

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's 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 posterizing 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 metropolis 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 has 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 enwrapped 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

AS things stand, the landlocked mountain republic of Afghanistan has entered into a crucial phase of the long drawn-out struggle for power unleashed by the Mujahideen factions soon after the exit of the Soviet troops from that theatre of bloody battle.

Although the factional feud in this strife-torn country has seemingly entered into its closing chapter, no one can say with a measure of certainty when it will end. On the contrary, it can be stated with a fair degree of confidence that the current conflict may turn out to be a painfully protracted one.

Following the expiry of 24-hour ceasefire arranged at the joint initiative of Pakistan and the United Nations to help evacuate diplomats and the wounded, the air and artillery bombardment of Kabul has been resumed at full scale. If the remorseless bombardment of Kabul continues unabated,

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

mayoral 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

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.

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.

Realising the fateful 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

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

politics 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-

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.

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 CPB leader Manzurul Ahsan Khan for the mayoralship with a purpose to maintain their proximity with the people and also to create a base

Guns Across the Karakorums

by A Z M Haider

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

A present two major Afghan Mujahideen 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 Shiites Muslims consti-

tute the overwhelming majority. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, on the other hand, represents southern provinces bordering Pakistan. Pushon speaking Sunnis preponderate southern provinces. As a matter of fact, Pushon speaking Sunnis form about sixty percent of the total population of Afghanistan. Naturally, therefore, Hekmatyar, who is the leader of the Pushon speaking Sunnis 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 unrelenting bombardments.

Such bombardments can cause

large-scale destruction and prolong agony of the civilian

Partnership for Peace Opens Door to NATO Membership

Alexander M Sullivan writes from Washington

tainty 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...

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