

Economic Diplomacy

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has called upon our missions abroad to engage in aggressive economic diplomacy to promote exports, inward remittances and foreign investment. She was inaugurating a five-day conference on manpower export Wednesday last.

Economic diplomacy has come to the forefront in an increasingly competitive world market. Economic considerations have come to play a dominant role in dealings among nations.

In recent days, India has signed a new agreement with the European Union (EU) or, the European Community (EC) as it is still being called, aimed at boosting economic and technological links. The agreement, which updates the earlier 1981 accord between the two sides, will substantially enlarge the field of cooperation on trade, economic and development issues as well as on subjects such as the environment and regional integration. It also has to be remembered that with the formation of the European Economic Area (EEA) the EU itself is being expanded in a year's time into a giant economic zone of seventeen nations. India has chosen the right time to enhance the level of economic interaction with the EU.

Right on the heel of its new accord with the EU, India has established a joint body with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to promote bilateral trade, investment and tourism. Formally launched this month, the ASEAN-India joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee would focus on areas suitable for expansion of trade between two sides and for establishment of joint ventures.

Pakistan, on its part, has joined Iran, Turkey and five Central Asian countries — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan — all formerly Soviet republics, as well as Afghanistan, to form the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) which could emerge in time as an active trading bloc in the region. Not that India is sitting idle. The President of Kazakhstan visited New Delhi this month. Among other things, it was also agreed that Indian banks would establish branches in the newly emerged country.

These then are some of the instances of economic diplomacy at work in this region. Let us hope that the Prime Minister's call at the conference will bring forth new initiatives and tangible results in our economic diplomacy too.

Understandably, the conference focused on promotion of manpower export. In terms of numbers, there has been a significant increase in the flow of people going out with jobs abroad. The volume of inward remittances of earnings, however, has not kept up with the expansion in the number of people employed outside the country. As it came out in one of the working sessions of the conference, the export of manpower increased by 260 per cent during the five-year period between 1988 and 1993. However, remittances rose by only 65 per cent over the same period.

The failure of the volume of remittances to match the level of the number of emigrant workers was blamed squarely on inward transfer of funds through unauthorised channels. It was also argued at the conference that the so-called 'hundi' business thrived because of the relative inefficiency of the banking system in effecting transfer of funds from abroad smoothly and expeditiously. It's not the first time that this realisation has dawned. Action is still awaited. Then again, the so-called 'hundiwalah' sitting abroad does not work in a vacuum. He has agents working for him within the country.

Our missions abroad could establish workable arrangements with the authorities in the host countries to identify the links so that the chain could be broken at this end at least. That too would count as an achievement of economic diplomacy.

Disquieting Omens

Seven more days to go for the mayoral elections. There is no sign yet of any party or candidate caring to obey the Election Commission proddings against camps and wall writings. This augurs ill for the polls.

The Chief Election Commissioner has through the media repeatedly insisted on the requirements of breaking down camps and wiping off wall daubings. He has been diffident and solicitous in that. And he has also issued written requests to the parties to abide by his instructions. Then he has tried to be stern using very explicit and unambiguous language. With no result, so far.

On the contrary some camps are being painted afresh in Dhaka. Not one of about 400 camps here has been dismantled. A national daily has noted that in the capital city only one wall remained to be written on — many of these wall writings were undoubtedly committed after the first warning of the CEC against these. The Commission has set a ceiling on election expenses. Whoever of the candidates have gone for multicolour and extensive posterage have already crossed that ceiling.

Time is ripe for stern action. And this time is fast running out. A day lost would make it difficult a hundred fold to salvage the elections. Knocking down the camps or wiping the walls only two days before the polls will only make the Election Commission a laughing stock. For the forces already set in motion to negate the rules of the game cannot ever be reined in by action taken too late.

Why are the parties doing it? Why are they being a party to sabotaging the elections willingly? One of them is running the government and another is in the run to do the same. If these two play foul, what would happen to our appointment with democracy and clean and transparent government?

It is high time the parties took command of their own situation and responded to the behest of the CEC. We call upon the parties to beat one another in the race to heeding the CEC's instructions for their own good. Whichever party would begin the race and break the camps first will earn not only gratitude of the electorate but also crucial votes matching that.

In the case of the parties and the candidates failing the CEC and the nation, we would very categorically counsel the CEC to call off the polls and reschedule these and continue doing so till things are satisfactory with him, if only to see him keep his words.

While the metro polis dwellers are gripped with polls fever, the whole nation looks forward to January 30 — the day for the grand city corporation elections through which the esteemed mayors of four cities will be elected directly for the first time in Bangladesh.

The excitement and enthusiasm created over these elections have perhaps surpassed that of other polls held in this country. National leaders like Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina are themselves now moving from door to door seeking votes for their candidates. Leaders and activists of other political parties are also on the streets to get their nominees returned. Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi are wearing festive look. These four cities having a total population of about 10 million, are virtually wrapped up with colourful posters, festoons and banners while slogan-chanting processions, rallies and noisy campaigns are warming up the chilly winter atmosphere.

Who will win or which party will gain much from these polls? — is the hot topic everywhere — be it a working place, a sitting room or a rendezvous. Dominating issue in such discussions is obviously the quality and background of the candidates while the past and present activities of the parties concerned also come up as well.

But the fact remains that the forthcoming elections are merely for local bodies like city corporations — all of

Mayoral Polls: Bout of Two Parties

by Chapal Bashar

last parliamentary elections that installed BNP in power while the AL emerged as the mainstream opposition party. Much water has flown through Buriganga during this period when the nation witnessed tussles and conflicts between the two parties which only grew with the passage of days and virtually reached a state of confrontation. In a latest development, the AL took the new stance demanding next JS

mentary polls. The January 30 elections have also provided opportunity to yield political gains for the AL which is fighting tooth and nail to capture mayors' offices and also to avenge their defeat in last JS polls.

All eyes are now fixed on January 30, the polls date, particularly that of the capital city where a total of 17,54,475 (however, out of a 7 million population), have been enlisted

tee. Both Abbas and Hanif are well known in the city for their political and social activities. Hanif, an inhabitant of the old city, maintains good contact with that part of the metropolis which has made him popular in some areas. Abbas also proved his popularity during the last JS polls, beating the AL candidate by a big margin.

However, both Abbas and Hanif are now facing each other with a bigger challenge in a large electoral area — the mayoral constituency that covers eight parliamentary seats. It is not a mere contest of two candidates — rather it can be termed and looked at as a big bout between the two major parties. One is fighting to protect its fort while other's target is to recapture it.

Among other mayoral candidates, former city father Malek of JP is also in the race. It is clear that the party of deposed president Ershad has fielded the candidate only to gain footing in the political arena. JP stalwarts Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, Moudud Ahmed, Kazi Zafar Ahmed and others have joined the campaign in support of their candidate and addressing the meetings and rallies in the city freely.

The left alliance has nominated CFB leader Manzurul Ahsan Khan for the mayorship with a purpose to maintain their proximity with the people and also to create a base

for the Left Front expected to be launched by the alliance soon.

Similar is the cause of Jamaat for nominating a candidate for mayoral polls while the party is utilising the opportunity to boost mass contacts and propagate its ideology.

Besides their personal quality and popularity, the fate of the mayoral candidates will largely depend on the political considerations of the voters. The impact of three years' performance and activities of the BNP and the AL will certainly influence the voters of the major urban centres which will be reflected in their verdicts. However, it is too early to predict anything about the trends or results of the elections since most of the voters are yet to make up their minds.

The scenario regarding election of ward commissioners is, however, totally different. Parties including the BNP and the AL have nominated candidates for the posts of commissioners, but it that not help them much to win. Local interests, irrespective of political considerations, are likely to dominate the trend of voting for the commissioners.

The enthusiastic electioneering full of pomp and grandeur charged with earnestness of the leaders and the candidates, has turned the city corporation polls into a grand event. The smooth holding of these elections will of course help flourish the hard-earned democracy. That is also the ever-cherished desire of the nation.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

polls under a neutral caretaker government. However, the demand was strongly opposed by the ruling party who termed the idea as unconstitutional.

In the backdrop of such a political scenario, the country is having this mayoral elections. This is vital for the parties as the mayors will be elected directly by the voters — first time in 38 years. The parties consider this election as a test-case to evaluate their position and popularity in the major urban areas.

The coming elections are undoubtedly a challenge for the ruling party to prove its dominance in four cities where the BNP captured all the JS seats during the last parlia-

as voters who will elect the city father and 90 ward commissioners. Twenty-four candidates, mostly from political parties, big or small, are vying for the coveted post of Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC). Prominent among them are Mirza Abbas (BNP), Mohammad Hanif (AL), Col (ret'd) Abdul Malek (Jatiya Party), Manzurul Ahsan Khan (10-left parties) and Azharul Islam (Jamaat-e-Islami). Mirza Abbas, a Member of Parliament elected from a city constituency, have also served the DCC as an appointed mayor for 31 months, but resigned recently. His main rival Mohammad Hanif, a former MP, is the president of AL's city commi-

Guns Across the Karakorum

by A Z M Haider

victory to the faction, which will eventually win, will be rendered meaningless because due to cannonade Kabul will virtually turn into rubble.

At present two major Afghan Mujaheddin factions — one being led by President Rabbani and backed by his defence minister Ahmed Shah Masud and the other being headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar — are locked up in bitter wrangle for power.

The warlord, General Dostum originally belonged to President Rabbani's faction. But subsequently Dostum defected from Rabbani's faction to take side with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Prime Minister and arch adversary of President Rabbani.

Rabbani and Masud hail from the northern provinces of Afghanistan wherein Persian speaking Shiah Muslims consti-

tute the overwhelming majority. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, on the other hand, represents southern provinces bordering Pakistan. Pushtun speaking Sunni Muslims preponderate southern provinces. As a matter of fact, Pushtun speaking Sunni Muslims form about sixty per cent of the total population of Afghanistan. Naturally, therefore, Hekmatyar, who is the leader of the Pushtun speaking Sunni Muslims of the southern provinces, thinks he has the legitimate right to rule this country.

Dostum, an ally of Hekmatyar, with the help of a couple of Russian made aircraft under his command, is carrying out blitz to heavily pound Kabul. Rabbani and Masud's forces who are based in and around Kabul are putting up

tough resistance. Rabbani and Masud together with their forces and air-base are well-entrenched in Kabul. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is conducting the war from his hideout on the outskirts of Kabul while Dostum is carrying out blitzkrieg from his stronghold in the northern town of Mazar-e-Sharif.

Hekmatyar and Dostum have mounted concerted offensive to dislodge Rabbani and Masud from Kabul because they know, he who controls Kabul has the sway over whole of Afghanistan. But Rabbani and Masud are too deeply ingrained and strategically well-positioned to be thrown out of Kabul by unremitting bombardments. Such bombardments can cause large-scale destruction and prolong agony of the civilian

population. But it cannot overthrow a militarily well-entrenched opponent. Thus the final round of civil war now being waged by the two opposing factions in Afghanistan is unlikely to end soon. It is, not the contrary, going to be a prolonged agony caused due to limitless bloodshed, deaths and devastation. And when this fratricidal strife ends, victory will be rendered meaningless to the victor. In other words, people of Afghanistan will have to pay a very heavy price for the current battle for power being fought by two opposing factions.

Realising the frightful consequences of this fratricidal conflict, Pakistan, which is the closest neighbour of Afghanistan, is making desperate effort to end it. Islamabad has a great stake in peace and political stability of Afghanistan

mainly for two reasons. Firstly, if the civil war in Afghanistan continues unabated, there may be large-scale influx of refugees to Pakistan causing unnecessary burden on her economy. Secondly, Afghanistan provides the only road link between Pakistan and the newly liberated Central Asian Muslim states who are members of the newly formed Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO). The dragging out of this conflict will mean the road running through Afghanistan and connecting Pakistan with Iran and the Central Asian Muslim states will remain disrupted. Naturally, therefore, the trade transactions and other economic activities due to begin within the framework of ECO will be delayed for an indefinite period. Afghanistan is also a member of ECO and hence she will also remain deprived of the benefits of ECO as long as this war continues. Sooner the warring factions realise this hard fact, better for them.

Partnership for Peace Opens Door to NATO Membership

Alexander M Sullivan writes from Washington

THE proposed "Partnership for Peace" is "setting in motion a dynamic process which is explicitly opening the door" to membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) by all the nations of Europe. President Clinton's National Security Affairs Adviser Anthony Lake declared January 4.

Lake added, "We hope they walk through." The partnership will be open to former members of the Warsaw Pact, including republics of the former Soviet Union, the nations of Eastern and Central Europe, and to neutral countries on the continent.

A senior administration official told a group of reporters he expects the partnership to be formally proposed during Clinton's participation in the NATO summit January 10-11 in Brussels, opening a process of formal commitment to a partnership declaration.

The partnership would confer no automatic security guarantees, as does full membership in NATO, but provides for consultation by partners with the alliance in the event of "direct and immediate threat." For the United States, the partnership does not require congressional approval, as would opening NATO to new full members. There would however be a

"modest increase" in the US defence budget to pay for potential peacekeeping activities.

The president is sending his United Nations ambassador and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Europe in advance of his own eight-day journey to further explain the partnership. Madeleine Albright and General John Shalikashvili will travel to Poland, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic and Hungary; Clinton will meet the leaders of those nations in Prague next week.

Shalikashvili told reporters at the White House that the partnership "is all about bringing stability and security to all of Europe." He pointed out the West has struggled for years "to try to break down the divisions" that have existed between East and West. He said the "reason the partnership is defined as it is" is less than full NATO membership "is to avoid at all cost the establishment of a new line, a new division that would create new tensions and fuel new conflict."

The general defined the "enemy" in the wake of the Cold War as "this feeling of instability, of insecurity that our European partners feel, particularly our East European partners feel. And rightfully so, as they look at the landscape that they see... those flashpoints all around the rim. It's that uncer-

tainly, that instability they see, against which they want some sort of protection."

He said the lesson that should have been learned in Europe is that "no one can feel safe and secure in Europe until all feel safe and secure. We cannot achieve that end if we include small numbers and exclude large numbers. At this very delicate time... it is not the time to set up new divisions."

The senior administration official said Clinton is going to Europe "at a moment of extraordinary strategic importance" for the continent and for the world. One theme of the journey to Brussels, Prague, Moscow and Minsk, he noted, will be the integration of Europe following the collapse of the Soviet empire and the fall of the Iron Curtain. "It is tremendously important, it seems to us," he said, "to see the whole area whole and the trip whole."

The official pointed out the people of the region and their institutions will be making difficult choices in the days ahead. "In Russia, will they be choosing over the next year and beyond, democracy and reform? Along the states on the periphery of Russia it's a question of whether those states will see their big neighbour as a good neighbour. Related to that is

nuclearisation," in Ukraine and elsewhere.

He said the nations of Central and Eastern Europe face the choice of "looking East in fear, or to the West in confidence."

For NATO, he said, there is the "large, historic question of what the mission and shape of the most successful alliance in history will be. We need to also set, with the European Union, what the post-Uruguay Round agenda will be; not just in trade issues, but how we work together for growth, for jobs et cetera."

Running through all those issues, the official pointed out, is the question of whether "that whole region can become more integrated or less, and related to that is whether democracies and (free) markets will thrive within those states."

The official told reporters the partnership "is a very important part" of the process of integrating Europe, providing confidence and stability for the region.

"It will be open," he explained, "to all the former members of the Warsaw Pact — not only the former Soviet Union but its allies within the pact — and (to) Europe's neutrals as well. We believe it will be launched at the NATO summit

through an invitation to prospective partners to sign a framework declaration which will spell out the political and military obligations of the signatories."

Obligations include a commitment to democracy, to peaceful resolution of disputes, civilian control of the military, defence budgets open to public scrutiny, and development of military forces capable of operating with NATO. Partners would file commitment documents specifying which forces they would make available for partnership activities like training, search and rescue operations, delivery of humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping.

"The intent of this," the official said, "is almost as important as the practical detail. What we say about it matters, and we see the partnership as NATO's opening to Europe's new democracies. It expresses our expectation and our hope that NATO membership will expand by means of an evolutionary process. The partnership is part of that process toward NATO membership."

The evolutionary process, he said, "avoids drawing new lines between East and West in Europe now. Such dividing lines, we believe, could destabilise states to the East and could become a self-fulfilling prophecy of

pessimism about Russia. This would not be in the interest of either NATO or indeed of the states of Central and Eastern Europe."

Questioned about news reports concerning doubts raised by Poland and other former Warsaw Pact members, the official expressed confidence that as the states understand the details of the partnership and the intent of the alliance, "they will be attracted. We do not mean that we have made a static decision. We are setting in motion a dynamic process explicitly opening the door, one that we hope that they will walk through, to a full NATO membership."

He said there is no timetable for conclusion of that "dynamic process" lest setting deadlines create new divisions between East and West, and strengthen the hand of ultra-nationalists in Russia. "We see the partnership as an insurance policy," he added, "one we expect will never be cashed in.... We believe it preferable to have an evolutionary process, with gradual expansion of membership."

The official said such a drawing of lines might seem to exclude Russia, when in fact eventual Russian membership would be welcomed.

Alexander M Sullivan is USIA White House Correspondent

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.

Baridhara J Block

Sir, Much has been written in newspapers and focused on TV to ameliorate the plight of allottees of Baridhara J Block.

Three months back from The Daily Star news I came to know that the Minister for Works had given assurance that the government was hopeful of giving possession of land of Baridhara J Block to the allottees.

Now, the year has rolled out, yet nothing concrete has evolved on this issue. Meeting after meeting is going on, but nothing has been finalised as yet. By now, eight long years have passed after allotment, and about a dozen of allottees have passed away without enjoying their life-long dream of a "sweet home".

May I, once again request

the Works Ministry and RAJUK to take positive step to finalise this possession issue without wasting any further time?

Moinuddin Choudhury
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Municipal elections

Sir, The present government deserves to be congratulated on its asking the candidates contesting the municipal elections to submit to the returning officers statement of their sources of income, statement of their property, accounts of their annual income and expenditure, other sources of income, if any, as well as a copy of their latest income tax payment receipt, — failing which they will even be liable to punishment.

Well and good, but the voters would also like to know something more. This is as a result of their bitter experience of the past elections. We have already seen how after the oath taking ceremony and commissioning of the Parliamentary session, the salaries, house rents and other emoluments of the MPs, Ministers, Prime Minister, Speaker, Dy. Speaker and President were raised. Even pension for MPs was sanctioned; later, however, withheld and withdrawn. They got

That is why, voters would like to know from the individual candidates for both mayors and commissioners, what honorarium and other emoluments and privileges they would like to have from tax payers' money when they are installed in office after the elections so that they don't feel shocked over again, if they find the mayors and commissioners, so elected, demanding, maybe, that their houses and other property be made tax-free for life!

Dr S Neamatullah
Dhaka

Rajshahi City Corp elections and demands

Sir, Election campaigns of 7 contestants for the mayorship and 257 contestants for the 30 ward commissioners of Rajshahi City Corporation are now in full swing. For overall developments of the city in particular, and the region in general, the inhabitants consider that more emphasis needs to be given on the demands, as follows:

The Works Ministry (Rajshahi) and Rajshahi Development Authority both sent to the government, in all 29 projects, old and new, for consideration. Besides massive reconstruction of roads, improvement of water supply, important also are agrobased industrial complex, Luxmipur-Kashia Vanga road extension, between Rajshahi University and Rajshahi Court, truck terminal, auditorium, shishu parks etc. But due to the paucity of fund, all these vital proposals remain shelved.

Rajshahi Airport needs to be developed as an international airport. It is possible with the introduction of weekly flights between Rajshahi-Calcutta and vice versa. There is not a single international airport in Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal Divisions. But there are three international airports in Dhaka, Chittagong Divisions. These airports also achieved the international character with weekly flights to Calcutta and vice versa. Jamuna river divides the country into eastern and western zones. To face the difficulties during natural calamities in handling international air traffic, Rajshahi airport needs to be developed as a second runway.

The region 'Barind' has been historically civilised and very ancient. The great religious and spiritual leader Gautam Buddha, the famous Chinese traveller Hsueh Sheng visited the region of which Rajshahi is the divisional headquarters. Ancient, rare relics, sculptures of Rajshahi Barendra Museum arbitrarily taken away to Dhaka, need to be returned and the Barendra Museum needs to be upgraded to a modern na-

tional museum with rapid, massive renovation and development.

The western region consisting of Rajshahi and Khulna divisions has two different railway systems — 85% broad gauge and only 15% metre gauge. To connect directly and smoothly both Rajshahi and Khulna cities and their vast agricultural, industrial, commercial base with the capital Dhaka, without any change-over and in less time, only broad gauge railway track should have to be installed on proposed Jamuna Bridge. To connect Dhaka, the proposed metre-gauge railway tracks on Jamuna Bridge cannot solve the massive communication problem because change-over from broad gauge to metre gauge and vice versa is more time consuming, expensive, troublesome, and also risky particularly in case of goods carrying.

Md Anwarul Afzal,
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Consultative Committee,
Rajshahi