

A Helping Hand from EU

Bangladesh is on the verge of opening a new chapter in its relations with the European Union (EU), particularly in trade. The EU, on the other hand, looks set to focus its development assistance programmes more towards household food security and human resource development.

In return, Bangladesh has already indicated its willingness to adhere to the international convention on protection of intellectual property rights, which has removed one obstacle to such an agreement. However, Dhaka's consent to "take back" illegal immigrants from EU states is likely to raise two important questions.

The focus of Dhaka-Brussels relations, however, needs to remain firmly on trade and development. All efforts must be made to strengthen relations in these areas. While trade is principally going to be driven by the private sector, requiring a great deal of initiative and professionalism from the Bangladeshi business community, the EU can also help.

End Happily in Sight

Stalled since a year and quarter and looking somewhat remote in the face of odd border incidents, the resumption of Rohingya repatriation to Myanmar comes as a very happy turn of events. On Myanmar government's clearing the homeward journey of 7,000 among the remaining 21,000 Rohingya refugees encamped in Cox's Bazar since the eighties the first batch of eight families have gone back home kicking off the last leg of a long drawn repatriation exercise.

As of this moment, the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh and the UNHCR can feel justly proud of their success in steering one of the biggest repatriation exercises in the contemporary world clear of the stunning odds that rocked the boat many times over.

The happy combination of circumstances for the repatriation to go ahead is noteworthy. Especially when the Myanmar authorities have their hands full with a pro-democracy movement they must come to terms with given the world public opinion which supports it.

Trial of a Dictator

His crimes have finally caught up with him. The 83-year-old former dictator of Chile, Augusto Pinochet, faces the prospect of extradition from Britain for trial on charges of genocide in Spain. After bitter debates among the British, Spanish and Chilean lawyers the case finally went up to the highest British court, the Privy Council, where the judges ruled 3-2 in favour of Pinochet's arrest made earlier while he was receiving treatment at a London hospital and also allowed proceedings to be drawn at lower court for the extradition of the former ruler.

General Pinochet overthrew the government of elected socialist President Salvador Allende in 1973 in a bloody coup in which President Allende died in the presidential palace. Pinochet ruled Chile for 17 years with iron hand ruthlessly suppressing all forms of opposition to his authoritarian junta. In the process, thousands of innocent people died and vanished in peculiar and unnatural circumstances. A sizeable number of Spaniards — about 3000 — were also murdered or vanished from Chile.

As a strong advocate for democracy and rule of law this paper believes that General Pinochet should be extradited to stand trial for the massacre of the innocent people during his despotic rule. The judgment of the Law Lords will go a long way in restoring people's faith in judiciary and rule of law. This will remain an example for dictators and despots all over the world that 'crime does never pay', especially crime against humanity. And regardless of the height of their former positions or the time-lag since their diabolical acts they will have to answer before the bar of world public opinion one day.

President Clinton's decision to overrule his top advisors like Secretary of State, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff and about planned air strikes against Iraq was appropriate and deserves appreciation. His top advisors pressed for immediate attacks against Iraq under unusual favourable conditions favoured US military action.

Pentagon rightly estimated at least 10,000 deaths — all ordinary Iraqis and not Saddam and his advisors — the items US was apparently interested in. There are dozens of presidential palaces and nobody knows where President Saddam lives. Some people say and they say it's no joke that there are many Saddam's (done by plastic surgery) and no outsider knows which one is the real President Saddam.

In any case, the attacks would have provided immense ammunition to the Iraqis and other Arabs who support Iraq. They would have gone wild to raise voice against the US and the UK. And the attack would have been totally unproductive when both the countries are trying hard to find peace in the Middle East. The air strike would have totally nullified the hard and laudable work done by President Clinton himself and his administration for days together in Wye River Plantation at Maryland. Today the Middle East peace process is back on track and the land transfer has started taking place bringing hopes to the millions in the region.

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Mission Impossible

If it is a UN action it should be the obligation of all members to participate. Why should the US and Britain take the burden on behalf of the UN? Is the UN going to reimburse the cost of the war to the US and Britain? Are the US and Britain the authorised members to fight all wars on behalf of the UN?

The US administration said it did not need any authorisation from the Security Council though the planned attack was for violation of the resolution of the UN. The Administration argue that the authorisation exists which others say it does not. If authorisation was there then the question arises why other members do not participate. If it is a UN action it should be the obligation of all members to participate.

superpower's might should be used not to wage war but to bring peace in the world. The Gulf war was waged to dislodge the occupier but if one back at the situation prevailing at that time one could see that the occupier started leaving Kuwait and strong diplomatic pressure could have averted the war and the disaster that followed.

Let the world and particularly the US pause for a while and see what UNSCOM has been able to reveal so far. Seven and a half years is a very long time. How many more years it would need to complete the job? Indeed it can never finish the job. It has been entrusted with the Mission Impossible. Iraq is a vast country and if Iraq authorities want they can hide things and take things from one place to another and it is virtually impossible for a team of foreigners to chase and find them. They can work for decades but still they will not be satisfied as they will always have doubts in mind and continue to ask for papers and documents as Mr Butler is doing now. He would continue to do so as it is absolutely impossible for any one to say at any stage that Iraq does not have any more of these weapons or any programmes to have those weapons.

Mr Butler cannot and will not take that risk. Moreover, he

will never get a "clean" report from his inspectors. There are inspectors like Scott Ritter who had regular contacts with Israeli Intelligence Agency — Mosad. This is why Butler and his team have been going round and round and making new demands and this process will continue indefinitely until the US Administration says — yes, we need no more search and that would depend on when there will be a new regime in Baghdad. Therefore problem lies somewhere else — not in the existence of chemical and biological weapons, if any, but with Saddam. If Saddam goes, Butler and his team will also go; no more search for these weapons. US administration also does not seem to be sure whether Saddam has these weapons. If he had he would have certainly used them during Gulf war when he fired as many as 39 scud missiles into Israel. After seven and a half years US laboratory detected traces of VX in the missile warhead pieces but reportedly negative reports were given by Swiss and French laboratories.

Therefore, it is no use insisting on something which may not exist at all. Even if they exist, these must be at laboratory level and do not pose any immediate threat to any one. Just to say that Saddam will develop them as weapons and use them against their neighbours is a far-fetched thing. Saddam knows that if he uses these weapons against neighbour he and his people will not escape as the distance is not too big. Therefore, on that assumption of existence of such weapons the UN cannot continue to keep a nation under strict surveillance and force its people including women and children to go with food and die of hunger and disease. Just a glance through the reports of UNICEF and World Food Programme will reveal the gravity of the situation in Iraq.

With Saddam's human rights records and his desire to cling to power, the demand for a change is understandable. But that demand must come from Iraqi people and not from foreign countries. To work openly against a UN member country's regime, however bad it might be, and promote opposition groups with funds are certainly not healthy developments in terms of international relationship.



Spotlight on Middle East Muslehuddin Ahmad

Is Mid-term Election Feasible in India?

If the BJP feels that power is going out of its hand and the opposition comes too closer to gain it, then it may recommend dissolution of the Lok Sabha and fresh polls, although this is a remote possibility. No one would like to be held responsible for forcing fresh elections on the nation so early. Still, this can become a reality if conditions warrant.

without an authority. These factors explain why the vulnerable Vajpayee government has remained firm in the saddle for all these months.

But certainly that scenario has changed to some extent in the last few days and whether the present government will last long has become a major topic of political discussions. There are also talks about chances of the major opposition Congress forming a new government and even whether the developments that may come in near future would force the country to go for a snap election.

India, which once witnessed strong governments that normally completed full term, is experiencing a different condition for last several years because no political party is being able to gain absolute majority in the elections and consequently, different forces come together to have a taste of power and in most cases, cannot remain together for long and the government collapses. Barring the P. V. Narasimha Rao-led Congress government, no other government in India in recent past could complete the normal tenure although the Congress under Mr. Rao did not get a clear majority in the polls but made up the gaps through different methods. That Mr. Rao even resorted to unethical means to remain in power is a different story. He is facing the music now and is charged with allegations like bribing members of other parties to win their support for majority in the parliament.

Since the people do not want frequent elections and the country cannot afford such a big exercise for financial and other reasons, it is desirable

that a government remains at the helm for a reasonable degree of time unless something extraordinary warrants it to quit. Mr. Vajpayee, certainly an experienced and popular politician for his own record and charisma, had been at the helm, albeit for only 13 days, but he and his government had to resign in the face of a difficult task to prove majority in the house. When he headed the government for the second time, many expected that he should be there for some time so that his performance as the head of the government can be properly assessed although the razor-thin majority of his rule has been a big headache.

Why has suddenly been the talk that the present government may not last long, the Congress may seek to form a government or as a desperate move or last resort even general elections may be called prematurely? Support for the main opposition Congress among voters has, of late, increased significantly, that too, at the cost of the BJP.

When readers read this column, results of November 25 elections to four Indian states which have gone to voting on November 25 were yet to be fully announced. But opinion polls and other sources have only predicted a big setback for the ruling BJP in Delhi and Rajasthan while gains in Madhya Pradesh. Even if the BJP wins in Madhya Pradesh, this cannot obviate the defeats in Delhi and Rajasthan. In fact, this loss is seen as a weaning away of the electorate from the BJP-led government even though the state assembly polls have no direct bearing on the federal government.

This setback will obviously encourage calls from the opposition that BJP quit power. The small partners of the coalition may also distance themselves from the BJP in fear that the it losing ground. "Country may face mid-term polls," said Prime Minister Vajpayee as the outcome of the state assembly polls was getting clear. He did not say that the country was going for such a step or it is necessary but he did not rule it out as a possibility. The Congress working committee, scheduled to meet Sunday (today), will probably decide to prepare itself for power should the present government collapses under its own weight as a sequel to the state assembly polls. Congress does not want mid-term polls, the centre-left coalition of the United Front does not either, let alone the BJP.

But if the BJP feels that power is going out of its hand and the opposition comes too closer to gain it, then it may recommend dissolution of the Lok Sabha and fresh polls, although this is a remote possibility.

people already infected with HIV and no sign of levelling off. Given the present mixture of complacency and extreme vulnerability, perhaps the early discovery of an effective vaccine and cure is the best thing that could happen. If and when that happens, these vaccines and drugs would also have to be widely available and affordable in countries that need them most.

That may be a tall order. Yes, current laboratory research is giving some promise, but there is no real breakthrough. Waiting for vaccines and drugs, it may be too late.

What is the realistic scenario? Heavy investment is needed to research and develop new vaccines.

HIV vaccine is a particularly complex undertaking at present. The western pharmaceutical industry is driven by profit motive. But is there a compelling incentive for the western pharmaceutical industry? Let us not forget that the perceived threat of the epidemic is declining in the West. There is realistic to hope that the industry will market a cheap and affordable vaccine anytime soon? Will the industry bring drugs that poor countries can afford to buy? In a free market economy, where is the rationale for altruistic or humanitarian concern? The UN agencies are

currently engaged mainly in advocacy and technical advice. Their ability to secure concessional delivery of HIV vaccines, when commercially available, is yet to be tested.

In that scenario, what is the practical and realistic option available with the present scientific knowledge and experience? The only redeeming factor might be the degree and level of success with which the governments and civil societies in the already affected and under-threat countries create total population awareness so that most people are able and willing to adopt safe and responsible sexual practice and other preventive measures concurrently, these countries have to prepare existing infrastructure and health system to care for those already infected and minimise the severity of the impact of HIV/AIDS.

One epidemiological feature separates HIV/AIDS from other more familiar infections. It is an elusive enemy, by the time the epidemic becomes clearly evident it is already too late for many; while infection is spreading almost invisibly complacency is the usual response. Will the governments and societies harness the will to act early even without an established epidemic?

Dr M Zakir Husain Dhaka

To the Editor...

No hartal pledge

Sir, The wonderful thing the present government has done is that it has made an unilateral declaration to abstain from hartal.

But some critics think that a right action has been taken at a wrong time. Had the government done this while in opposition, probably this would have been a unique instance in the world. In support, some recall a small story of the past. It goes like this:

"When and then?" Politician's wife — "Dear, when people are patriots?" Politician — "At our call when people resort to hartal, violence, arson, looting etc. then they are patriots?"

Wife — "And when they become terrorists?" Politician — "At others' call when they resort to hartal, protests etc. then they are terrorists."

Abdullah Dhaka

Energy crisis

Sir, We are going through energy crisis in general and electricity crisis in particular. Now our PM has advised us to be more careful and economical about electricity. This takes me way back in the '70s. The then president

Hiv/aids scenario: The present option

Sir, The world epidemic of HIV/AIDS and people less able and prepared to effectively cope with it. Of the estimated 30 million currently infected worldwide with HIV, vast majority are in Africa and Asia; India alone has probably 8 million

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OPINION

"Who's Afraid of Genetic Engineering?"

MAS Molla

I have read the article by Mr Jimmy Carter (Ex-US President) captioned as above published in the DS page on 18.09.98 with rapt attention. From this very article I have come to know that nations ratifying the Bio-diversity Treaty of 1992 (the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro) sought an ad hoc team to determine whether the genetically modified organisms could threaten biodiversity. Under pressure from environmentalists, and with no supporting data, the team decided that any such organism could potentially eliminate native plants and animals.

The article further informed that the members of the said team come from environmental agencies of more than 100 states excluding the USA. The team would complete its work within six months and present its final recommendations that might be a binding international agreement from early next year. Besides the members are pushing to regulate shipments of all genetically modified organisms and products made from them.

The writer anticipated that grain, fresh produce, vaccines, medicines, breakfast cereals, wine, vitamins and so on would require written approval by the importing nation before they could leave the dock. This approval may take months. Meanwhile, barge costs would mount and vaccines and food would spoil. Mr Carter guessed an anti-biotechnology campaign by the environmentalists who "exaggerate the risk of genetically modified organisms and ignore their benefits."

Being a biologist of an underdeveloped country like Bangladesh, I cannot ignore the very many benefits of genetic engineering. We live mainly on the high yielding varieties of rice produced by our own agricultural scientists or imported from abroad. Our supply of fish, meat and milk is also dependent on hybrid animals. Most of our vaccines and medicines are genetically engineered goods. Although using these benefits of biotechnological developments, yet we are undernourished and lacking adequate medicare. Furthermore, the hybrid varieties of plants and animals are added to the natural biodiversity (if kept intact). That is why we, as a na-

tion, cannot logically stand against biotechnology. But when we come to know that the US is protecting the genes of every species (most of which were known by others for centuries) in the biotechnological laboratories and patenting them as bio-resources of the patenting companies of that State, we cannot but denounce this practice. We become stunned in knowing that a company of Mr Carter's country produces Sterile Seeds (?) to be exported to us — the poor nations. This practice is both anti-nature and anti-human, because seeds are produced by plants naturally for the protection of their kinds (species). Thus the so-called seeds of cereals are some clusters of complex chemical compounds (mainly starch) and none should dare to term them as seeds which are artificially destined to produce plants once for all and die for ever. Anti-human because the seeds are to be imported by exorbitant price in every season for every crop by the poor countries like us and the benefit would be the so-called seed producers. I mentally participated the procession led by Mr AZM Obaidullah Khan (the Ex-Deputy Director General of FAO-Asia-Pacific region and a poet of Bangladesh) against these activities in Bangladesh. Would Mr Carter also join us or we are to expect his stand?

Mr Carter took the environmentalists of more than 100 developing countries for fools. The evidence lies in his statement: "Under pressure from environmentalists, and with no supporting data, the team decided that any such organism could potentially eliminate native plants and animals." How can it be right that such a large team would not base their recommendations on some supporting data? How does a knowledgeable man like Mr Carter think that the "lesser humans" of such a large team cannot make a single 'greater human' like him?

I am confident that if the recommendations of the team of environmentalists is implemented, the required checking of bio-engineered goods will be done in required speed so that these are not spilled in the dock as Mr Carter feared.

Just on suspicion that Iraq has chemical and biological weapons the people of Iraq have been put to untold sufferings by the world body which is supposed to look after the interest and welfare of the people of the member countries.