. One Democrat, Russell Feingold of Wisconsin, voted with nine Republicans in committee to advance the nomination.

Ever since Kennedy said he would consider delaying a vote, members of the Democratic leadership balked at the idea — especially floor leader Thomas Daschle, who nonetheless announced his opposition to Ashcroft on Tuesday. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., said he hoped for a final vote Thursday.

WASHINGTON — Buoyed by new projections for an enormous \$3.12 trillion surplus over the coming decade, President Bush and top congressional Republicans hope to push a big tax cut through Congress by July 4.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office planned to disclose its new surplus projections formally today to the Senate Budget Committee. Details of the huge estimates emerged on Tuesday, giving added momentum to Bush’s plan for a \$1.6 trillion, 10-year tax cut.

“We are interested in success,” Bush said Tuesday after discussing strategy with House and Senate GOP leaders at

the White House.

Democrats, who mostly prefer a smaller tax reduction, argued that the surplus projections could prove overly optimistic if the economy’s recent sluggish performance becomes a long-term problem.

They also said the costs of Bush’s tax cut and expected spending boosts for defense, prescription drugs, education and other programs could erase the surplus and push the budget back into deficit.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., said he believes lawmakers can ship a final tax package to Bush by Congress’ Independence Day recess.

WASHINGTON — Secretary of State Colin Powell joined with Mexico’s top diplomat in expressing concern about the large number of undocumented Mexican aliens who die from exposure and other causes while trying to enter the United States.

Powell and Mexican Foreign Secretary Jorge Castaneda, speaking at a news conference, said Tuesday the issue will be high on the agenda of Presidents Bush and Vicente Fox when they meet in Mexico on Feb. 16.

Castaneda said there are “too many Mexicans who die of exposure, dehydration starvation.” He also said some

migrants die as a result of hostile action on the U.S. side of the border, but noted that the numbers are going down.

Powell echoed Castaneda’s sentiments and said the issue of migrant safety has to be a concern of both countries.

The United States has been stepping up efforts to thwart illegal migration at urban crossings. But as a side effect, would-be migrants have been trying to cross in remote border areas where the physical risks are much higher, such as deserts and mountains.

The known death toll along the Mexico-Arizona border was well over 100 last year, compared with 43 in 1999.

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve, trying to prevent the weakening economy from slipping into a recession, is prepared to aggressively cut interest rates to rejuvenate economic growth.

Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan told Congress last week that economic growth is probably “very close to zero,” bolstering economists’ views that the Fed’s rate cut on Jan. 3 would be followed with several more.

The slowdown has been documented in a spate of troubling economic reports.

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