The Commonwealth must make a conscious effort to encourage countries in

Africa and Asia, as well as the Small States of the Caribbean, the Pacific, the

Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean to be actively involved in the work of the

Commonwealth. If the Commonwealth is perceived by the membership at large as

an organization which is dominated by a handful of countries this will run

The Commonwealth at the Turn of the Century

N 1949, when that visionary statesman Pandit Nehru pro-A posed the replacement of the British Commonwealth with a Commonwealth of independent sovereign states, no one could have predicted that fifty years later a Commonwealth of 8 member states would have grown to 54 member states. which collectively account for nearly 30% of the world's population.

During this period, the world has witnessed enormous changes. The global agenda has changed. The multilateral system has been transformed. The end of the Cold War has opened new opportunities for co-operation. Fifty years ago, the population of the world was a mere 2.3 billion; today it is close to 6 billion. A hi-tech world of satellite telecommunications. cable TV, lap-top computers and mobile phones. A world dominated by Microsoft and the Internet. A world which today has close to 400 billionaries. where 50 years ago a millionaire was someone quite special. Today 500 corporations in the United States, Europe and Japan account for 80% of the world's volume of Foreign Direct Investment and half of world trade.

Yet, in this world of plenty, the number of people living in extreme poverty has increased substantially. Nearly one fourth of the world's population today lives below the poverty line, illiterate, unemployed and malnourished. Almost two thirds of the poorest of the poor happen to be located within the Commonwealth.

In 1951, the Heads of Government in their communique recognised "that the peace and prosperity of the free world cannot be assured while millions live in poverty." Ever since, the plight of the developing countries has figured prominently on the agenda of every Commonwealth summit.

There have been 30 Commonwealth Summit meetings, during the past fifty years. The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, or CHOGM meetings as they are popularly known, constitute the lifeblood of the Commonwealth. A Commonwealth Summit is like no other summit. The informality, the ability of Heads of Government to meet each other without aides and without notes at the Retreat provides them with a unique opportunity to get to know each other and to exchange views on sensitive subjects. Over the years there have been several landmark summits - Singapore in 1971 at which the heads adopted a Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, which became the Magna Carta of the

Commonwealth. Twenty years later at Harare the Commonwealth Heads pledged themselves to promote the fundamental political values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, just and honest government, sustainable economic development and international consensus building. A new global agenda was launched. Good governance would henceforth be the order of the day. Four years later the heads adopted the Millbrook Action Programme on the Harare Declaration. This provided for the setting up of a Ministerial Action Group which was mandated to deal with serious violations of the Harare principles. The Commonwealth Heads had not only pronounced themselves against military dictatorships but had taken the unprecedented step of instituting specific measures against offending countries. No one could henceforth look upon the Commonwealth as a toothless tiger Indeed the Commonwealth had gone further than any other international organization to uphold the principles to which it had committed itself. This proactive approach must be sustained.

The Lusaka Summit in 1979 paved the way for an independent Zimbabwe and an end to white minority rule. It also adopted the Lusaka Declaration on Racism and Racial Prejudice. The Nassau Summit in 1985 adopted an accord on Southern Africa as well as the Nassau Declaration on World Order. The Kuala Lumpur Summit in 1989 adopted a statement on Southern Africa: the Way Ahead and the Langkawi Declaration on Environment. The Common-

Garfield ®

wealth has throughout played a leading role in supporting and facilitating the process of decolonisation. Its signal contribution to the birth of Zimbabwe and to the end of apartheid in

The path breaking Edinburgh Summit, clearly recognised that one of the major challenges facing the international community at the turn of the century will be the efficient and equitable management of globalisation. Since ODA has been very much on the decline, the progressive integration of markets has now made it essential for all countries to be able to compete in the global market. It has become essential for the developing countries to be able to export, and to attract foreign direct investment. The experience of the past decade has indicated that while most developed and some developing countries have benefited from globalisation, it has been less easy for others. Most developing countries, and this includes many of those in the Commonwealth, have experienced serious pain and difficulties. A case in point is Bangladesh. In the last three

years we have seen a substantial increase in exports, on average nearly 15% a year, and have also been able to attract a sizeable quantity of FDI, particularly in the energy sector. As a part of the process of economic reform and liberalization, tariff and non-tariff barriers have been substantially reduced in Bangladesh and in many other developing countries, opening the way to cheap imports. This has resulted in a large number of small-scale and medium-size industries have closing down since they were unable to face the competition from cheaper imports. It is essential that domestic industry, large, medium and smallscale become more competitive. We need a new breed of entrepreneurs, who can introduce better management techniques, who can diversify their product range and enter the global market. Otherwise, weaker developing countries will end up surrendering their markets, and getting little in return.

A number of very concrete proposals were adopted by the heads of government at Edinburgh, including support for duty free market access for the exports of LDCs and as well as support for the interests of the ACP countries. The Commonwealth Secretariat gives the highest priority to implementing these decisions and taking the necessary follow-up action.

The establishment of the Commonwealth Business Council and the holding of periodic Commonwealth Business Fora, has been, to my mind, not only a major initiative but an extremely timely one. It recognises both the important role of the private sector today and the excellent business opportunities available within the Commonwealth. It is important that the private sector be made aware of these opportunities and is encouraged to make full use of the networks available within the Commonwealth. The need for a strong partnership between government and the private sector today is a matter of fundamental importance to all our countries.

We share a common language. Our legal, administrative and business systems are similar. We can capitalise on a myriad historical and business links. As the Secretary-General put it in his speech to the first Commonwealth Business Forum meeting in London in October 1997, "the Commonwealth business executives can arrive in each others countries and hit the ground running ..." Several other related initiatives such as the setting up of regional funds. the Trade and Investment Access Facility, Combinet, the Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management, Commonwealth Association for Corporate Governance, Commonwealth Institute for Business Information Services, and the Commonwealth Invest-

ment Guarantee Agency deserve to be commended. One of the most important initiatives taken up by the Commonwealth in recent years has been to address the special problems faced by Small States. This matter was first discussed

South Africa must be viewed among its major achievements.

> counter to the essential spirit of the Commonwealth ... writes Faroog Sobhan Ministers meeting in 1977 and has been part of the CHOGM agenda since 1979 when it was first discussed at Lusaka. The problems arising out of their small size, limited resources. isolation and vulnerability to natural disasters prompted the Commonwealth to adopt a pro-gramme in support of the Small States. Today 60% of CFTC's funds are spent in the Small States. 32 countries in the Commonwealth have been categorised as Small States. Any country with a population of less than 1.5 million qualifies as a small state. However, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea and Lesotho, although having populations in excess of 1.5 million have been included in the Small States group on the grounds that they hare many of the economic characteristics of Small States. Twenty of the Small States have populations of less than half a million. 25 of them are small island states;

products. In 1997 a Commonwealth Advisory Group headed by Dame Eugenia Charles revised and updated the 1985 Report, "Vulnerability: Small States in the Global Society." The report contains a number of very useful recommendations. The work of the Ministerial Group on Small States under Prime Minister Owen Arthur and the Commonwealth-World Bank Task Force has done excellent work in support of the Small States. The Commonwealth must continue to give the highest priority to programmes, which promote and safeguard the interests of the Small States. This must be done in a bold and imaginative way. The Commonwealth must extend strong support for the legitimate interests of the banana producers in the ACP and en-

most are highly dependent on

tourism or one or two export

ments outside London. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth has a very serious image problem. Some people still see it as the British Commonwealth, others seem quite ignorant about its work and purpose; and yet others are frankly quite uninterested. Derek Ingram in his report on the image of the Commonwealth provides a detailed account of the problems and also puts forward some recommendations on how we might rectify the problem.

The projection of a more positive and dynamic image will be one of the major challenges facing the Commonwealth'in the 21st century. We must expand the support base of the Commonwealth. Clearly one of the best ways of doing this is with the help of what is widely known as the unofficial Commonwealth. There are some 300 organisations which directly or indirectly have an interest in the Commonwealth. This unofficial network is what makes the Commonwealth both special and different. The official and the unofficial Commonwealth should join hands in infusing new life into the Commonwealth.

Commonwealth The Foundation was established in 1965 at the same time as the Secretariat. The two have traditionally worked closely together. The Commonwealth Foundation, which has been given the responsibility for dealing with the unofficial Commonwealth, has done excellent work with its meagre resources. A number of organisa tions in Britain such as the Royal Commonwealth Society, the Royal Overseas League to mention just a few and many others overseas are to be commended for their support of the Commonwealth. The Common-

wealth Parliamentary Associa-

mately 20 million pounds per annum only, the CFTC must ensure that every pound is spent wisely. Given the serious resource constraints it is important that every effort is made to explore opportunities for cost-sharing. The CFTC should concentrate on certain specific sectors where it has already established a good track record and where there has been a strong demand from member states for CFTC assistance. For example. it is quite evident that in the coming years most of the member states will need help in revamping their legal systems, developing capital markets, establishing a suitable regulatory framework in key sectors like telecommunications, power generation and distribution, as well as the financial and banking sector. Many member states would need help in improving the quality of governance and in strengthening certain key public sector institutions, with this in mind it will be important for the Secretariat and CFTC in particular to further develop their expertise in

private sector on a full cost recovery basis. The Commonwealth Secretariat should be seen as an important thinktank for the membership as a whole. Brimming with new ideas, bubbling with enthusiasm. It should be an exciting place to work, where we can attract some of the best talent in the Commonwealth. The emphasis must always be on quality. There can be no better advertisement for the Commonwealth or a more effective way of enhancing its image.

these niche areas. The presence

of top level experts could also

consultancy services to the

enable the CFTC to offer

Every CHOGM and this is certainly true of the last five CHOGMs, have invariably

General. This clearly indicates

the confidence reposed in them

by the heads of state; more so

when you think that they are

being asked to do more with

substantially reduced re-

sources, both financial and per-

the Secretary General's versa-

tility. He has to be active in not

simply mobilising resources

but in developing new partner-

ships, both with the private sec-

tor, the financial institutions.

the UN, multilateral bodies and

NGO's in advancing the princi-

ples, programmes and objec-

tives of the Commonwealth.

The Secretary General's good of-

fices role has become an essen-

tial part of his responsibilities.

The delicate task of helping

member states resolve internal

political problems presupposes

an enormous degree of trust and

confidence in the Secretary

General. Upholding the Harare

principles, implementing the

Millbrook Plan of Action,

working alongside C-Mag, mak-

ing democracy work and pro-

moting good governance, have

today become an integral part

of the Secretary General's re-

The Commonwealth today is

finely woven tapestry with

different hues and colours.

elaborate and intricate. Each

one of us has contributed to this

tapestry. As Sir Sridath

Ramphal or Sonny so elo-

quently put it in a speech to the

Commonwealth countries

League two years ago: "the true

value of the Commonwealth

drives not from likeness or

even like-mindedness, but from

variety. It derives from the fact

sponsibilities.

Today there are no limits to

commingling of the world's diversity. What the Commonwealth tries to do is to harmonize difference over a wider range and to a further degree than any other grouping." The Commonwealth has fequently been referred to as a family of nations. Fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging all member states to be actively involved in the work of the Commonwealth, I believe, must always remain central to Commonwealth.

the existence and success of the Commonwealth must make a conscious effort to encourage countries in Africa and Asia, as well as the Small States of the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean to be actively involved in the work of the Commonwealth. If the Commonwealth is perceived by the membership at large as an organication which is dominated by a handful of countries this will run counter to the essential spirit of the Commonwealth: it will undermine the sense of belonging and participation which is so important to the Commonwealth.

The Harare principles constitute the core values of the Commonwealth today Democracy and democratic values are relevant not only within individual member but within the Commonwealth as a whole and the way it discharges its responsibilities. The world has shrunk. We speak of the world as a global village, a village where some people are made conscious of the fact that the power and influence of a few countries is overwhelming. The Commonwealth true to its values and principles must consciously work towards ensuring that each and every member state is encouraged to be fully

involved in the work of the "The collective power of people to shape the future is greater now than ever before, and the need to exercise it is

> Commonwealth. Transparency accountability and good gover nance are values that must be adopted by our global village but these must be applied first and foremost within the Commonwealth itself.

The Commonwealth has shown a strong commitment to promoting consensus among its members on important economic and political issues Bridge building has tradition ally been one of the great strengths o f Commonwealth. One of the distinctive features of the Commonwealth has been the mix in membership. The Commonwealth has from the beginning strongly believed in the principle of consensus. Decisions at CHOGM and at various Commonwealth meetings are taken based on consensus

I would like to mention here some specific proposals which I hope can be taken up by either the official or the unofficial Commonwealth at some future

1. A group of eminent persons chosen from within the Commonwealth should be established, perhaps at the Durban Summit. They should be mandated to put forward an agenda for the Commonwealth for the first decade of the 21st Century. Their report can be discussed at CHOGM in 2001 in Sydney. It will be recalled that ten years ago a similar exercise was undertaken at the initiative of the outgoing Secretary-General, Sir Sridath Ramphal. The work of such a group could infuse the Commonwealth with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and purpose.

Commonwealth expert group on

Diwali — the Festival of Lights, but

Minus the Firecracker Menace

adopt in promoting trade and becoming more competitive in attracting trade and investment. This group should specifically put forward recommendations on simplifying customs procedures, eliminating bureaucratic hurdles and removing administrative bottlenecks. 3. The Commonwealth should launch a programme, which periodically brings together the various regional economic groupings within the

globalisation should be set up.

This expert group should be

mandated to put forward spe-

cific proposals on advising both

governments and the private

sector on measures they should

Commonwealth such as CARICOM, OECS, SADC, ECOWAS, EAC, SAARC, ASEAN and the South Pacific Forum. The interaction between such bodies could be very useful in exchanging experiences and undertaking joint programmes in areas of common interest. 4. Through CFTC as well as

COL, Comnet (the Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development) and other concerned bodies, the Commonwealth should jointly set up a task force to prepare and implement a special programme to promote computer and internet literacy throughout the Commonwealth, especially in educational institutions. A road show should be launched which would introduce governments to some of the latest development in IT education.

5. A Commonwealth Election Commission may be established. Eminent personalities may be invited to serve on the Commission, which could be chaired by a senior statesman. The Commonwealth has built up an excellent track record in observing elections. However, at present a different group of people are chosen each time. In the case of a permanent or standing commission, the members would serve a three or four year term, and in the process, they would acquire considerable expertise on the job. The responsibility of the Commission could also extend to advising interested governments in organising elections. and in making improvements in their own election commissions. Special training programmes might also be arranged with the help and participation of the Commissioners.

Commonwealth Election Commission would also serve to enhance the image of the Commonwealth.

6. The success stories within the Commonwealth need to be better advertised and known within the Commonwealth. While the CFTC is doing this to the best of its ability, some thought can be given to promoting closer interaction among NGOs in select disciplines. Best practices and success stories need to be written up and circu lated as widely as possible. In recent years a number of NGOs in Commonwealth, and this includes several NGOs in Bangladesh, have pioneered important breakthroughs in different fields such as the environment, rural development' and small scale industry. O course, the case of Grameen Bank and micro-credit is today widely known and is being replicated in over fifty countries. During my recent travels, around the Commonwealth, found several countries very interested in wanting to replicate the Grameen Bank experience in their own countries.

7. While the Commonwealth does have a programme under which volunteers with special skills and expertise in different fields are sent to Commonwealth countries would like to suggest something slightly different. One of the most remarkable developments in recent years has been the number of outstanding young people from different parts of the Commonwealth in Africa. Asia, and the Caribbean who now work in the financial sector in Europe and the US. At a time when all the developing countries are in desperate need of qualified people, the best and brightest of our own young people, who command handsome salaries abroad, are not avail-

able to us because no one at home is able to pay them on a similar scale.

My suggestion is that through a joint CFTC-CBC programme we arrange to place the services of some of these financial whiz kids with the private sector in their home countries or with public sector financial institutions. These could be short two to three week assignments, with services provided free of cost. The responsibility of the CFTC-CBC will be finding suitable people and arranging for their placement. My sense is that there will be a great demand for the services of such people and these young professionals themselves will be very keen to be of some service to their own countries.

8. In February 1997 a Round Table of Heads of Government from African Commonwealth countries was held on Democracy and Good Governance in Botswana Further such round table meeting should be convened in the future, on a regional basis on the same topic. The summit meetings can be complemented with smaller round table meetings on human rights, gender issues, transparency and accountability in addition to democracy and good gover-

9. In pursuance of the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development the Commonwealth should launch a major publicity drive in member states which would aim to persuade governments (as well as enlist the support of appropriate national bodies in each member state) to implement for this purpose. These could be eminent women who would enjoy wide recognition on a regional or sub-regional basis. They could form the world of performing arts, politics, and writers. The implementation of the Plan of Action can also be discussed within the framework of the meeting of regional economic grouping within the Commonwealth.

10. Consideration may be given to the establishment of a Commonwealth think-tank which would work closely with Commonwealth Secretariat. Each of these proposals is

designed to give a sharper focus to areas of priority interest to the Commonwealth. Hopefully, these proposals can be implemented at a minimum cost. Each proposal will help in enhancing the image of the Commonwealth.

The opening paragraph of the Report of the Commission on Global Governance reads as follows:

"The collective power of people to shape the future is greater now than ever before, and the need to exercise lit is more compelling, Mobilizing that power to make life in the twenty-first century more democratic, more secure, and more sustainable is the fore most challenge c this genera tion. The world needs a new vision that can galvanize people everywhere to achieve higher levels of co-operation in areas of common concern and shared

I believe this new vision can be provided by the Commonwealth in the 21st century. The Commonwealth can and must play a dynamic role in creating a just society free from hunger and disease; a just society which is inclusive and which actively encourages and promotes the participation of all its members in the decisionmaking process. It must bridge the gap between rich and poor, between North and South, between the developed and the developing world: it must to do so with compassion, with determination and a sense of urgency. It must continue to strive to heal the wounds within our countries and within the international community. The Commonwealth family must join hands to transform our aspirations and hopes into real-

The author is former Foreign Secretary and presently Bangladesh's candidate for the Secretary-Generalship of the Commonwealth.

more compelling. Mobilizing that power to make life in the twenty-first century more democratic, more secure, and more sustainable is the foremost challenge of this generation. The world needs a new vision that can galvanize people everywhere to achieve higher levels of co-operation in areas of common concern and shared destiny.' tion, the Commonwealth Press added to the work of the Secretariat and the Secretary

sure that all possible help is extended to them to facilitate diversification of their economies. Adequate transitional arrangements should be provided in the successor arrangement to the Lome Conven-

Thanks to the Commonwealth, the international community has become increasingly aware of the special problems faced by the Small States arising out of their isolation and smallness. It must remain central to the work of the Commonwealth that problems of the Small States are given special consideration by the international community. Perhaps the time has come for the Commonwealth Secretary General to appoint a high-level Special Representative both to help in overseeing the implementation of the various programmes in support of the Small States and to maintain close contacts with various multilateral organisations and institutions in order to advance the case of the Small States.

.The excellent work of the CFTC, the Commonwealth Programme, Youth Commonwealth Election Observer groups, the work of the Commonwealth of Learning. Commonwealth Foundation, the programmes in support of human rights and gender integration deserve our support and appreciation.

During the past year, I have visited a large number of Commonwealth Countries as the Special Envoy of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. This has given me an opportunity to meet a wide assortment of people both inside and outside government and to hear from them their views about the Commonwealth. While I have spent the past fifteen minutes talking to you about the achievements of the Commonwealth. I should mention that there appears to be very little awareness of these achieve-

Union and many other Commonwealth organisations and associations have been doing excellent work over the years. The unofficial Commonwealth has made a monumental contribution towards fostering and promoting this sense of belonging and participation, which makes the Commonwealth so special. No other organisation in the world has as many networks as does the Commonwealth.

Today, as all speak of Civil Society, its role and responsibilities. Well Civil Society has been very much an active player in the Commonwealth from the very beginning, thanks to these numerous organisations and associations within the Commonwealth. The dialogue between the official and the unofficial Commonwealth has contributed significantly to the work of the Commonwealth. This has been one of the great strengths Commonwealth and it is important that during the next fifty years this dialogue and interaction is further intensified. I believe this could be of immense benefit to the Commonwealth, to its image, and in making it both more widely known, supported and appreciated throughout the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is not the United Nations. The Commonwealth Secretariat's budget is less than one per cent of the budget of the UN; ten million pounds or 16 million dollars in the case of the former as against \$2.5 billion in the case of the UN. The strength of the Commonwealth Secretariat has been whittled down to less than 330 persons as against 13,500 plus in the case of the UN.

Notwithstanding its meagre resources, CFTC has been able to provide valuable technical assistance to member states these past 28 years. However, today with a budget of approxi-

that this family facility is a

at Commonwealth Finance











HE markets are full of shoppers, roads are choked with traffic and fairs offering exciting rides for children and selling everything under the sun dot the city Diwali, the annual festival of lights, is being celebrated with usual vigour though official festivities this year have been toned down, with the government cancelling its

celebrations to curb expendi-

ture "at a time of a national

calamity" like the October 29

devastating supercyclone in the

eastern Indian state of Orissa.

Also missing this year is the constant, ear-shattering sound of firecrackers and the thick cloak of smog that normally settles on the city at Diwali Shops and makeshift stalls selling firecrackers report a sharp decline in sales this year, with huge stocks of sparklers lying unsold because there are few takers. And even the people who are buying firecrackers, have considerably scaled down their purchases. spending about one-fourth of what they normally would, to, honour the Delhi government's drive against crackers. "Earlier, before Diwali, we used to ask even our relatives to come to our shops only after 11 p.m. But our shops are deserted this year", Gulshan Kumar, a

firecracker retailer, told the

Pioneer newspaper. Ajit Prasad, a fireworks owner, in the Chandni Chowk commercial area of old Delhi, says, "The trend has changed. crackers are not a craze any more. Everyone thinks it is a waste." The non-governmental

organisation Pravah (Wave). which has organised street plays and held programmes in city schools promoting a cracker-free, pollution-free Delhi, for the government's department of environment, is satisfied with the outcome of its efforts. "We have an enthusiastic response from schools. Students become involved when they learn that children of their age make these crackers in dangerous working conditions," observes Rajneesh Saran of

Pravah. A total of 150 schools were targetted in this year's campaign to educate children about the harmful environmental effects of firecrackers and the risks involved in playing with them. Children were also advised against buying firecrackers because they are mostly made in small-scale manufacturing units in the southern town of Sivakasi that employ child labour. Firecrackers have, over the years become an integral part of Diwali. a major Hindu festival. Revellers wear new clothes, distribute gifts and

Anjana Motihar Chandra writes from New Delhi sweets and light up their homes with candles and earthen

But increasing incidents of eye injuries, burns and high levels of pollution in the city associated with Diwali prompted government and nongovernmental organisations to launch a major campaign last year against firecrackers which proved to be highly successful. According to official figures, the air pollution levels in Delhi rise by as much as six to ten times on Diwali day. Besides, a large number of burn injuries are reported. At a gathering held at the India Gate lawns in central Delhi, schoolchildren took the pledge to celebrate Diwali with lights and not fire-

crackers. The campaign, organ-

ised by the NGO Child Relief and You (CRY), aimed to highlight the plight of children, many as young as *1x years, who work in horritying and hazardous conditions in the fireworks factories. The pledge was administered by Amod Kanth, Joint Commissioner of police. Many children have also decided to do without firecrackers this year because of the devastation and suffering in Orissa. Some children of the Prashant Vihar municipal primary school have reportedly pooled their pocket money and handed it to their principal for Orissa relief. Residents of a south Delhi neighbourhood also decided not to organise their annual Diwali fair this year for the same rea-

Anti-child Labour Delegation Meets Vajpayee

PRIME Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has assured a prominent Indian anti-child labour organisation that he will consider its demand for introducing free and compulsory primary education in the country, talking to a delegation of the

SACCS. Ashraf, a former domestic

child labourer rescued from the house of an administration officer, garlanded Vajpayee on the occasion. Diwali greetings were also exchanged. The meeting is significant considering that this year an anti-firecracker campaign has gained momentum in Delhi in the run up to Diwali, the festival of lights.

— India Abroad News Service