

MEDIA: TELEVISION

A New Star Rises in the East

TELEVISION viewers in Asia are relishing the changes on their small screens. From the skyscrapers of Hong Kong to the emerald green ricefields of China and the far reaches of India, families are lathering in American soap operas, being mesmerised by talk-show hosts and staring at raunchy, scantily-clad female rappers groping and grinding on their TV screens.

It is Western culture, Star TV style. Star TV is revolutionising television in Asia. After just two-and-a-half years on the air, the Hong Kong-based satellite television company now beams into 42 million homes in 53 countries across Asia and the Middle East and boasts that it has the potential to reach two-thirds of the world's population.

With five satellite channels, the television company founded by Hong Kong tycoon Li Ka-shing and now controlled by Australian-American media mogul Rupert Murdoch is shaking up the airwaves and winning fans and foes alike.

"We are obviously delighted with the growth that Star TV is experiencing," says Gary Davey, Star TV's newly appointed chief executive, noting that the number of viewers has increased by almost 300 per cent in the last 10 months. "Clearly there is a huge demand for our product right across the footprint." ("Footprint" is jargon for the area covered by broadcasts.)

There is also a sudden surge of stiff competition. Despite the uncertainties of 1997 when Hong Kong reverts to Chinese rule, international broadcasters are rushing to set up shop. With its booming economy and low tax rate, the British colony serves as a gateway to China, the world's fastest growing economy.

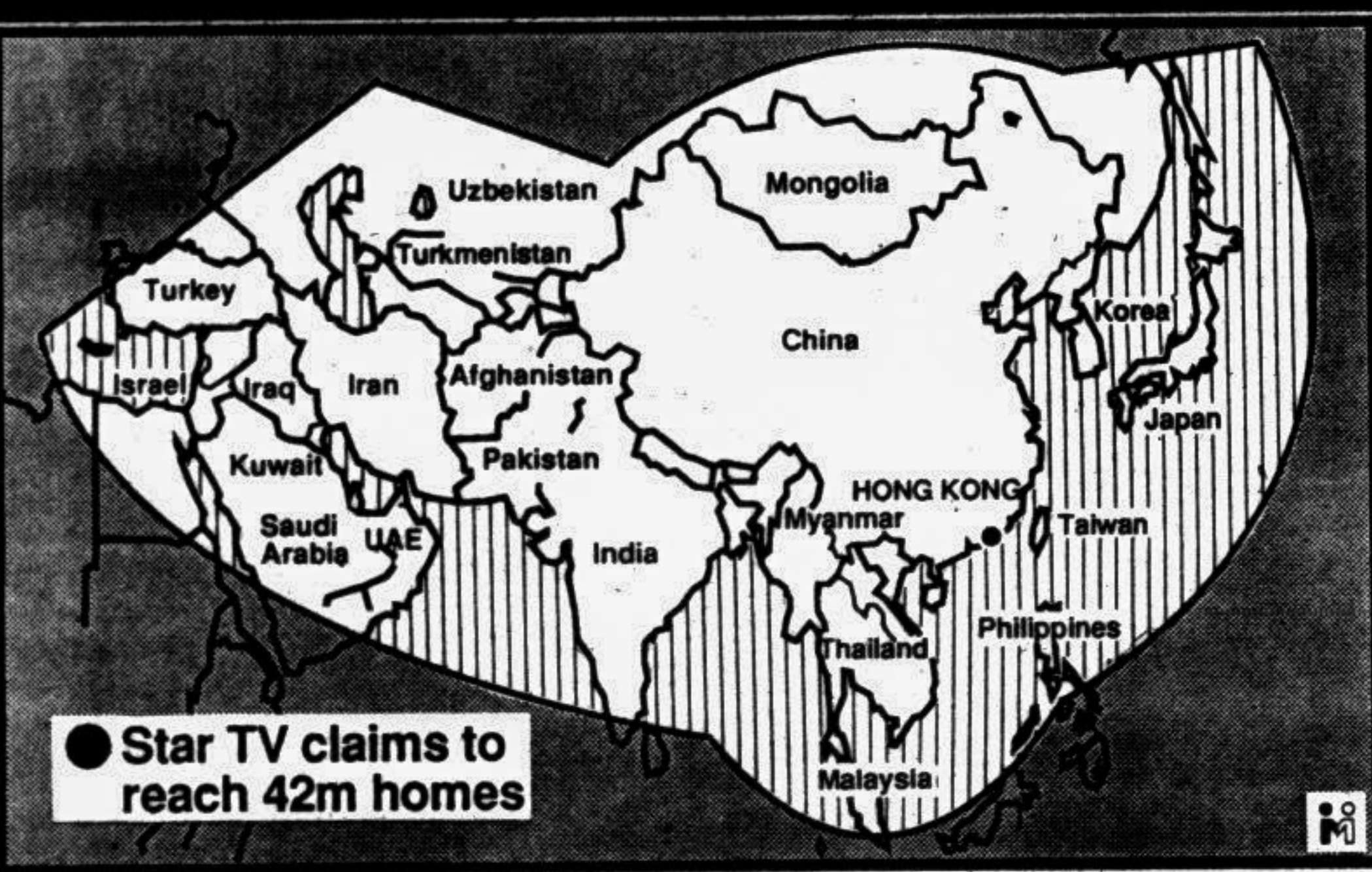
The British government is trying to make it more appealing for foreign broadcasters to invest in the colony by lifting restrictions and allowing full ownership of satellite operations.

Says James So, Hong Kong's Secretary for Recreation and Culture: "What we will do basically is to encourage more people to set up television, either through cable or satellite

The Hong Kong-based Star TV has revolutionised television in Asia. Owned by Australian-US media mogul Rupert Murdoch, it now beams into 42 million homes in 53 countries across Asia and the Middle East and claims to have the potential to reach two-thirds of the world's population. Gemini News Service reports on an extraordinary media success story.

Frances Kelly writes from Hong Kong

Where Star shines



Star TV claims to reach 42m homes

or other forms, through the relaxation of rules."

In a move that further secures Hong Kong's role as the media hub of Asia, a consortium of international television stations, led by Hong Kong's Television Broadcasts (TVB), has reserved 16 transponders on a soon-to-be launched satellite, with plans to broadcast throughout the region.

The group, which includes Turner Broadcasting, sports channel ESPN Asia, the Home Box Office film channel, Discovery Channel, Viacom and Time Warner, is set to compete against Star TV.

The US giant, CNN (Cable News Network), has also announced plans to turn Hong Kong into its Asian headquarters with a production centre to be opened later this year.

CNN plans to co-anchor its international news broadcasts from Hong Kong during Asian prime time.

Despite fears about restrictions on freedom of the press after the Chinese takeover, CNN president Tom Johnson says the network is not worried about being able to cover news events.

He says: "We have great confidence in the long-term ability to report from this region and especially from Hong Kong."

Before finalising its plans, CNN executives discussed such issues as press freedom with Chinese authorities in Beijing. CNN received a "very positive general reaction," adds Johnson.

At least five other international broadcasters have expressed interest in transmitting from Hong Kong and have submitted licensing applications to the colonial government.

But the strongest candidate is Murdoch, who controls 60 per cent of the Australian

press and about 40 per cent of the British press. He is now set to move to Hong Kong to play a greater part in the operation of his huge investment.

Murdoch owns half of the European satellite service, British Sky Broadcasting, as well as America's Twentieth Century Fox and Fox Broadcasting, with their huge libraries of films and TV programmes.

Despite the optimism, Star TV is not without problems. The company is involved in a legal row with a Taiwanese agent that pulled out of an agreement to sell advertising space for Star TV. Another legal skirmish with Wharf Cable, a Hong Kong pay-TV distributor and programmer, is delaying Star TV's plans to launch a pay-TV service.

Until it can set up a pay-TV service, Star TV must continue to rely on advertising revenue to keep it going. It boasts more

than 600 advertisers, yet the company has failed to cover its costs.

Although satellite television is hugely popular, it has its critics. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad complained in the United Nations General Assembly about the terrestrial invasion. "Today they broadcast slanted news," he said. "Tomorrow they will broadcast raw pornography to corrupt our children and destroy our culture."

China has also taken steps to control satellite transmissions and will introduce new laws in April to crack down on unauthorised production and installation of satellite TV equipment. It has even jammed foreign broadcasts and limited their availability to hotels and foreigners' homes.

This at a time when the growth of Star TV in China has been rocketing. According to a recent survey, 30 million Chinese homes can now receive Star TV compared to only five million in late-1992.

With an eye on the massive Chinese market, Star TV is trying to build up its stock of Chinese language programmes. It now operates a Mandarin language channel, in addition to its sports channel, the immensely popular MTV music channel and a general entertainment channel. In addition, it also broadcasts programmes from BBC World Service Television.

But it is in the area of Chinese-language programming that the TVB consortium is ahead, with a library of 100,000 hours of Chinese films and shows.

The consortium is to invest millions of dollars in the production of Mandarin-language programmes at newly commissioned studios in Taiwan. The programmes will serve the region's vast Mandarin-speaking audience.

As far as the fortunes of Asian television is concerned, the sky is the limit. This year alone, at least three satellites will be launched, covering most of the continent and Australia.

FRANCES KELLY is a Canadian freelance journalist based in Hong Kong.

Screen Test for Prime Minister Rabin

As soon as the PLO and Israel signed the September peace accord, the Palestinians put in a request for their own television station. The station is ready to go on air: it has money, equipment and staff. The hold-up like the delay in the peace process itself, lies in the interpretation of the small print — will it, for example, be subject to Israeli censorship?

Barry Chamish writes from Bet Shemesh, Israel



A proposed Palestinian TV station will be unique in the Arab world, promises journalist Daoud Kutub: "We will not devote our opening reports to the activities of this president or that royal family, which is customary throughout the Middle East."

"Our order of priorities will be determined by the importance of events and nothing more."

Katub has set up a company, El-Kuds, to produce news and documentary programmes for the planned station. It is these programmes, not the entertainment, which worry Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

But Katub is clear: "We will not broadcast propaganda and will report from all perspectives be they of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, Hamas (a radical Islamic organisation) or Israel; 75 per cent of the news will be local since we can't afford foreign correspondents, but we will not be anyone's mouthpiece."

Palestinian TV is a potentially powerful force, but in recent weeks it has become clear to the Israelis that, despite their nervousness, its arrival on the scene is

inevitable.

Establishment of a Palestinian TV station was one of the first requests to be made to Tel Aviv after it signed a peace accord with the PLO last September.

Rabin, worried that broadcasts might be politically manipulated, declared that no station would begin operations without his personal approval.

Undaunted by Israeli concerns, the Palestinians quickly began planning the station. In October, the PLO purchased German broadcasting equipment and shipped it to East Jerusalem. A month later, 24 Palestinians travelled to Amman for a technical training course offered by Jordan Television.

By December, Katub, a respected Palestinian journalist, had established his company.

He has assembled a staff of about 30 technicians, editors and broadcasters who learned their trades working for foreign correspondents in Israel. The start-up costs of the company were paid for by Swedish aid.

The European Union has agreed to contribute \$2.2 million this year and has promised another \$5.5 million

next year for construction of a studio.

France's Channel Two donated an outside broadcast vehicle and is training a Palestinian crew of seven to run it. The French are also training 30 Palestinian administrative staff.

In mid-January, the Israeli government agreed to licence the station. It would broadcast on one of Israel Television's free channels and be subject to the same censorship laws as Israeli television.

The station is scheduled to begin broadcasting soon — but the green light depends on the faltering Middle East peace process. And the differences of interpretation over how the station will operate are an exact mirror of the differences currently holding up the peace talks.

Redwan Bud Ayyash, deputy director of the Palestinian television company, notes that "the agreement of principles between the PLO and Israel states the television station is to begin operations three months after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho."

The purpose of the station was to promote the first

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NEPAL will use satellite to enhance television's use to promote social and economic development.

The reception of national television in all 75 districts of the mountain kingdom is expected to be sharp and clear with the satellite broadcast.

Negotiations with Intel Sat or Asia Sat for leasing satellite time will begin soon. The existing microwave links to transmit TV signals from Kathmandu is not only expensive but also inefficient in terms of picture quality.

French consultants Sofratev and Japan's Kansai Telecasting Corporation about a decade ago already concluded that a national TV network was virtually impossible in Nepal because of the long configuration and

Turning on Nepal's TV

Propaganda and cheap entertainment on local TV have many Nepalis turning to India's state-run Doordarshan — which is no better

Jan Sharma writes from Kathmandu

mountain topography. But with the use of the satellite, costing about US \$2.6 million, that seems no problem.

However, critics say the government is using the state-run Nepal Television (NTV) as a tool for propaganda rather than as a means of development communication. And because of political propaganda and cheap entertainment in local TV, many Nepalis are

turning to India's state-run Doordarshan TV — which is no better.

Nepalis who can afford expensive dish antennas are glued to BBC, Star TV and Zee TV which is gaining in popularity. Kathmandu-based European diplomats now get their home programmes by satellite antennas.

In an apparent bid to counter foreign influence, the

government has drafted a National Broadcasting Bill. "Such a legislation on electronic media is necessary to ensure the freedom of speech and right to information provided for in the 1990 Constitution," says a spokesman for the Communications Ministry.

What the legislation aims at is to make the programme factual and credible, the news be edited impartially from the political point of view, and that nothing is broadcast against public security, morality or social decorum.

Any breach may cost the licence or a heavy fine. The proposed law also aims to create a National Broadcasting Authority to formulate guide-

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Cinema Hall: It Mustn't Turn into an Inferno

Cramped conditions, poor means of escape, no compartmentation and a high fire load — there is a major tragedy waiting to happen in one of Bangladesh's cinema halls, warns Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology

BANGLADESH, even with the economy in a state of disarray and cyclone and tidal surges taking their regular annual toll, churns out about 100 movies each year from its four film studios.

These films are exhibited in about 800 cinema houses or halls all over the country. Most halls have three shows daily — matinee (1500 hours), evening (1800 hours) and night (2100 hours) shows. Halls in the capital and larger cities also have

an afternoon show at 1230 hours and morning shows on holidays.

Although the burgeoning video industry has cut the size of audiences significantly, the movie business seems untouchable and cinema halls continue to be commissioned throughout the country.

Moreover, producers are still investing in films and directors continue to make films. On average, two films are released every week. On the first three days of almost any release, most cinema halls are full.

The colour, the dazzle and the music blaring well over the safe decibel limit transports the audience from one dream world to another. Yet even the immediate environment of the movie goer is far from glamorous. The interiors of the cinemas are usually hot, cramped, sticky and smelly. But above all, this dark, enclosed world is a potential death trap when it comes to fire.

To help assess the fire safety cinema halls, students from the Department of Architecture at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology carried out a survey of some 13 cinema halls in Dhaka Metropolis a couple years ago. This article focuses on the findings and analysis of that survey.

Bad Planning

The conditions inside most cinema halls are hot and humid. Some have air-conditioning systems but these are usually inefficient and managers often turn them off anyway to save money. Ceiling fans (provided occasionally even in air-conditioned halls) are sparsely located and often installed 4 to 5m above the seats to allow a clear line of vision for upper balcony viewers. To add to the misery, often cockroaches, insects and rodents thrive in the damp, dark atmosphere.

The general state of most of

the cinema buildings is deplorable. The walls — often of brickwork only 125 mm thick — offer poor weather protection and heat insulation. The plasterwork and paintwork in buildings more than a couple of years old show severe deterioration.

Roofs are made of corrugated iron sheet cladding on mild steel truss mounted on frail columns of reinforced concrete or occasionally brickwork. The ceilings are often covered with highly combustible materials such as jute fibre-board, cork-board, etc. The interior walls are lined with similar materials, adding to the fire load.

Foyers and lobbies are cramped and badly laid out, leading to congestion before and after any show, particularly when one audience is waiting to get in and another is leaving. Some halls have corridors along the sides of the auditorium, usually leading to the cheaper seats. Often, one of these corridors is used for toilets, leaving only one narrow, unlit access (or egress) route which will almost always be stuffed with furniture and rubbish.

The cinema seats themselves consist of metal frames upholstered with cheap synthetic materials, frequently with torn covers showing the coil stuffing. Space between the rows of seats is tight and viewers often have to sit with their knees jutting against the back of the seat in front. Rows in some cinema halls are 24 seats long. Irregular steps and worn carpets present serious trip hazards.

If anything encourages people not to be late for a night out at the movies, it is the lack of aisle lighting inside the auditorium once the show begins. The thought of trying to find a seat in the dark while tripping over people who hardly have leg-room for themselves is not a tempting one.

The potential for a fire in one of these cinemas to cause a major loss of life is obvious — dimly lit, cramped halls lined with highly combustible materials, housing up to 1000 people, and inadequate escape routes.

Unfortunately, fire is not seen as a threat in Bangladeshi cinema houses.

Historically, few properties have been badly affected by fire, primarily due to the fact that all buildings have traditionally depended on natural ventilation.

However, more and more buildings are installing air-conditioning systems. Windows which were once open for ventilation are now closed, thus increasing the risk of a serious fire developing.

There have been incidents in cinema buildings when small fires have started in projection rooms, stores, mechanical rooms, but because these were easily controlled, there is a false sense of security among cinema owners.

The Potential for Disaster

One of the most probable sources of ignition in a cinema hall is smoking materials. No-smoking signs are displayed, graphically and in all the halls. However, the signs are widely ignored. People will light up inside the auditoria and lobbies, and drop cigarette ends on the floors or carpets.

Other causes of fire could be the use of naked flames, defective electrical equipment and installations and the use of portable heating appliances by snack bars in the lobbies.

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Asia's Sesame Street

A maverick Philippine children's educational television show has become Asia's unique version of Sesame Street.

Ramon Isberto writes from Manila

THE multi-awarded and beloved Philippine children's show 'Batibot' still bears strong similarities with its US parent 'Sesame Street', but the ten-year-old programme now has its own distinct Asian identity.

One year after being born in 1983, Batibot went through the trauma of being 'abandoned' by its parent and was forced to develop its own distinct image.

Last year, it lost a custody battle over two of its most popular muppets and other characters, prompting Batibot to develop its own.

These days, while Batibot continues to follow a Sesame Street-like magazine format spiced with animation, short features and special effects, it has also developed its own style and thrust.

Indeed, it has come a long way from its predecessor 'Sesame', a co-production venture of a Philippine government agency and Sesame Street makers, the Children's Television Workshop (CTW).

Sesame was a hybrid, with half of its consisting of materials from the US show, while the other half was produced in the Philippines by locals in co-operation with CTW consultants. The programme got rave reviews, but government soon ran out of money for it, forcing CTW to back out.

The show would have died then and there had not the Filipino project staff set up an independent outfit, the Philippine Children's Television Foundation (PCTVF), to produce a completely Filipino programme: Batibot, a Filipino word meaning 'small but strong'.

It was still dogged by money problems, but Batibot survived. Along the way it won numerous awards and citations here and abroad. Then in April last

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Student Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting

As Heads of State took part in the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Cyprus, these teenagers in the Council Chamber, Kensington and Chelsea Town Hall, London, were seeing what it is like to be in their shoes for a day.

Five hundred British sixth formers at five venues across the UK — London, Leeds, Cardiff, Belfast and Guernsey — enacted the roles of Heads of State and delegates in one-day conferences, offering a rare opportunity for young people to find out, through role playing, how international affairs are conducted and how international cooperation works.

Two students represented each Commonwealth country. They were well briefed on the main issues affecting their adopted nation, and strove to communicate its views and interests on key topics, divided into four groups — trade, aid and debt; the environment and development; human rights; and the Commonwealth and the 'new world order'.

As in the real CHOGM, a communique was prepared, giving the recommendations of the delegates on agenda items discussed throughout the day. The final draft was sent to influential people in Britain, including Queen Elizabeth II (Who is the Head of the Commonwealth), the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, and to the Commonwealth Meeting in Cyprus. — LPS