

USSR Steps Up its Business with South Africa

Charles Quist Adade writes from Leningrad

Diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and South African may be re-established soon — 30 years after they were broken off. In the meantime, increasing numbers of businessmen are visiting South Africa as tourists, with the blessing of the Kremlin. Although Moscow says it still supports sanctions, trade and other contacts between the two countries are being stepped up.

THE Soviet Union has joined the sanctions-busting bandwagon of its former junior comrades in eastern Europe by confirming that it may re-establish diplomatic links with South Africa sooner than expected.

Nikita Krushchev, who led the Soviet Union for nearly a decade, cut diplomatic ties with South Africa in 1956 and virtually froze economic and trade ties in 1960.

Boris Asoyan, deputy head of the African Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and reputed to be the "most enlightened" Africanist in the USSR, says that officially the Kremlin "still supports" sanctions "until the process of the liquidation of apartheid takes an irreversible character."

But the growing list of sanction-bustings by perestroika-style businessmen and bureaucrats makes nonsense of Moscow's stand. The Kremlin seems to have given its blessing to business activities while maintaining a discreet silence.

Asoyan writes: "Official protest against the forging of ties with South Africa right away and not waiting for sanctions to be lifted is almost not heard."

He lists "minor facts" of sanction-busting which have "accumulated" over the last few months "as the boom in relationships with South Africa reaches a new height."

These include: a proposed

tour to South Africa by the Moscow Circus (cancelled at the eleventh hour); an attempt by the Lithuanian Zhalgritis Football Club to play local teams in the Bophuthatswana homeland; numerous visits to the USSR by South Africa tourists, many of them in fact businessmen "rushing to explore the untraversed expanses of the huge Russian market"; plans by Novoe Vremya, the international affairs weekly, and the IAN news agency (formerly APN), to open bureaux in Pretoria.

Asoyan also mentions as major sanction-busting acts by Moscow the agreement between the Soviet Ekoprom concern and a group of South African businessmen and cabinet ministers of the government of President F.W. de Klerk, and a multi-million diamond deal last summer with De Beers Diamond Market Company.

Long before perestroika the Soviets were known to have maintained clandestine contacts with Pretoria over the

marketing of gold and diamonds through the monopoly Central Selling Organisation controlled by South Africa's Oppenheimer interests.

The Soviets have acted according to the principle: "You may sup with the Devil, provided you have the decency to use a long spoon." They had argued that they were dealing with a British firm, and that it was impossible to circumvent De Beers since it had monopoly control of the world diamond market.

"And so," stresses Asoyan, "we're relatively clean in our relationship with South Africa."

An African National Congress (ANC) official told me Boris Asoyan was part of the campaign to lift sanctions. The ANC man found himself confused about what was happening in the Soviet Union.

The Literaturnaya Gazeta weekly reported on a colourful ceremony held in Moscow in 1989 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the first "open agreement" on the buying up of

Siberian diamonds. Present at the ceremony was President Mikhail Gorbachev's wife, Raisa, and executives of the South African Anglo-American group.

According to the paper, the deal had been renewed annually without substantial changes ever since it was signed in 1960.

Economics lies behind the Soviet outstretched hand towards South Africa. As the country tries to make a transition to western-style market economics a frenzied search is on for convertible currency and trade partners.

The rebellion by the republics makes it virtually impossible for the Kremlin to pursue any uniform international economic policy. In trying to end its isolation by the world community South Africa is exploiting the Soviet difficulties to its advantage by advancing enticing offers.

One African diplomat in Moscow said privately: "Today decorum and morality as far as apartheid is concerned appear

to have gone with the winds of perestroika."

A Moscow entrepreneur said: "Good white guys came from South Africa with excellent and lucrative proposals. Later they offered goods. Should I refuse them because the UN is against apartheid?"

A stream of Soviet journalists have visited South Africa in the last two years, returning with a new apartheid story. Instead of "state tales" of white policemen and dogs chasing "stone-throwing" black protesters, they now file stories about a disappearing apartheid, the eternal South African spring and fantastic wealth.

Some reports point out that the Front Line States have maintained economic ties with South Africa in spite of their abhorrence for and struggle against apartheid.

The new Soviet-South African relationship has spread to the republics and district centres. City councils have set up special committees to begin active contacts with South African businessmen.

There is a rush for South African visas and since the Soviet Union has no diplomatic relations with Pretoria these have to be obtained via third countries, notably Austria and Finland.

South African labour contractors are reported to be roaming Moscow recruiting workers. At Leningrad State University advertisements for job opportunities in South Africa have been on display for some time now.

In Boris Asoyan's opinion the new crop of Soviet businessmen have little understanding of what sanctions against apartheid entail. But this is begging the question.

The Soviet Union has long been the most persistent propagandist against the evil apartheid system outside Africa. Since it cut ties with Pretoria 30 years ago the mass media has waged a persistent campaign against the racist ideology. It has given South Africa as much coverage as the whole of the rest of Africa.

The heart of the matter, it seems, is that anti-apartheid propaganda in the pre-perestroika period was not meant to educate or influence the Soviet citizen per se. It was employed as a plank of the Soviet cold war counter-offensive.

— GEMINI NEWS
CHARLES QUIST ADADE is a Ghanaian journalist studying for a PhD at Leningrad University.

The London Summit

There has hardly been a summit of the seven industrialised democracies in recent years which had not been regarded as a "success" by its participants. Yet, none ever produced a declaration or a package of reforms that changed the world. In this context, it should be perfectly true to say that leaders of Group-7 come to their annual get-together to deliberate on the problems of the world on the basis of their established positions and to work out necessary adjustments among themselves. This is what the so-called success of a summit is all about. The London Summit fits in with this general description.

Yet, one item on the agenda added a new dimension to the talks in London. It is the question of aid to the Soviet Union whose leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, in an unprecedented show of urgency and humility, travelled to the British capital to present his case for assistance. His personal presence surely made a difference to the outcome of the Summit, especially in its Six-Point Plan announced for helping Moscow. As expected, the plan identifies the areas of economic co-operation between the G-7 and the Soviet Union and discusses the modalities for such collaboration. But, as we had known all along, the plan offers no cash, not even an indication as to how much President Gorbachev might expect in near future. However, the plan includes two provisions — one positive and the other somewhat controversial — which merit attention. The positive item concerns the Summit's directive that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) should extend to Moscow "special association", without, of course, offering the Soviet Union any loans or credits at this stage. If the Kremlin leader is pleased with this opening to the two most resource-rich aid agencies, he cannot surely overlook the repeated references in the plan to the need for monitoring economic reforms in the Soviet Union by the West. It is this evaluation which will eventually decide how much — and when — the Soviet Union can expect "the goodies," the term actually used by Chancellor Kohl of Germany, from the West. It is not surprising that President Gorbachev has expressed his polite disappointment with the outcome of the Summit. However, he should still welcome the framework for co-operation, which is less ambiguous than many experts had expected.

The real disappointment caused by the London Summit concerns the economic issues facing the world, more specially the Third World. There was no promise of a breakthrough on any of the problems which have blocked the progress of the Uruguay Round of talks, beyond a vague assurance that G-7 leaders would "intervene with one another if differences can be resolved at the highest level." On the question of providing relief to debt-ridden developing countries, the Summit has passed on the matter for further discussion to the next week's meeting of creditors in Paris, without any specific recommendation as to how the discussion in the French capital should proceed on the vexed question. Another area of disappointment relates to the Summit's position on the environment issue. While offering to "promote mobilisation of financial resources to tackle environmental problems," the Summit bowed to the opposition of the United States which blocked any strong commitment on this issue, much to the disappointment of the Germans and representatives of the European Community.

As in the past, the G-7 Summit has followed its charted course with skill and seriousness, but only within the framework of interests of its own participating governments. This is a pity. Unfortunately, the rest of the world can do nothing about it.

Life Term without Trial

Jalil Sheikh is free now. He is free to go anywhere, talk to anyone and stay with any kind of soul who would sympathise with his problem called — paradoxically — freedom.

He was arrested and thrown into the jail in 1980. The charges were false. The file on him was conveniently lost. But there was no escaping for him from rotting in the jail. He was held there for eleven years and has been released from the Khulna jail early this month. What length of time does a life sentence run? With all kinds of holidays and remission coming to the help of the convict it hardly adds up to ten years. Jalil has served more than that. For whose fault? Not his. Won't anyone, any agency be held responsible for his lost years, for his wasted life — and be made to pay?

While we must thank the Bangladesh Society for the Establishment of Human Rights but for whom Jalil would never have been released — ah what a system this interior-ministrywallahs have fashioned —, we cannot help wondering on two points.

The Human Rights Society's job is well-done, they are finished with this case. What will Jalil do now? He has a far bigger fight now in freedom than he had in captivity. Who's there to help him now?

How many Jalils are still there in the jails? Eating up their days on the earth as well as taxpayer's money — there must be simply thousands languishing behind the bars without trial and for years. How to get all of them out and at once? No one has the right to incarcerate any of them for a single hour more than they have already been made to spend in captivity.

There were widespread jail disturbances at the beginning of the Acting President's tenure. With so many untried and unconvicted people caged in there we could as well wish the jail rebels had broken down all the walls of injustice and inhumanity there are on this land. We expect the authorities to move in time to prevent such an eventuality by releasing all unconvicted and unsentenced prisoners before it is too late.

HUNDREDS of Sri Lankan women, some in their teens, have taken to the gun and joined the guerrilla fight for Eelam, a homeland for Tamils.

Some of them look hardly capable of catching a fast-moving bus, let alone handling a high-powered gun. But look can deceive. Their dedication to the cause can be fearsome.

Investigation of the killing of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi near Madras has pointed to the possibility of a women assassin who was blown up in an apparent suicide mission. Only a person of fanatical determination could have carried out such an assignment.

How the girls were recruited and trained has been described by a reporter writing for the "Indian Express." Among those who feature in

the report is "Captain Kajani" who, then barely 21, dropped out of law classes in Sri Lanka's Jaffna University in 1983 to join the Tamil separatists. The most favoured group at the time was the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and its women's wing.

At the same university was "Captain Kalpana," now 30.

She, too, suddenly stopped going to school, after attending a meeting of the students' union. Such moves, say observers, were prompted by a massacre of the Tamils in Sri Lanka in July 1983.

Other recruits were Lata and Geeta, who became militants when they were only 17. They began political work like

distributing leaflets. Then they helped to conduct simple exercises in self-defence and first aid.

By 1986 the women's wing had attracted hundreds of members. Recruits were given basic combat training while the more promising ones went

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and Ak-47s.

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to India.

Apparently, the women's wing of the EPRLF has had a change of heart — or tactics. They are saying: "We do not rely on weapons and do not demand freedom. We believe in the democratic process and want only our human rights, restored. We are prepared for a united Sri Lanka if these are granted."

Some Tamil women militants still in India say they want to shift from armed struggle to social work and development activities. But, observers say, these are still outnumbered by others whose indoctrination goes deeper.

Indian police have begun ferreting out women Tigers, detaining hundreds for questioning and putting some in jail. The women, however, are unlikely to be deported.

— Depthnews Asia

Armed Militants Ponder the Cost

Priya Darshini writes from New Delhi

Some Tamil women guerrillas now want to shift from armed struggle to social work, but there are other more radical activists whose indoctrination goes deeper

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— Depthnews Asia

Hong Kong

Erasing Colonial Relics and Symbols

The Hong Kong government has begun the process of removing emblems and monuments of British rule in the Crown Colony. Yojana Sharma of IPS reports from Hong Kong.

putting in the names of its socialist heroes even though Hong Kong is to remain a capitalist enclave for 50 years after 1997 under the terms of the 1984 handover agreement between Britain and China.

Meanwhile, long-standing British institutions in Hong Kong have been asked by the government to draw up lists of "colonial relics", emblems or monuments which will have to be removed from Hong Kong before 1997 under an understanding reached with China.

Individual organisations will be responsible for their own timetables for removal although the overall process is being monitored by the government.

The Hong Kong airline, Cathay Pacific, has confirmed it would no longer be flying the British flag.

Controlled by the British-based company, Swire, Cathay was slowly removing the flag

from its fleet's tailfins. Two of its 41 aircraft have emerged from their hangars free of colonial trappings after a re-spray job.

"There is no legal requirement for national flags to be painted on aircraft and in future Cathay will not carry such identification," said company spokesman David Bell.

The move is also seen as a clever way of sidestepping having to make a decision to replace the British flag with the Chinese one in 1997. China owns a 12.5 per cent

stake in Cathay through its mammoth China Investment Trust International Corp (Citic) holding company.

Most of the old colonial buildings are being swept away in a frenetic construction boom, making the removal of embarrassing plaques and coats-of-arms unnecessary.

However, many insignia such as the ubiquitous coat-of-arms used by the Urban Council, the municipal authority, will have to be replaced.

And some changes could pose problems. Over 500 tradi-

tional red "pillar boxes" or postal boxes imported from Britain over 150 years ago are anchored firmly into the streets with foundations going four feet below ground.

Some date back to Victorian times. More modern ones bear the crown and have the initials 'EIR' (for Queen Elizabeth II) hammered into the cast-iron structure. It would be impossible to remove them without digging up the streets.

It is still unclear how strictly China wants the rules to be applied. Government sources say this will depend on how relaxed relations are politically near the handover date.

Many organisations are looking to parallel moves in the Portuguese enclave of Macau which reverts to Chinese rule in 1999, two years after Hong Kong.

In May, a controversial statue of former Macau Governor Ferreira do Amaral was finally removed by the Portuguese authorities.

Chinese officials stirred up a storm two years ago by demanding the statue's removal as a "colonial symbol".

Macau has also signalled it will be removing Portuguese emblems from its coins from next year.

Hong Kong coins struck by Britain's royal mint have as yet no fixed timetable for withdrawal. The 1984 Sino-British treaty on the handover explicitly states "Hong Kong currency bearing references inappropriate to the status of Hong Kong as a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China shall be progressively replaced and withdrawn from circulation".

The Hong Kong bank which issues 85 per cent of the colony's high-denomination banknotes bearing the British royal coat-of-arms has said the design would have to be changed in the near future.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Height concern

Sir, The Bangladesh Bank building constructed in pre-liberation period at an important road junction in Motijheel Commercial Area used to command the view of its neighbourhood much in step with the authority it exercised as the top financial institution on behalf of the nation. But with the recent construction of a high rise commercial building in its close proximity, the Bank's building has virtually been dwarfed which in its turn has dented in no small measure the esteem in which it is held by the citizen. The authorities now would be well advised not to allow construction of any building taller than the National Parliament should the proposed Secretariat building or for that matter any other building be constructed in its vicinity in future.

It may be mentioned that in Washington DC no building taller than the Capitol Building is allowed to be constructed as per law enacted by the US

House of Congress. In Ottawa, Canada, the Parliament House is protected by similar legislation.

It is a pity we are yet to enact such a law so as to maintain the dignity and sanctity of buildings of national importance and avoid hurting the sensibilities of the citizen.

Syed Badrul Haque
Lalmatta, Dhaka

DU Rifle Club

Sir, It was probably in the last week of July, 1989, a major vernacular daily in its leader expressed grave concern over a grossly irregular incidence of missing of fire arms and ammunition from Dhaka University Rifle Club. It said, as of course must have been reported in other newspapers, 17 various types of guns and 23,000 ammunition were missing. Officials reportedly said those were sold to the members, but appropriate papers were missing in that regard. And an account of such sale proceeds was also not

there, the newspaper editorial indicated. However, the University authority made a high-powered enquiry team, and the team subsequently submitted its report to then Vice-Chancellor. And the University authority also reportedly lodged a case in this regard with the police.

Now, it is a matter of regret that no response in this arms case of grave concern has yet been made while the arms case of ex-President Ershad, filed the other day, has been completed. Who knows where the missing arms and ammunition of Dhaka University Rifle Club have found their 'safe haven' — in the hands of 'fighting mastans' or violent 'rival' students or We are simply concerned.

Mahmood Salehin
West Tejantpara, Dhaka.

Company Affairs

Sir, The ministers, and other top executives of the cabinet, often threaten to privatise loosing concerns since the nation cannot bear such burden till eternity. But the performances of Dhaka Stock Exchange show that there are a number of companies which could not declare any dividend for the last 3-4 years at a stretch. At the same time holding companies of sector corporation failed miserably as the return on investment is

negative. The investment made in those companies 3-5 years back has been reduced considerably. Let the Finance Minister, a chartered accountant himself, judge the actual investment benefit as a professional. Mere privatisation will not serve the purpose unless appropriate measures to rectify 'national disease' is undertaken.

Sadik Alee
Maghbazar, Dhaka.

What's in an age?

Sir, Strange things — or supernatural phenomena — have been happening on earth for centuries, many of which have yet to be scientifically explained or defined. Some of such extraordinary mysterious events are sometimes concluded as miracles. Whatever the underlying truth is, a rare hard-to-believe matter came into being recently in UK — Land of Test Tube Baby — with the birth of a baby to a 59-year old Bangladeshi woman.

This fact is considered as a Guinness Book material (?), and Bangladesh must have felt relieved at the news that the baby (her 13th child) born on British soil does not enlarge the population size of Bangladesh (120 million) already characterized by Baby Boom contributing to a high population growth rate (2.5%)

with reducing proportional land area (55,000 sq miles) coupled with seasonal calamities inflicting colossal damages to national life.

The just effected 5-year national budget has been preceded by the 3rd Population Census of the country undertaken early this year (final report is expected in 3 years). As expected, over the next five years, the changing national population characteristics had better conform to the national budget designed for the betterment of the citizenry.

M. Rahman
Zila School Road,
Mymensingh 2200.

Too many newspapers

Sir, Resulting from the assurance by the present democratic government of right to freedom of expression, too many newspapers are coming out from the capital city. Some of them have or will have very limited readership. A big number of newspapers, however, is not bad, rather an auspicious sign for the nation. It is said that more than five hundred dailies come out from the city of London alone.

But most of the new dailies which come out here at Dhaka have a very short span of life. Journalistic quality in that is also below standard.

The newspaper industry requires standard publication by capable, learned and honest people, faithful to the national interest. Now-a-days the industry involves big amount of money and considerable extent of technology. Let's do not float a newspaper business if we cannot afford to attain a minimum standard. Rather we should employ our full energy behind a selected few, in the national interest of prestige.

Abu Isa Choudhury
South Goran, Dhaka.

Constitution amendments

Sir, The constitution amendment bills propose that not more than one-fifth of the ministers could be appointed from among non-MPs. The purpose of this provision is obviously to include in the cabinet such eminent experts and specialists who are normally not interested in politics or elections but their expertise will be beneficial for the policy making decisions of the government. However, the candidates who contested in the election and were defeated should not be included in the cabinet under this proviso. It would be an insult of the public opinion to appoint such defeated candidates as ministers.

M. Rahman
Mohammadpur, Dhaka