

Information on Investment

A regional expert meeting just held in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang has decided to set up an Asia-Pacific area investment information centre in Seoul next year. This will have the obvious purpose of disseminating necessary data and facts relating to economic prospects in individual countries in the region. The expert meeting has been closely followed by another, this one at the ministerial level, held in Tehran, to discuss the prospects of industrialisation in Asia-Pacific countries. Both the meetings had the support of several United Nations organisations, including the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

Such meetings seldom produce instant actions, but they do offer useful ideas which, put into effect, strengthen economic co-operation among concerned countries. The plan for the investment information centre should, therefore, certainly find in one specific area that is vital to Bangladesh, namely, the information-sharing on investment and trade. At this moment, the main source of facts on these subjects are the country's own missions and some UN agencies. As far as we know, there is no regional data or information centre which could tell potential investors all there is to know about possibilities in joint ventures in Bangladesh, about the relevant laws and regulations or about the labour market, to name a few. This country may not be the world's perfect place for foreign investments, but it certainly offers attractive possibilities.

For more than reason, Seoul appears to be a good location for the proposed centre. True, it is a little far away from South Asia. But it is situated in the heart of a region which is awash with surplus cash. For instance, Taiwan has foreign exchange reserves worth \$75 billion, while South Korea has \$13 billion. Even the tiny city republic of Singapore is sitting on a hefty foreign exchange reserve of \$20 billion.

A part of these reserves are being invested abroad, but mostly in Southeast Asia or in what is otherwise known as the ASEAN region. South Korea's investment in Bangladesh shows an upward trend, but it is still insignificant when compared to Seoul's involvement in Southeast Asia.

However, what is disturbing is that a substantial part of cash reserves held by these newly industrialised countries (NICs) in East Asia is being spent on defence. With its relationship with North Korea still following an uncertain course, Seoul probably finds it difficult to reduce its military budget. But defence expenditures of Taiwan and Singapore also remain high. It is important that these countries start looking at investment prospects in South Asia, including Bangladesh, instead of maintaining huge defence budgets or confining their attention to Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia in the field of investment. In order to do so, they need information and hard facts. And this is where the proposed centre in Seoul should play a major role.

It should be the responsibility of the Government of Bangladesh to help the centre in Seoul in every possible way. If the project is to get off the ground by next year, we have some six months to complete our own data collection and other relevant facts on the economic situation in the country. In this respect, the Bangladesh mission in Seoul should play an active role in monitoring the progress of the project. It would certainly be a welcome move if a Bangladeshi official can be placed at the centre. We should indeed derive maximum possible benefits out of this worthwhile venture.

Children Suffer in Somalia

Reports from Somalia are all disconcerting, to say the least. One report has it that children are dying in hundreds — 100 of them in the Somalia capital Mogadishu alone — of starvation and hunger-related diseases every day. Add to this the plight of Somali refugees in the high seas and off the Yemeni coast near Aden, the nightmare of the people of that war-torn country is complete. By Monday at least 149 refugees had died from hunger, thirst or heat exhaustion aboard a ship.

Against the backdrop of the large-scale starvation facing the sub-Saharan region, Somalia's problem has been made specially worse by the fact of a lingering political unrest in that country. The children, in such crises, become the worst victims. Somali children are just paying for the blunder of their elders. Sub-Saharan Africa is in an acute shortage of food, as many as 40 million people are facing starvation there and at least 19 nations require emergency relief. This means that Somali people cannot even expect support from its neighbours.

This fact has been amply reflected in the refusal by Yemen to grant shelter for the Somali refugees. Some 3,300 refugees have been left stranded in foul weather at an Aden beach camp. Those who are taking the risk of crossing the sea are not expected to fare any better. The fact that Yemen has asked the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to find places for their shelter shows the country's lack of interest in the matter. Yemeni Foreign Minister Abdel-Karim al-Irriyani is however keen on seeking UNHCR help for tackling the problem of refugee influx.

If the neighbouring countries are not in a position to provide enough material, help and shelter, the international community must come forward. But political upheavals in some of the East European countries seem to have overshadowed the tragedies in the African countries which together will require as much as 15 million tons of food this year. The tragedy being enacted in Somalia and other African nations has been overlooked only because the political stake there is almost nil for the West, specially after the disintegration of Soviet Union. It is in such a situation that someone like Bob Geldof, who arranged a widely publicised concert for the famine-affected people of Ethiopia, must take the responsibility of raising fund to help lessen the sufferings of the Somali people — specially the children.

AFTER all the talks about consensus, the Narasimha Rao government has turned out to be purely Congress. That should not be surprising; the party has the largest support in parliament. But the prime minister's sweet talk and the fact that the Congress does not enjoy a majority in the Lok Sabha had given the impression that the country would see a new phase of cooperation between the government and the opposition.

The functioning of the ruling party has proved that it yields space to others only if it cannot help. For example, it would not have given the Lok Sabha deputy speaker to the Bharatiya Janata Party if the Congress could have won the Speakership on its own. The selection of Shankar Dayal Sharma as the presidential candidate underlines the same point.

At no stage did the prime minister make a serious effort for a consensus. He talked to the CPI(M), a me-too party, but did not bother about others. Had Narasimha Rao agreed to nominate vice-president from among the opposition candidates, Sharma would have got a unanimous support.

Even then, the choice between a reasonable agreement and a shameful division over the office, which should be above controversy, could have been avoided if the Congress had accepted G G Swell, former deputy speaker who is a tribal leader in the north-east, for vice-presidency. He is the opposition's choice for presidency. But he himself told the prime minister that he would withdraw from the contest if the Congress were to back his candidature for vice-presidency. Narasimha Rao reportedly has a retired civil servant in view

Not Even Pretence of Consensus

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of Foreign Minister Madhavsinh Solanki. It was not a small matter. At the instance of the prime minister, Solanki had submitted a note to the Swiss authorities to go slow on the disclosure of names of those who had pocketed the kickbacks. Had the ruling party been concerned about the consensus, it would not its credibility, it would have made some gesture to the opposition in the Speaker's chamber where the two met for the post.

The declaration of Sharma's name too did not reflect humility, a trait associated with Narasimha Rao. In the past, the prime minister would himself declare the name and appeal to all political parties for support. This time the announcement was made by V N Gadgil, the Congress spokesman, and Ghulam Nabi Azad, minister for parliamentary affairs, who, however important, are mere functionaries of the party.

It is difficult to say why the Congress has shed even the pretence of a consensus. Probably the party feels comfortably entrenched; probably it has come to infer from the squabbling in the opposition ranks that the government cannot be defeated, probably it is not afraid of facing a mid-term poll. Whatever the reason, at least the timing of the Congress decision to go it alone can be zeroed to April. After the budget was passed at the end of March, the party began to ignore the opposition.

The amount involved in the scam, the word used for the bungling, may turn out to be of the order of Rs. 8,000 crores. The Bofors gun kickbacks totalled Rs. 64 crore and there has been no respite to the successive governments in the past six years. A scandal, which is 12 to 15 times more, any prove to be an unending nightmare for the rulers.

BETWEEN THE LINES
Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

several times to reach a compromise. Even the promise to have the beneficiaries identified "without further procrastination" would have been suffice at that time. The matter is going to burst with all the intensity in the ensuing session of parliament from July 8.

In fact, the session may see an open warfare, with no holds barred, for more than one reason. A new scandal has come to the surface. The opposition is furious over indiscriminate advances by banks, running into thousands of crores of rupees, against the far-less valued shares and government securities. In some cases, there were not any guarantee. The Reserve Bank of India, supposed to supervise the working of banks, has been caught napping.

Manmohan Singh may be justified in arguing that there is no link between the scam and liberalisation. But since the finance ministry was taking credit for the boom in the share market in the wake of its policies, it cannot run away from the blame. Too many people seem to have connived at too many levels for too long a period; banks alone are not to blame. It appears that RBI governor S. Venkataraman has been retained to propitiate the opposition when it builds up attack in parliament. By sending him out earlier, Manmohan Singh would have been too exposed.

Again, the nonchalant manner in which the government is dealing with the criticism makes all official pronouncements suspect. On lesser mat-

ters, it has invited the opposition for a discussion. Why not on the worst scandal in India's history? The government would have itself gained through such meeting. It might have assuaged some of the fears of the opposition and prepared the ground for an orderly debate in parliament. Political parties tend to take an intractable stand in the open forum of parliament. The opposition may now balk at conceding even the most convincing point.

This is the time when a consensus would have helped. The government would have been more forthcoming and the opposition less bitchy. In the absence of any equation, it is going to be free for all. The Congress will be the biggest loser because people are already prepared to believe the worst of charges against it. The nation will also suffer in an atmosphere where every action of rulers will arouse doubt and defiance.

The scene will become still murkier because even the semblance of understanding among the opposition parties has also got vitiated. The ruling party may feel jubilant that it has been able to divide the opposition by enticing the Marxists to its side. Their disillusionment it against V P Singh, the Janata Dal leader, who has trivialised politics. They are anti-Congress and staunchly opposed to the government's economic policies. And when the chips are down, they will be on the other side.

But what counts in the opposition is the BJP which commands nearly one fourths of seats in the Lok Sabha. So far its tacit support has come in handy to the government. The BJP saved Narasimha Rao by abstaining at the time of voting on the budget. The end of consensus means the loss of that crucial support.

It may also mean defiance of the consensus reached on the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute at the National Integration Council meeting. The BJP had promised to respect the law court order not to disturb the status quo until it pronounced its judgement. That Murli Manohar Joshi, the BJP chief, wrote to Home Minister S B Chavan to postpone the last meeting of the standing committee of the NIC on the dispute and went away from New Delhi is significant.

When even the limited understanding breaks, as has happened between the government and the opposition on the one hand and within the opposition itself on the other, doubts about the bona fides of one another multiply. The best of intentions are questioned. The government becomes too cautious and the opposition over suspicious. Even the normal work suffers. This looks like to be a worrisome scene of tomorrow.

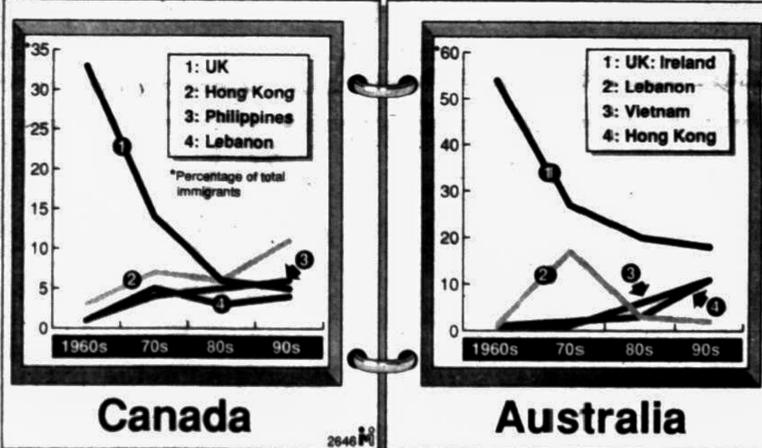
The Narasimha Rao team has battled for one year in the manner some cricket players do in one-day matches: saving their wicket but no scoring. The government has solved the problem; it has not allowed the situation to deteriorate either. As in cricket so in politics, the performance will have to be accelerated because there is very little leeway left. It is a pity that the consensus will be absent when it is needed the most.

Wind of Change Blowing Through Immigration Policies

Etan Vlesing writes from Toronto

For decades Canada and Australia were flooded with European immigrants, the majority from Great Britain. But more recently that pattern has been changing, with an increasing number of people arriving from Asia and Latin America. As Gemini News Service reports, the new immigrants are forcing these countries, with two of the most liberal immigration policies in the world, to make some changes.

Changing trends in immigration



increasing numbers around the world, Western politicians are often left wondering where they are headed and how they will get there. "Governments are asking if the existing instruments that allow people to leave war zones, and to seek and take up protection elsewhere, are enough. If they aren't, the consensus is we may need more instruments," Weinfeld said.

The number of refugee claimants into Canada grew markedly during the 1980s, from about 5,000 in 1983 to nearly 36,000 in 1990. Total immigration into the cities of Vancouver and Toronto between 1986 and 1991 represented 38 per cent of population growth in Canada during the period.

Police makers in both countries are also grappling with evolving, highly contentious distinctions between economic and political migrants. Many delegates to the conference pointed to the work of the United Nations in urging economic growth in developing countries to forestall greater flows of economic migrants.

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.

Road safety

Sir, Road accidents in our country have become top news of every day. Bangladesh has one of the highest road accident rate compared to the number of vehicles, road mileage, vehicle run etc. There are various factors for such high rate, the driver-characteristic being the prime contributing factor. However, there are other factors as well. It appears that the aspect of public safety during construction, operation and maintenance of roads are very much neglected by the concerned agencies. It pains me to state that road-users are not even treated like market chickens in respect of cost to benefit. Let us discuss the utility and philosophy of iron-joist fitted and fixed in, joint road

dividers of Dhaka City. So long it was a trade-mark of Dhaka Municipality and now being adopted by the Roads and Highways Department in some portion of airport road possibly on the mis-conception of better technology of traffic-control. These iron-joists speak a silent language: "Come on, hit me and get lost."

Now let us talk about the pavement top where the tendency is to make it smooth which is very dangerous in Bangladesh because of occasional rains. The top layer of pavement should be non-skid. The pavement of Airport Road was constructed with asphalt concrete. Recently a layer of premixed seal coat was applied making it a skid-surface and accident-prone road specially during rains and in fact some road accidents have occurred on this road for this reason only.

I would request the Honorable Minister for Communication to kindly take the following steps to prevent high incidence of road accidents in Dhaka City. (1) Iron-joists placed beside the road-island should immediately be removed and should not be used

anywhere in future. (2) The Airport Road from Banani to Tongi should be provided with a properly designed road-island divider to prevent head-on collision. (3) Airport Road should be made a non-skid surface by suitable means.

M Bhaswar Rahman
Uttara, Dhaka

Budget X-rayed

Sir, Our national budget for the year 1992-1993 looks healthy because no new taxes have been imposed, taxes on a number of items have been reduced, taxation system has been made easier and import of gold upto one kilogram per Bangladeshi traveller returning home from abroad has been allowed and we all welcome the new budget. But have we looked deep into the financial condition of our beloved country — Bangladesh? The revenue income of the Government of Bangladesh for the year 1992-93 stands at Taka 10,554 crore. In the same year, revenue expenditure is Taka 8550 crore and the development expenditure

is Taka 8650 crore. Our expenditure is Taka 17,200 crore and our income is Taka 10,554 crore only. We run a deficit of Taka 6646 crore for the financial year 1992-93.

In addition to that we are also burdened with foreign debt of US dollar 12,335.9 million since 1972 which is equivalent to Taka fifty thousand crore approximately.

Where does Bangladesh financially stand to-day? How and when we would be able to solve our monetary problems? Would our learned Finance Minister kindly enlighten us? O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203.

RAJUK's residential plots

Sir, RAJUK has invited applications for allotment of residential plots at Banani and Gulshan in Dhaka. What is most astonishing is the pricing of the plots. In 1985 RAJUK (then DIT) had fixed Tk12 lakh per bigha. Whereas now the price has been escalated to Taka one crore per bigha for plots in the

same residential areas. That is an increase of over eight times than the value of 1985. This is indeed outrageous.

Many genuine applicants at earlier allotments were not given plots due to their lack of 'pull and push'. Why should these and other applicants be subjected to such arbitrary and unrealistic pricing now? In fact prices of plots under allotment should be lower as for these plots RAJUK had already derived some financial benefits due to earlier allotments which were later cancelled but RAJUK nevertheless received some non-refundable payments from those allottees.

May I, through your esteemed newspaper, request RAJUK to be sensible in fixing price of residential plots keeping in mind their earlier allotments. Refixing not only of the price of land, but also other terms and conditions for allotment is also required. Meanwhile, price of land in Dhaka city has soared sky high after RAJUK's announcement of its pricing. Abdul Hal
Baranaghazur, Dhaka