

Dhaka, Tuesday, March 12, 1991

Economic Diplomacy

The Executive Secretary of ESCAP has done well in alerting governments of South Asian countries of the consequences of being left out of new regional groupings now planned in East and Southeast Asia, under the initiatives of Australia and Malaysia. Since these new blocks have not invited the participation of countries in this sub-continent, the Indo-China countries and the Pacific island states (a question mark also hangs over the role of China), they can at best be treated as sub-regional arrangements. However, regardless of the label, the new groupings will undoubtedly provide much benefits to its members, which countries in South Asia will be deprived of.

In an exclusive interview to this paper, appearing elsewhere in this issue, S.A.M.S. Kibria, the chief of ESCAP has expressed his hope that, now that they have been warned of the new development, South Asian countries would be able to take care of their interests. We wish we could share Mr Kibria's optimism. Officials of governments of this region, especially their diplomats based in Southeast and Far East Asia, do not always follow the economic trends as carefully as they should nor are they in a position to brief their administrations effectively. Above all, as critics say, these officials are defensive about weaknesses of their countries, about their desperate need for aid and about the unimpressive performance of their own regional alliance, SAARC. This probably explains why many of these officials feel helpless when their countries are bypassed and left out of developments taking place in their neighbouring region.

All this means that there is no single answer to our problems. In the first place, our officials, especially diplomats posted abroad, must be more effective, even a little aggressive, in their economic diplomacy, in building bridges and establishing links with the outside world. Here, let's take the example of investment. According to Mr Kibria, "the fact that Bangladesh offers extremely favourable terms and conditions to the investors is either not known or even if it is known, it is not very credible in other countries." If this is the view of a Bangladeshi who has known the working of the administration from inside, we can well imagine what others think of the situation prevailing here.

Among other answers, mentioned by Mr Kibria and touched on by this paper on other occasions, the need for all parties concerned to promote national consensus on economic matters is certainly one, probably the most important one. We do not expect such a consensus to emerge overnight, especially in a country where divisiveness touches almost every aspect of our national life. We see this consensus as a product of a long, sustained national debate that involves academics and politicians, opinion-makers and intellectuals. For once, our policy makers should be listeners in this debate and learn from the experience of others.

Meanwhile, we shall be watching with interest how ESCAP widens the scope of regional co-operation during its forthcoming session. The idea of setting up a new mechanism that pays special attention to LDCs and promotes trade, investment and technology transfer is intrinsically sound. Let us hope that it will work, and work well.

Unrealised Potential

The Eighth Asian Cup international table tennis meet ended in Dhaka on Saturday. Dhaka is little better than a backyard in terms of international sport. The meet was as such a big event — as big as could be. Ten nations participated in it with 36 players and 20,000 dollars was at stake as prize money. There is no way a Tk 30 lakh sports meet could be any less than that.

We write to observe that, however, its potential as a big event was far from realised. The benefits and justification of any sporting events in this scale can be measured broadly in two aspects: first, the benefit accruing to the practitioners of the particular game — its players, coaches, organisers and promoters and all backers of all these including the parents of the players; secondly, the satisfaction and pure enjoyment it gives to the lovers of sports, spurring thus the enthusiasm for it in the society and helping create a broadening of the playing base. Unfortunately for us the Asian Cup thing failed miserably on both counts. What percentage of people from one first category benefited from the proceedings? A niggardly figure that must be. The BKSP indoor facility is quite far from the metropolis and if some transport arrangement is not sponsored — there is no question of interested people travelling there on their own.

If we consider the question of home participation in the tournament the justification of holding the event further suffers. In a 36-player international field the hosts must field at least six if not quite half of the whole — simply because they are the hosts. If you don't have that much of local talent — pray don't hurt an international meet of such a game. Take your time, develop the boys and girls to that level and then call in the others — or send your own abroad. We must not start after the Sharjah Cup model where non-Arab teams play for hefty oil grabs with little prospect of ever enthusing a Gulf sheikh to take up the willow or the leather.

The management of the event had too many holes for an event of that scale. Lighting was very poor. Ventilation atrocious. And even the participants, while playing, could hardly shake off the obdurate mosquitoes. But this swarming shame was itself shamed by an opening ceremony where six long speeches were in place of someone opening it with that celebrated cryptic sentence so much known to and respected by the sport lovers. Thousands of words gushed forth — without anyone declaring the meet open. That was the measure of the poor thing.

A Setback for Thai Democracy — I

BANGKOK: Thailand is under army rule, yet once again. This time after 12 years. This long gap (in Thai terms of course, having had 18 coup attempts in the last 51 years, an average of one every three years) has given rise to a feeling among the Thais that their democracy was on a firm footing. Basking in the glory of its economic success and hoping that the vitality of its business sector would rub off on their political culture, they had forgotten, or perhaps had wished it away, that the armed forces continued to be the arbiter of their political life.

The 23 February coup that toppled the government of Gen. Chatichai Choonhavan, the first directly elected Prime Minister under the now abrogated Constitution of 1978, was the 18th coup by the armed forces since 1932. Of these 11 were successful coups including the present one. The military takeover was led by the Supreme Commander Gen. Sunthorn Kongsompong and supported by the Commanders-in-Chief of the Navy, Air Force and the Army (the last being the power behind the coup). The military junta, calling themselves the National Peacekeeping Command (NPC) abrogated the Constitution, dissolved the Parliament and dismissed the cabinet and interned the Prime Minister and some of his close advisors for the first two weeks.

On the day following the coup, Mr. Suthichai Yoon, the highly respected editor-publisher of The Nation, one of the two English language dailies from Bangkok, in a signed front page commentary, wrote: "Under no circumstances can we condone the toppling of an elected government by force. A bad government should stand or fall on its own... the spectre of a military coup that haunted us these past few months has hit us with a startling reality. It is a serious blemish on our contemporary political history." It is not usual that a Thai should be so outspoken, that also in public and in print. This bold and risky public statement against the military take-over is a measure of Mr. Yoon's

frustration and perhaps of the Thai intellectual community as evidenced by the wide acclaim that The Nation's comment has received.

Why is there such widespread frustration? The Thais were well aware of the power of the armed forces; of their involvement in politics and of the entrenched nature of their presence in every aspect of the economy. Yet the practice of democracy over the last decade, the strengthening of the political parties and the press, the regular holding of elections over the last 12 years and most importantly the dramatic rise of their entrepreneur class had given rise to a feeling among the Thais, not altogether unjustifiably, that coups were a thing of the past and that whatever differences there were between the civilian government and the military, could be resolved without a confrontation of the type that we saw on 23 February last.

As events were to prove, there was really no justification for such optimism. For when the coup did finally occur, it was caused not by any national crisis but by the military's wish to assert itself, because the Prime Minister was not doing their bidding. The military did

not have any social, political or economic reason for its move. The country was riding on an unprecedented export boom and the economy, though falling short of the 10 per cent growth rate of the last few years, continued to be the envy of the ASEAN with an 8.5 per cent growth.

In fact the Chatichai government showed tremendous dynamism in various fields compared to the sedate sterility of the era of Chatichai's predecessor Gen. Prem Tinsulananda. Though there is some truth in the view that Chatichai could not perform as

crisp that broke the economic isolation of Vietnam, imposed by a vengeful US, and opened up vast new markets for the Thai businessmen. So bent was Chatichai in promoting the economic interest of Thailand and he deliberately turned the other way as the Burmese junta flaunted the democratic verdict of its people. As a reward the Burmese military rulers literally gave the Thais a "carte blanche" and agreed to all sorts of trade privileges including huge timber concessions, most of which were contracted through the armed forces or

attitude towards kick-backs and never really tried to reign in his associates. He never took these allegations seriously and by his brushing aside of the probing media questioning only reinforced the public impression of wrong doings in high places. However, the irony is that the military should be doing the finger pointing. The link between the military establishment and the business community is known to all. Big companies vie to get retired Generals into their folds for the singular purpose of cashing in on their 'connections'.

Among the other four reasons justifying the military's takeover, are harassment of government officials, instituting parliamentary 'dictatorship', attempting to destroy the military institution and distorting a case involving attempts to topple the monarchy. The first is an obvious PR exercise to win over the powerful, disciplined and efficient Thai bureaucracy. The issue of Parliamentary Dictatorship is something that the junta has not cared to elaborate and does not talk much about it anymore.

The case involving an attempt to topple the Thai monarchy requires a bit of an elaboration. In 1981 one Col. Manoon Roopkhachorn and a few others made an abortive coup attempt against the government of Gen. Prem Tinsulananda. Following its failure Col. Manoon and a few of his followers were alleged to have plotted in 1982 to kill the Prime Minister, Gen. Prem, the then Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Arthit Kamalang-ek and a third person. The identity of this third person was never established. The army says it was the widely revered Queen of Thailand, Col. Manoon denied his involvement in any such plot. In 1985 Col. Manoon made a second attempt to topple Prem's government and again his bid failed and he once again went into hiding. The army resented Col. Manoon's rehabilitation under Chatichai, especially his re-entry into the army and more specifically his promotion to the rank of Major General. The army was extremely resentful of the influ-

ence that Manoon was alleged to have on the Prime Minister. However, the police investigation about the plot to kill Gen. Prem and others continued. Last month the Chief Investigator was 'promoted' into a different job and another Police General (in Thailand Police also have rank titles similar to that of the Army) more amenable to Chatichai's point of view, was appointed in his place. The army considered it to be a sure sign of interference with the investigation aimed to save Manoon, who was considered to be too close to Chatichai for the army's comfort. The appointment, last month, of Gen. Arthit, the number two target of the plotters of '82, as the Deputy Defence Minister was seen by the army as a trade-off to make Gen. Arthit declare that there was no third target of the plotters and so the suspicion that Manoon conspired to overthrow the Monarchy was unfounded. It was on his way to confirm Arthit's appointment and present him before the Thai King who was then in Chiang Mai that the Prime Minister was interned and the coup set in motion.

The accusation that the Chatichai government attempted to destroy the army as an institution is perhaps where the real reason behind this coup lies. Though Chatichai is a former General, still he became the PM by participating in direct election. According to the Thai practice, after winning an election, the majority party or its coalition would select a retired general as a consensus candidate, acceptable to the army and of course the King who would then become the Prime Minister. Gen. Prem and all his predecessors remained Prime Minister for one, two, three terms without ever being elected by the people. Gen. Chatichai was thus a first. His election was hailed in the Thai political circles as a big step towards representative government. Everybody hoped that all future Prime Ministers of Thailand would henceforth be directly elected by the people.

(Part II: Constitutional reforms and profiles of coup leaders — to follow)

The Third View by Mahfuz Anam

well if not for the foundation laid down by Prem, yet there are many areas where Chatichai can be credited to have shown originality and drive. His most celebrated policy innovation was towards Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. His slogan that he would turn the "war zone into a trade zone" really captured the imagination of the Thai business community, searching for new markets as their productivity rose and gave a moral justification for a cause whose basic drive was profit.

It was again the Thai lead-

their designated people.

So why the coup? The military gave five reasons. The first was corruption. The military alleged that government leaders reaped huge personal gains through the abuse of political office. The ministers tended to push big projects with pay-offs and kick-backs replenishing their personal coffers. The Prime Minister turned a blind eye to all this and even protected the wrong doers, the army said. Sadly, there is widespread public impression of this being true. Gen. Chatichai had a very carefree



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C'wealth helps Educate Blacks for Post-apartheid S. Africa

Asif Khan writes from New Delhi

Skills being acquired by young South Africans would play a crucial role once apartheid is abolished Because people who really run the country are the ones with skills, not politicians.

Commonwealth countries under the scheme which was launched following a decision by the 1985 commonwealth summit in Nassau, the Bahamas.

Two types of awards are made under the scheme: Nassau Fellowships granted by individual member government, and Commonwealth Secretariat in London.

The multilateral scheme, administered by the Secretariat's Fellowships and Training Programme (FTP) headed by Dr Mohan Kaul of India, has expanded rapidly.

The number of FTP-sponsored students increased from 137 in 1987-88 to 302 a year later. About 600 students have so far received the fellowships for courses at institutions in more than 20 Commonwealth countries.

Costs per student are low compared with awards from other international agencies. Funds from Commonwealth governments are augmented by

contributions from the United Nations Educational and Training Programme for Southern Africa, the United Nations Development Programme and other co-funding agencies.

The Secretariat has encouraged more Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth governments and organisations to contribute to the scheme which, it is hoped, will go some way towards alleviating the widespread devastation caused by apartheid to the social and economic fabric of South Africa's majority population.

More than half of the country's blacks are believed to be illiterate, and there is a shortage of about a quarter of a million skilled and technical workers.

The importance of education and training for victims of apartheid has been recognised by South African liberation movements such as the African National Congress (ANC)

which has warmly welcomed the fellowships scheme.

Mr Mutuzell Mphole, chief ANC representative in Asia, based in New Delhi, said South Africa's minority whites dominated skills. This monopoly had to be broken to prepare the majority for a post-apartheid South Africa.

"The more self-sufficient our people are the better," he said. "They don't get opportunities for education and training discrimination permeates entire life in South Africa."

Mr. Mphole, 63, a trained teacher who runs the Asian mission with his wife Joy, a former nurse, said skills being acquired by young South Africans like Kagisho Mamepe would play a crucial role in South Africa once apartheid is abolished.

"These skills will be of tremendous importance to us because people who really run the country are the ones with

skills, not politicians."

Of the fellowships scheme, Mr. Mphole said: "We greatly appreciate it. This has given a new dimension to our efforts in trying to educate our people."

"We are aware of the financial constraints on the Commonwealth, but earnestly hope that it will increase the number of awards and continue to pay attention to educational deficiencies in South Africa so that tomorrow, when genuine democracy is established there, we can all, irrespective of our colour, play an equal part in our national life."

He thanked the Secretariat and India and other Commonwealth countries which have welcomed South African students for their support.

"We are very, very grateful to all of them. Institutions have sometimes made places available to our students at the expense of their own, often relaxing conditions to accom-

modate them.

"We hope Commonwealth countries that have not yet received our students will do so soon."

While South African students benefit from the fellowships, a Commonwealth expert group is looking at the skills development needs of their fellow countrymen and women in a post-apartheid South Africa.

The group, led by Mr John Harker of Canada, will identify areas for higher education, training, and work experience for blacks. It will determine the present level of participation by them in advanced skills work and likely future requirements of those skills.

The group was assembled by Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeke Anyaoku of Nigeria on a suggestion by the Commonwealth committee of Foreign Ministers on Southern Africa.

The committee was set up by Commonwealth leaders at their 1987 summit in Vancouver, Canada, to ensure that world attention remains focused on the problem of apartheid to maintain pressure on South Africa.

Chief Anyaoku said: "Skills development among the disadvantaged majority population is an integral part of Commonwealth efforts to support South Africa's transition to a successful and stable non-racial democracy." — Commonwealth Feature

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.

Iraq

Sir, I can't but feel very sorry about what's still going on in Iraq. Iraq is where was Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilisation, Iraq is where the ruins of Babylon still attract tourists and connoisseurs. Iraq is where Karbala and the Forat are; where there is the city of Basra that obviously link roses to its name. Iraq is a country the Iraqis must boast of. But what fate it is in now!

A prolonged war with Iran, then a recess for much shorter a period that the war continued for, has been followed again by an

avoidable war with the formidable allied forces, and much more devastating at that. No sooner the hostilities ceased there has erupted an infighting, reportedly claiming more than 30,000 lives already. Why must they fight apparently for no justified cause or gain, but destructions and casualties? The casualties in the just concluded allied action, some reports say, was between 100 and 200 thousand, and the destruction, simply immense. One must pray for peace in Iraq!

However, what is going on is Iraq's internal affair. But human conscience gets

concerned at anything not in favour of humanity, anywhere. So, it's time wisdom must prevail over wills that lead to ills. There must be concerted human efforts to contain forces of destruction, of course, not by destruction again.

Manik Chowdhury
Wari, Dhaka.

Safe drinking water

Sir, These days we all are made aware of the hazards of drinking polluted water, still we often find public places like a cinema hall, or even an office, where arrangements for safe drinking water is lacking.

We all know the diseases which can be caused due to drinking water which carry germs.

I am not talking about people or places where this caution is yet to reach. It is right in the middle of a city, that such things are

happening.

In a capital city like Dhaka, most of us seem either not aware of the hazards of impure drinking water or do not care for.

But the point I would like to stress is that at least those of us, who are in the knowledge of it, and can avoid having contaminated water, should at all costs do so. Otherwise awareness and knowledge is of no use.

Tawfiq Khondakar
Gopibagh, Dhaka.

Price of cement

Sir, Recently there was a news item which said that the price of cement had increased from Taka 200 to 230 a bag, following the Gulf crisis. This was however the quotation for a single day and the price varies each day. But once it is on the rise, the margin of variation revolves around the jump already made.

Cement is among the essential products used for a number of purposes, more importantly construction, repair etc. Now with the increase in the projects for multi-storied buildings, cement will be required more and more.

Therefore, now that the Gulf War is over and as things settle down, we hope the price of cement will also stabilise, if paid necessary attention to the point by the authorities concerned.

Romiz Mojumdar
Bangla Bazar, Dhaka.

Acceptance with grace

Sir, It is said that best amongst God's creation is man. But it cannot be claimed as a matter of right. We are to prove it by our deeds. "Khud hi ko kar buland itna ke har taqdir

se pahle, khuda bando se puchhe bata teri raza kiya hai" said the great poet philosopher Iqbal. It means raise your inner self to that exalted height so that before every allotment of fate God asks His slaves "Tell what you desire." We are to make ourselves worthy of the souls before which angels were asked to lie prostrate (in Sijdah). We cannot take things for granted. That is to be obtained through exercise, discipline and training. How many of us can bow their heads to the Lord in the height of glory or how many of us can stay sublime in the face of worst defeat and accept it with grace? But if we take victory and defeat as the gift from God according to the sayings from the Quran there is no confusion to accept it for we do not know what is good for us.

A. M. F. Quadir
Lalmatia, Dhaka.