

## Strengthening SAARC

The eighth South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit began on Tuesday on a happy note. The happiness comes from the seven nations' accord to ratify the stalled South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) on the eve of the summit proper. The trade pact signed in 1993 at the last summit in Dhaka is expected to be operational at the beginning of next year after it has been ratified by member states by November 8. The hope is that SAPTA will be approved by the parliaments of member-states by come December at the latest.

Let us hope this sets the tone for the entire proceedings and helps end the conference on a positive note. So far the deliberations have moved rather smoothly excepting perhaps the discordant note struck by Pakistani President Farooq Ahmed Leghari. His departure from the usual beaten path to allude to controversial issues like freeze on nuclear armament and bilateral problems however has not dampened the spirit of making the summit productive.

The Pakistan president's reference to unpleasant issues may not be compatible with the charter of the 10-year-old organisation, but it is time that some of the unpleasantness was faced rather than evaded to strengthen the ties within the organisation for meaningful co-operation. Without mutual understanding and deep appreciation of each other's problems, the organisation cannot work to its full potential. All the nice words and novel ideas are likely to stumble on the hard rocks of political impediments. No denying the fact that the nations must have meeting-points — no matter if they are outside of the forum — to resolve outstanding irritants between them.

The conference has already generated enthusiasm for new ideas and accordingly proposals are now before the leaders of the seven-nation forum. Their adoption and implementation are essential but these will depend largely on congenial interstate relationships. For instance, the establishment of a South Asian development fund or regional collaborative ventures aimed not only to feed regional market but also the markets beyond are in some ways political decisions too. Again, a common stand by the SAARC members at international fora calls for a lot of thrashing out of differences. To turn the weakest of all the regional fora into a dynamic one we must seriously pursue the course of closer co-operation and action.

## For a Free Radio, TV

Yesterday was the International Press Freedom Day. There are days all round the year and one is not supposed to keep track of every one of them. Not so the case with this one as the issue of press freedom is very relevant to our nation's democratic development. Which is, for historic reasons, another name for our social and political development. Governance here cannot be expected to be either meaningful and forward-looking without the feedback called press. But press is not all feedback. More than any it helps keep the nation in one piece and adds to the quality of society by bringing about an informed population.

All that is good and socio-politically very fetching about the thing applies only to a free press. A less than free newspaper or radio is not press at all. By that token our electronic media, in worse bondage than even the slaves in Rome, and an agent constantly feeding the citizens on the ultimate in disinformation, is not press. By making a state facility serve the parochial interests of one political party it is the state that is being undermined — dangerously.

On the International Press Freedom Day it is, therefore, the fittest thing that we call out for the freedom of our radio and television. Until that is here, press freedom would be honoured by Bangladesh only by violating it. It is very urgent and necessary that radio and television be freed completely of government control forthwith, which should mean well ahead of the elections. This is a demand in perfect consonance with the Goal Outline of the Three-party Alliance to which the present government owes its birth.

The government has done still more to take the substance out of what is on the surface a comparatively free print media. Through a deliberate and thorough pursuit of the policy of patronage, the government has given birth to a pronouncedly conformist press — an anathema to press freedom. This degeneration has been aggravated by the very unfortunate waning in Bangladesh of the editorial institution — the one thing that stands for and guarantees — in fact builds brick by brick — freedom of the press.

The UN has chosen as the motto of this year's Press Freedom Day the slogan *No to Silence, No to Death*. This should mean a no to both imposed silence and the self-imposed one. And the no to death should mean, first of all, denunciation of the moral death of a newspaper or the professionals that constitute it.

## We Shall Not Forget

Jahanara Imam wrote in blood and tears possibly the most poignant story of our Liberation War. And she, after both her husband and son had been sacrificed to that glorious war, lived to live that struggle for the Bengali people's emancipation in her person. Hers was no less heroic a performance. She battled on two fronts: A cancerous body and a cancerous society in the process of being fast gobbled by anti-Liberation War values and their militant preachers.

Yesterday was her 66th birthday. This legendary beauty was also recognised as one of our best teachers, knowing her job better than any and loving to do it with her heart in it. The war changed it all. Her diaries of the hellish nine months became not only a best-seller but it gave everlasting reality to the receding memory of the Liberation War, in the manner Anne Frank's gave to the days of the Holocaust. There was no looking back for her after that.

Many patriots feel that the Liberation War was not all finished on December 16, 1971. Jahanara Imam gave her life to see it decisively concluded in the true victory of what has come to be known as the ideals of the Liberation War. We shall not forget this indomitable fighter and incomparable patriot and unfailing leader from outside the political fold.

OVER 30 million French voters went to the polls in the first round of Presidential elections to decide their preference in a full slate of nine candidates. In a major upset that stunned political pundits, socialist candidate Lionel Jospin secured nearly seven million votes (or 23.24 per cent of the votes cast) to come out first in the pack while the favourite Jacques Chirac, a Gaullist, was grateful to scrape through to the second round with about 6.2 million votes (20.64 per cent). Chirac was just ahead of his former friend, fellow Gaullist and handpicked PM Edouard Balladur, who had deserted his mentor in a bid for the Presidency but fell just short by 600,000 votes, getting only about 5.6 million votes (or about 18.54 per cent). Not to be denied his place under the French sun Jean Marie Le Pen, the Far Right candidate, secured 15.15 per cent of the vote, translated into 4.6 million votes, slightly above par than his previous performances. Next came Communist Robert Hue with 2.6 million votes (3.72 per cent), then Trotskyist Arlette Laguiller with 1.6 million votes (5.34 per cent) followed by Nationalist Philippe de Villiers (1.4 million votes 4.78 per cent) and Ecologist Dominique Voynet with 3.33 per cent of the vote representing one million votes. At the very tail was the Extreme Right candidate Jacques Cheminade with 83472 votes (about 0.27 per cent).

Since none of the candidates got an outright majority (50 per cent), a second run-off election will be held on May 7, 1995 between the Socialist Party Candidate Lionel Jospin and "Rally for the Republic (RPR) Party" Candidate, Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac. Contrary to pollsters' speculation a few months ago that pitted Conservatives Chirac and Balladur against each other, the early front runner French PM Balladur self-destructed in the final weeks to make it a straight Left-Right contest. On the surface, the Right (Chirac, Balladur, Le Pen, Villiers and Cheminade) picked up about 18 million votes (60 per cent) to 12 million votes of the Left (Jospin, Hiz, Laguiller, Voynet) about 40 per cent. However, this is rather a simplistic calculation as not all the voters of the Right will vote for Chirac or, for that matter, Jospin will not automatically sweep up all the votes on the Left. A fair esti-

THE next summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum is still a seven months away, but member-countries are already scrambling to prepare for it.

This is because the specifics of a free trade plan struck in Bogor, Indonesia last November are expected to be hammered out at this year's summit in Osaka, and analysts predict clashes between one side led by the United States and the other headed by Malaysia.

Part of the problem is that most APEC economies have hardly had the time to do the sophisticated task of calculating the pluses and minuses of trade liberalisation, especially since the region within which this process will take place includes developed economies such as that of Japan and the United States.

And now there are rising fears among analysts and activists in APEC developing economies that there would be moves in Osaka to extend 'free trade' to 'free trade area' and 'non-binding' commitment to legally binding agreement.

APEC groups together Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, Mexico, Chile,

Paupa, New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada.

Last November, the leaders of the 18 APEC member economies meeting in Bogor adopted a declaration calling for the establishment of free trade among themselves by the year 2010 for developed nations and 2020 for developing countries.

At the meeting, the United States played the most active role in pushing for a free trade area to be set up, and for liberalisation of trade, services and investments.

But some of the developing countries led by Malaysia were alarmed by the rapid rate at which APEC was being institutionalised and being moved along the road toward a free trade area.

mate is that a vast majority of each side may still favour their ideological inclination (and a fair amount may stay at home) but most voters react to individual candidates in preference to their political leanings.

The inaccurate French polls had shown Chirac getting nearly 27 per cent of the vote of about eight million votes — he fell short by a massive 1.8 million votes, nearly 25 per cent less than predicted by pollsters. On the other hand, Jospin did better than expected by about 1.6 million votes and Balladur was short of the projections by about a million votes. These represent very wide margins of error and expert analysts are of the opinion that Chirac almost got clobbered because of (1) voter apathy insofar that they expected him to win anyway and stayed at home, (2) the Right-Right split of the Gaullist vote and (3) desperate Socialist attempt to keep their candidate Jospin alive by concentrating the left vote. At the same time Le Pen, who had no chance anyway, profited from his rabid rhetoric against immigrants, the symbolic backlash maintaining his performance of the past. The Extreme Left (in Hue, Laguiller and Voynet) got a better than expected five million votes (about 17 per cent).

Alarmed by the Socialist success in the first round, French PM Edouard Balladur was the first to concede defeat (within the hour of the unofficial results) and throw his support behind his former friend and mentor, Jacques Chirac. While clearly upset at his surprisingly poor showing in the polls, Chirac (nicknamed the Bulldozer), was quick to re-adjust his signals for a determined third bid in the Presidency by a low-key victory speech in the face of Le Pen exhorting his supporters not to vote for Chirac, the Paris Mayor knows he has his work cut out for him if he is to overcome the psychological handicap of the first round "defeat" at the hands of likeable Jospin. Given the mood to the right of the French populace, computer

# The Majority Vote

It is a historical fact that in countries where literacy is low, class divisions are much more pronounced, in effect these become "special interest groups" who have a vested interest in coming to power to protect the ever-shrinking economic pie. In countries of South Asia like Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, etc these are manifested in varying ways.

projections are presently giving him a 57-43 per cent placing over Jospin in the May 7 run-off. In actual terms, this means that approximately an additional 11 million voters would cast their preference for him (total 17 million) while Jospin would get only six million votes (total 12 million). Given the mood of the populace, this mathematical calculation of the margin may not be as wide as projected with a 53-47 per cent margin quite possible in favour of Chirac, representing 16 million votes cast for Chirac to 14 million votes for Jospin.

While we will have to wait for the actual results on May 7 to see about these projections some very interesting observations are on display for everyone to see, particularly those who are interested to correct the present anomalies in the electoral system in

improvement of 20 per cent while Kravchuk could only manage an increase of 4 per cent only to 47 per cent. Kravchuk had a clear majority of 43 per cent of the electoral votes in the first round, a greater number of voters who had voted for other candidates did not want to see him in office and thus went over en bloc to his opponent in the second and final round, a fair expression of the will of the majority as to their preference.

It is a historical fact that in countries where literacy is low, class divisions are much more pronounced, in effect these become "special interest groups" who have a vested interest in coming to power to protect the ever-shrinking economic pie. In countries of South Asia like Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, etc these are manifested in varying ways. In Pakistan,

advanced western countries is a clear Left and Right divide, not so in the Third World. The result is that anyone who gets between 20-25 per cent of the vote has a core strength that gets him or her elected in the first past the post basis. It is not secret that the winning candidate depends upon a hard core of voters who prefer him not because of their individual likes but because their closed society wills them so. This is not democracy, this is an absolute farce. The aspirant winner need only target a part of the electorate and his (or her) success excludes the major part of the electorate who mostly become spectators during the tenure of the NMA/MPA while the "special interest groups" live off the winner's spoils. This core group may be of ethnic, sect, caste and even a blind belief in their party.

The polarisation enhances division in the populace as in time the other groups become frustrated at their inadequacy in numbers and decide that they have no future within this system because of their back-ground and begin to look for alternatives like secession that will give them a place in the sun. This process promotes disintegration whereas our aim should be for candidates to have cross-over votes from all sides. Moreover the present system inculcates a weak government as candidates get elected who do not owe any allegiance to the majority of voters in their constituencies and thus being unaccountable are available for defection to the highest bidder.

Pakistan is a classic example of everything that has gone wrong with democracy but could have been different provided we were logical and truthful in our concept. Except for the MQM whose candidates mostly get more than 50 per cent in the first round and a handful of leaders like the MP Ms Benazir Bhutto, etc in her ancestral Larkana constituency, the rest get between 20-30 per cent of the votes cast in their constituencies to get elected. Since the voting percentage is

about 50 per cent, it means that only between 10-15 per cent of the eligible voters in a particular constituency manage to get their candidate elected. Some are elected because they were Shia or Sunni, some because they belonged to a Baradri, some because they were Mohajir or Sindhi, some because they were Awan or Rajput or whatever, some because they created a "group" on the strength of money.

How can known honest men like Air Marshal (Retd) Asghar Khan, Mairaj Mohammad Khan, etc ever get elected in such a system even though the majority may prefer them in the ultimate analysis? It is therefore important that before even such people are forced to compromise on principles for the sake of being elected in a "democracy" such as presently ours, we opt for a measure that gives verdict on the basis of a genuine majority vote. The present disintegration of our society is also deep-rooted on the frustrations of the majority at being effectively shut out of the democratic process by a strong minority with the help of a divided vote.

Critics argue that a second run-off election involves considerable expense that an impoverished nation cannot afford. Is this price too much to pay for the integrity of this country? Do we have to continue to suffer the paralysis of government and the vagaries of nepotism and corruption because of a few billion Rupees? In the face of the many billions that are regularly frittered or pilfered by our unaccountable leaders, the concept of a majority vote is a small price to pay.

A run-off election will put the "Special Interest Group" against the will of the majority, democracy can only prevail when the majority vote prevails. In the process Shia will have to align with Sunni, Awan with Rajput, Mahajir with Sindhi, etc and so on. Only candidates who command the confidence of the majority of the eligible electorate will get elected. If Pakistan is to be saved then we must change the system to reflect the correct interpretation of democracy, not one that works in favour of feudals, the rich and the influential. Of all the ills we dream about reforming, there is nothing more important to Pakistan's survival than democracy in its correct form to reflect the true will of the majority vote.

## AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

vogue in the third world. Essentially this is the practice of having only "first past the post" system, making it a lucrative hunting ground for "special interest groups" and even strong minorities. Whether Chirac wins on Jospin, the mandate the winner will receive from the electorate is very unambiguous, a majority of those eligible who cast their preference would be represented by the winning candidate. That is the essence of democracy, the will of the majority.

While it is a possibility that Jospin may win, the present measure of the will of the French people indicates a turn to the right, giving the edge to Chirac, nominally the runner-up in the first round. This is the same that happened much more drastically in the Ukraine where the sitting President Kravchuk got 43 per cent in the first round, a clear lead over former PM Kuchma who got only 33 per cent. In the run off election, Kuchma got 53 per cent, an

the divisions may be because of sect, ethnicity, Baradri, caste, etc while in India it is further complicated because of the sharp class division within the Hindu caste system with the Brahmins miles apart from the Untouchables, who incidentally have started to flex their muscles. With a good size Muslim and Christian population, ethnicity, etc adds to the turmoil. While in western countries where "special interest groups" may be created out of ideological motivation, in third world countries these are mostly created out of heritage, the accident of birth in a particular location, religion, sect, caste, etc. These cultural divisions make further polarisation into potential for violence.

This is the very anti-thesis of democracy where individual preference must be the cardinal principle behind the free vote. In essence, democracy can never function within these parameters, the model clearly shown in ad-

# APEC: Steep Road to Osaka

Issues that the Bogor APEC summit brushed over may come back to haunt Asia-Pacific leaders when they meet in Japan later this year. **Martin Khor** reports for Inter Press Service from Penang, Malaysia

as Malaysia regarding its stance on where APEC should be headed.

At a World Net dialogue session in February in Kuala Lumpur, the US coordinator for APEC, Sandra Kristoff, made it clear her country will push hard for the acceptance of the liberalisation datelines.

She said Washington's understanding of the Bogor Declaration was that the forthcoming Osaka meeting should have an ambitious and bold action agenda to speedily launch the free trade plan.

"We have to be bold," Kristoff said. "While we agree that the agenda for trade liberalisation must be balanced, we cannot mistake balance with timidity. (The year) 2010 is our goal. Some nations may need longer and can take until 2020."

She added that this 15-25 year period allowed "plenty of

room for pragmatism".

But to many analysts, the pace of APEC's progression itself has been astonishing. Initiated by Australia, the grouping started in the late 1980s supposedly as an informal and unstructured gathering of economies.

By 1993, leaders of the member-economies gathered in Seattle for the forum's first summit. Months after, a report by APEC's Eminent Persons Group had a proposal for a free trade area in the Asia-Pacific.

The Bogor Declaration deliberately left out details due to the reservations of countries like Malaysia and China.

The implications for the developing economies within APEC are enormous, especially since the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT) expanded the concept of free trade to in-

clude not only trade in manufactures, but also in agriculture and services.

It now also covers the granting of intellectual property protection to transnational companies, a measure that many activists say is protectionist and goes counter to the principle of liberalisation.

Analysts point out that countries like the United States already have instruments that they use to attain extra trade concessions.

One example of these measures is the so-called Super 301 that the United States has either applied or threatened to use on countries such as China, Thailand, India, Brazil and even Japan, all of which Washington deemed to have inadequately complied with the requirements of US firms.

Indeed, there lurks a suspicion that APEC may be used to get Asian countries to make concessions in trade, services, investments and intellectual property, beyond those made through the Uruguay Round.

Some Asian governments are also wary that Washington is keen to get

APEC off the ground as a regional free trade arrangement and be a counterweight to the European Union, which is currently the largest and most powerful regional economic bloc.

Some analysts say the APEC process can be seen as parallel to how Washington brought the Americas into its orbit.

First, there was the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This led to a larger liberalisation process involving almost all South American countries, whose leaders attended a summit with US President Bill Clinton at Miami last December.

APEC, experts argue, would bring the Asia-Pacific countries concerned closer to the US circuit, thus giving US firms a headstart over Europe.

But the United States scoffs at such charges, and Kristoff during the World Net dialogue denied that the United States was trying to push APEC to move faster than any of its members could handle.

She told a panel that included representatives from Malaysia, Japan and South Korea: "Nothing in the US posture suggests we are trying to take NAFTA and extending it westward across the Pacific."

## To the Editor...

### Stranded Pakistanis

Sir, Now-a-days, perhaps like many others, I do not relish my breakfast if it's not preceded by watching and listening to the BBC World News. On Apr. 29 morning I happened to see a very interesting pictorial report prior to the main news, broadcast from the port city Karachi of Pakistan, depicting the life style of the Biharis (or Mohajirs). You like if or not they their own way of life. They have since long agitating for their political rights. However, they are blamed for the riots and to have created an acute law and order situation.

These Biharis (now their number swelling to more than two lakhs) did express their allegiance towards Pakistan and claimed themselves as Pakistanis, when Bangladesh became independent in 1971. A large number of them then were taken by Pakistan and rehabilitated in the province of Sindh. But very soon Pakis-

tan govt. stopped their repatriation from Bangladesh. Since then, a large number of these stranded Pakistanis are passing their miserable days at various camps in Bangladesh. Bangladesh govt. also naturally must be tried to house and feed them for an indefinite period. Now their population also must be increasing and their already unhygienic camps are becoming overcrowded and turning into environmental threat as well.

We, therefore, urge upon our Prime Minister and the Chairperson of the SAARC to take up this long hanging issue with Pakistan at the summit meeting in Delhi to bring about a permanent solution to this menacing problem.

**Ft. Lt. (Retd.) Mohiuddin Dhaka.**

### False cases to harass

Sir, One of the easiest tasks in our country is to vex and harass others. Practically, the law and order has gone down to

such a low that most of the guardians advise their wards particularly daughters to ignore any unprovoked taunts/teases for the sake of peace and safety. Experiences suggest, referring the cases of harassment to the law enforcing agencies or the court of law may simply aggravate the condition further.

We face another common problem in our society. There are some people who find sardonic pleasure in filing suits against others to make their lives simply miserable. This happens many a time out of jealousy or bad intentions without any valid ground. The prime incentive for playing foul untestamentally is that after losing the motivated false cases, the manipulative persons go unpunished. On the other hand, the innocent and good people usually prefer to avoid filing compensatory cases against those criminals due to uncertainty, inordinate delay and high cost involvement in seeking justice at the court of law.

Due to this undeterred criminal activities, the community has to pay a very high cost by way of wastage of en-

ergy, money, disturbance of mental peace, hindrance to development and stunted growth. While the social workers/reformists are trying to change the people, some strict qualitative deterrent measures are required to combat filing false cases and 'helping the community march ahead smoothly.

The appropriate authority (maybe the judges and the Lawyers) may take initiative/make provisions to award punishments if a case is proven unnecessarily purported to harass somebody, saving the sufferer (s) from insurmountable pains to file another case to get compensation for the harassment committed against him/her. This will motivate many to refrain from filing false cases too.

The false cases to harass must go.

**John Arun Sarkar**

**Singholla, Dhaka.**

### Down the memory lane

Sir, A few days back a very old friend of mine, took me for a drive to Azimpur new colony to recall the good old childhood memories of the

60s. On reaching the new blocks of the Azimpur colony, we noticed a rather gloomy and precautions look all over, as if every one was alarmed of a disaster. The good old green fields where we once joyfully played around now looks lifeless with uncared growth of bushes here and there. We came across some youngsters of the colony, who in their behaviour appeared overgrown and serious. Others were seen sitting in circles, as if in political meetings. The other changes we noticed were erection of collapsible gates at the entrance of most buildings and the one time open veranda of the ground floor now fully converted into suffocating enclosed structure.

There came a touch of emotion while staring up the flats where we once so happily lived for so long. We could not help but recall the days with our beloved parents, neighbours, friends, those school years and the innocent times when a mere radio and the black & white

television were all that fun and excitement. I once thought of climbing up the 3rd floor along with my four-and-half-year old daughter, but then had to change my mind, realising the prevailing uneasy atmosphere. "These days no body trusts anybody". You might as well be seriously misunderstood and humiliated. "Whereas, even an unknown visitor was greeted and asked to come in for a cup of tea, so was the common feeling of the bygone years.

Suddenly certain questions crept up in my mind, inspite of all that enormous privileges, increased rate of literacy, technological developments and with so many other facilities being provided why are we not cruising ahead in thoughts and behaviour? Are all that privileges and advantages costing our peace and security? Are all these benefits a bit hard to digest?

**Viqar Moinuddin Dhaka**