

Bangla-EC Relations

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to EU headquarters in Brussels has provided an impetus to Bangladesh's ties with the European Union. This has come by way of a better understanding of each other's position on trade, aid and investment. Concrete results are likely to follow.

EU is the largest importer of Bangladeshi goods and significantly the biggest development partner for her in terms of the total development assistance received by Dhaka from individual EU member-states and EU as an entity. When such are the strands on which their relationship has evolved over the years there could have been a tendency towards taking things for granted. But obviously that would have been extremely naive the stakes being too high in such big volumes of transactions between the EU and Bangladesh.

The European Commission President Prof Romano Prodi has set the right tenor by unveiling an EC proposal for a unilateral opening of EU markets to LDC products granting them zero tariff access which has been a sticking point for the Least Developed Countries.

However, till such time as the EU and OECD countries provide zero-tariff access to the products from LDCs and the latter's productive capacities increase significantly to take full advantage of it, GSP and other concessional facilities would need to be continued. In other words, there is a case for the 2005 deadline on special concessions, including quota reservations, to be relaxed.

On aid and investment, the imperatives look clear-cut. First of all, the flow of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the developing world has marked a sharp decline during the last couple of years. The stipulated disbursement from the developed countries of at least 0.7 per cent of their aggregate national incomes remains a far, far cry. There has been a noticeable shift in the aid policy from project to sector-wise investment, which the Bangladesh PM pointed out, tended to reduce the flow of resources 'during transition'. Cluttered formalities sometimes put a blight on project aid itself. And, if this should come to characterise sector-wise investment as well then we don't know where to read the sign of progress?

The hitherto protected local industries have a survival problem in adjusting to the present-day tariff and trade regimes. As well as restructuring the old units we need to set up new industries to cope with the situation, both requiring a heavy dose of investment. We can garner it only from improved terms of trade and FDI.

AIDS Campaign Bank-rolled

THE World Bank's new loan package of 40 million US dollars for AIDS/HIV prevention programmes can be looked at from two angles. Indeed, increased influx of fund will bolster the country's fight against spread of the deadly disease. At the same time, it underscores the dire need to be on constant guard; more so because our closest neighbour India has one of the highest number of HIV-infected people in the world. Also, prevalence rate in Myanmar and Thailand is scarily on the rise. Therefore, the news of WB lending brings relief amidst trepidation.

If slow progress in implementation of previous AIDS/HIV projects — only seven per cent of 7.75 million dollars provided by UNDP and other development partners has so far been utilised — were any indicator of our awareness and activism in this regard, we have reasons to be disappointed. Also, the National AIDS Committee, formed back in 1985, has been rendered dysfunctional by the government's apparent reluctance to get its recommendations materialised. Basically, therefore, our fight against this killer malady has largely been confined to seasonal seminars and symposia. We definitely need to change our approach right away.

True, at this point of time, we have a low prevalence rate at around one per cent; some 30,000 people have been diagnosed as HIV-positive or AIDS patients. However, there are so many factors that can change the scenario for the worse overnight. High incidence of the disease in neighbouring India and Myanmar aside, there is the threat of 'behavioural and migratory' pattern of the infected. Another worrying factor is the high percentage of HIV-positive among intravenous drug users and other high risk groups. Besides, we have no such thing as sex education in our curriculum and 'safe sex' is a notion most of our young generation has never come across.

Therefore, we need to put more accent on sensitisation and the WB loan is directed towards launching a campaign in this behalf. We hope that the people at the top is fully seized of what needs to be done and make good use of the WB loan.

Diesel Smuggling

A large scale smuggling of diesel across the border into neighbouring West Bengal has been reported from the north-western region of Bangladesh. This could hamper the cultivation of boro in the area. A section of dishonest petrol pump owners allegedly in league with professional gangs are carrying out the smuggling operation. Resultantly, transporters and power pump owners are getting less diesel than they need and, at a higher price, too. Boro cultivation is the dependent on irrigation which seems to have received a setback.

The Prothom Alo report in question specifically mentions the places and routes of diesel smuggling together with a possible reason why the people are engaged in this illegal trade: price of diesel is much higher in the neighbouring areas of India, particularly West Bengal. The role of local administration and BDR has drawn a flak in the face of continual smuggling. Around 40 lakh litres of diesel is required every day to run the irrigation pumps and tubewells. Strangely enough, about five lakh litres are on additional demand, beyond the daily requirement figure, and it is feared the quantity is being smuggled out.

This is such an item which is difficult to transport without being seen by the security forces or border guards. The local administration must be knowing the people responsible for such activities in the border areas that are injurious to the national economy. Home Ministry may be aware of what has been going on but we are yet to see any deterring action taken against the culprits. If this be the attitude of the administration towards the smugglers and their mentors then the country is up against odds that can hardly be overcome and people will be made to suffer for it. The Home Ministry has to step in and fix the matter.

Is Austria's Far Right Party a Challenge to EU?

by Harun ur Rashid

Why did EU react in this way? After all the people of Austria have elected the representatives of the far-right Freedom Party in an election held democratically in October last. Have not the people in Austria the sovereign right to elect the representatives with extreme right-wing policies? Can EU interfere in an internal matter of a member-state? These are the anxious questions, which are being debated in Europe and elsewhere.

President Portuguese Prime Minister described the coalition pact as a "very dangerous move". The proposed visit of Portugal's President to Austria next month is on hold as an expression of displeasure to the political developments in Vienna. Israel has recalled its Ambassador from Vienna even before the coalition is installed as a government.

Why did EU react in this way? After all the people of Austria have elected the representatives of the far-right Freedom Party in an election held democratically in October last. Have not the people in Austria the sovereign right to elect the representatives with extreme right-wing or fascist policies? Can EU interfere in an internal matter of a member-state? These are the anxious questions

which are being debated in Europe and elsewhere.

Freedom party's populist leader Jörg Haider (50) has expressed extreme views on immigration and human rights. He praised Hitler's policy of employment and considered Nazi SS troops as 'men of honour'. He is known to be hostile to the presence of foreigners in the country and believes in zero immigration, even from the neighbouring poor European countries. His views were attractive to the Austrian voters for quick-fix solutions. He expressed his views without realising the consequences it would have elsewhere in Europe.

Moreover, Haider was encouraged by the rise of far-right parties in Australia, France, Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy and

Switzerland.

The rise of far-right parties in Europe and in other countries, according to political experts, is due to the unsettling effects of globalisation and modern high technology on the community. The rural people are adversely affected by this change. Old order has disappeared, and once the thriving towns have been deserted by young people. Unemployment is on the rise in the rural areas and during hard times, the people need scapegoats. Immigration policy and minority community are often the targets of the populist policy.

It was thought that the Holocaust during the second world war would be reminder that xenophobia, hatred of minority and racism would have no place in the present-day world. Fur-

ther it was believed that prosperity and progress would eliminate the rise of nasty elements of human irrationality and bigotry in the developed world. Kosovo war was fought to combat intolerance and protect the fundamental human rights. It was assumed that the liberal values in a democratic country were safe.

However this belief was shattered when the far-right Freedom Party won a third of Austria's voters in the last October election and more so now when that far-right party would enter a coalition government.

The EU and the US have taken tough stance to the far-right coalition government in Vienna because the policies of the Freedom Party are menacingly similar in many ways to those of Hitler. There is a strong

view that the policy of appeasement to Nazi Germany was dead wrong and the democratic governments which neglected the moral fundamentals during the rise of Nazism had to pay a heavy price at a later date. The EU does not wish to commit similar mistake.

No one argues that the voters of Austria have no right to elect any party in the election. Equally it is argued there exists the right of others to accept or reject Austria in a club which believes in tolerance and fundamental human values. The relationship is a two-way street. If the people of Austria are satisfied with a far-right party, it is their business but they must be aware that they are not welcome in the EU or elsewhere. So long they vote for a government of a far-right party, they will have to bear in mind that they could remain isolated from the rest of the world. They can't have the cake and eat it too.

The writer, a Barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Clinton's South Asian Trip

If the visit of the president to South Asia succeeds in lessening tensions mainly caused by two rival countries and improve the political climate here, then the vast multitude living in the region will be benefited by the trip.

THE dates for the much-awaited visit of United States President Bill Clinton have finally been officially announced. This has set at rest speculations and some elements of uncertainty about the visit. His trip to South Asia is 'much-awaited' because it was to take place much earlier but was later postponed due to nuclear explosions in India and Pakistan in May, 1998.

The US is against expansion of nuclear power and had been urging both New Delhi and Islamabad to desist from carrying out atomic devices. As an expected development to the nuclear detonations by the two traditionally hostile neighbours, President Clinton called off the trip to this region. The unfortunate victim of this postponement was Bangladesh, which never received an American president before. While India and Pakistan can be held responsible for creating reasons for the postponement of the visit, Dhaka undoubtedly, missed the chance.

However, the president's South Asia trip remained on the cards and he said he would make a visit here before relinquishing the office after two terms — a time span that expires later this year. Still, there were uncertainties on the trip mainly due to the political climate in the region. Two principal actors — India and Pakistan — hardly demonstrate any sign of improvement in their relationship, which often remains bedeviled due to their inherent mistrust and belligerent postures. On the contrary, their ties nosedived in the last few months that clouded the prospects of the trip of the US president. Fortunately, the visit has now been formally announced and President William Jefferson Clinton will be in this part of the world in late March

barring unforeseen development. But the announcement in Washington did not mentioned about Clinton's going to Pakistan. Several reasons are being attributed for skipping Islamabad during the visit, which is because of its close ties with the Afghan regime.

Neither Kabul nor Islamabad was responding positively to Washington's request as they have their own reasons and perceptions. A high-level Democratic Senatorial delegation paid a visit to Pakistan some time ago but there was no assurance from Islamabad that it could exert its influence on the Kabul government on this matter. The Assistant Secretary

of State for South Asian Affairs Karl Inderfurth also held talks with Pakistan side including Chief Executive General Musharraf but no headway could be made. As such, president's visit to that country remained uncertain. But after the formal announcement, Gen. Musharraf told a high level Afghan delegation led by second man in the Taliban regime Mullah Rabbani that 'Laden' issue needs to be resolved.

However, there was no indications from the Afghan side that he would be expelled. But Mullah Rabbani said Laden is a 'guest' who will not be allowed to carry out terrorism from their soil. This might have

contributed to the re-thinking in the State Department whether Pakistan will be included in the trip. Besides, the army ruler — so far ambiguous about a timeframe for return of civilian rule in his country, has of late said that it is possible within two years time. US was insisting for a timeframe in this regard.

There was no problem for President Clinton to visit India. Still, the tensions with India on the 'Kargil' issue and later over hijacking of Indian airlines coming out of India from Kathmandu by the suspected 'Kashmir' militants worsened the political environment in

to withdraw its people or those supported by it from the Indian side of the line of control. India also made some trade relaxation to the US in recent past.

But some opposition parties, particularly the leftists, feel that the Indian government is leaning too much to the US and that the coming visit of Clinton will lay the foundation of 'complete subservience' to the Americans. The main left party, CPM, has expressed fears that India may replace Pakistan as the 'surrogate' in the region. Evidently, the government brushes off the charges.

Clinton while preferring India to Pakistan as a democratic state, does not seem to be willing to shut the door to Islamabad and wants to maintain a kind of balance between the two rivals. Washington's refusal to consider Pakistan as a 'terrorist' state as asked by India in the aftermath of the hijack episode explains this perception. American may also be feeling that such a balance will help promote regional amity and will also encourage both sides to sign the CTBT and NPT conventions. At the same time, the US may be willing to retain some levers over both countries as it has not withdrawn all the restrictions that were imposed in the wake of the nuclear explosions. It is possible that the US president may announce further relaxation provided there is intentions to comply with the CTBT.

For Bangladesh, the visit will no doubt be a fillip since this will be first presidential visit from the US. The Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was to come here about two

years ago but the visit was called off at the last moment owing to her sudden occupation in the Middle East. President's close aide Bill Richardson, now the Energy Secretary, had first announced here during a visit nearly two years ago that Clinton would come to Dhaka during the South Asian visit.

Finally, it is now taking place. The foreign office with an experienced Foreign Minister, and a dynamic State Minister with him, deserves some credit for this. The first lady Hillary Clinton came here nearly five years ago. That was seen as a feather in the cap of the government. The first ever visit to this country by an American president will expectedly give a fresh impetus to the bilateral ties. The US is obviously attaching greater importance to South Asia and it is in this line that a territorial bureau for the region has been created in the US State Department. Robin Raphael was its first assistant secretary of state and later further has succeeded her. He makes routine swing to the region like his predecessor.

America, in addition to whatever strategic importance, has to turn attention to an area populated by more than one billion people.

If the visit of the president to South Asia succeeds in lessening tensions mainly caused by two rival countries and improve the political climate here, then the vast multitude living in the region will be benefited by the trip. After all, the essence of peace and stability lies in the well-being of the people who are mired in abject poverty and not in ritualistic rhetoric of the visit being 'successful and productive' or expressions like 'this will further strengthen the already existing warm ties between the two countries'.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

The Men Who would be President

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

The Presidential primaries do not end until June. With delegation-rich populous states such as New York and California holding their primaries earlier, the contest in all likelihood will be decided by super Tuesday on March 7.

dethroned by the present occupant of the White House, President Bill Clinton, in 1992. There are other candidates in the Republican primary, most notably Steve Forbes, a Princeton graduate and publishing tycoon, who finished second to Bush in the Iowa caucus. But the race is really between Bush and McCain.

The Democratic contest pitted two intellectual equals. President Al Gore, who had run unsuccessfully for the Presidency in 1988, is the son of a former Senator from Tennessee and is a Harvard graduate. A devout environmentalist and a cyber geek, a few years ago Vice President Gore coined the now familiar phrase "information super highway". Of course, like a true politician he did not stop there. He claimed to have invented the Internet. Under a torrent of ridicule, only recently Gore has toned down his claim on Internet fatherhood.

Former New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley grew up as a star High School Basketball player

in rural Missouri. Colleges nationwide sought to recruit him. Bradley narrowed his choices down to two: the perennial basketball powerhouse and an excellent University, Duke, and one of the best Universities in the world, Princeton. Everyone assumed Bradley would choose Duke; he chose Princeton instead.

In his first year, Bradley had to struggle to make the grade in Princeton. In typical Bradley fashion, after four years he passed magna cum laude. On the way, he picked up an Olympic gold medal in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics as a member of the US Basketball team, single-handedly took Princeton to the final four of the college basketball championship in 1965. Bradley was the Most Valuable Player, Princeton finished third, and spent two years at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. From 1968 to 1978, Bradley, as a superstar of New York Knicks professional basketball team, won two world championships. Bradley's team

mates used to call him, "Mr. President." Bradley successfully ran for US Senate from New Jersey in 1978, was re-elected in 1984 and 1990, before retiring in 1996. Bradley has managed to do all this in one life time. Clearly, Bill Bradley is the writer's choice for President.

In New Hampshire, Gore defeated Bradley by 52 to 47 per centage points. After Gore's two to one spectacular victory over two weeks earlier, the Gore camp was hoping for a similar romp. The closeness of the race prompted Bradley to claim victory. Yes, if the front runner fails to meet expectation, the second-finisher can claim victory of sorts! Depending on how they perform in every state's primary, the candidates accumulate delegates. The candidate winning 2170 delegates will win the Democratic nomination. The Republicans will similarly elect their candidate at their convention to be held in

Philadelphia this summer.

A year ago, Governor Bush seemed to have a lock on not only Republican nomination, but also on the Presidency. As the late British Prime Minister Sir Harold Wilson used to say, "a week is a long time in politics." A year is much longer. Governor Bush, as the manager of his father's campaign in 1992, could not have forgotten what happened to the senior Bush. After leading the allies to victory against Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War of 1991, President Bush's popularity skyrocketed to over 90 per cent. This scared away all the leading Democrats from running against President Bush. Only an unknown Governor from an obscure state, Arkansas, mustered enough courage to challenge the seemingly invincible incumbent President. His name was Bill Clinton. Within a year, the economy turned sour, and since Americans are known to vote their pocketbooks, they gave the sitting President the heave-ho.

The Presidential primaries do not end until June. With delegation-rich populous states such as New York and California holding their primaries earlier, the contest in all likelihood will be decided by super Tuesday on March 7. Although in the aftermath of his New Hampshire triumph Senator John McCain, who wants General Colin Powell as his Secretary of State, is riding the crest of a wave of popularity, it is difficult to imagine him defeating the Republican establishment's choice, Governor Bush, who has raised an unprecedented 80 million dollars for his campaign. And as much as the writer would like to believe that his candidate Bradley will win the Democratic nomination, with the Democratic Party establishment solidly backing Vice President Gore, it will be tough to topple him.

If the contest in November comes down to Gore vs. Bush, and there is absolutely no guarantee that either will win their party's nomination — who will win? There is good and bad news for Al Gore. Only twice in American history has a sitting

Vice President been elected President. The first was the 8th President of the US, Martin Van Buren in 1837; the second was George Bush in 1988. The odds against Al Gore are overwhelming. On the other hand, last year a Clinton-seeker named Al Gore trailed Governor Bush by wide margins in the polls. This year as Americans focus beyond Clinton, Al Gore is neck and neck with Bush.

American public may be suffering from Clinton fatigue, but the candidates are not. Both the Democrats and the Republicans are sounding more and more like candidate Bill Clinton and emulating his successful shifting of his party to the centre. Gore has been anointed Republican by espousing "compassionate conservatism", and blaming his party for not being more inclusive. The Republican right tolerates Bush's appeal to moderates because after eight years of Clinton, they too desperately want to get back into the White House. Al Gore is taking credit for the largest peace-time expansion of the American economy under Clinton, and Clinton is letting him have the credit. Clinton was offended by Gore's harsh criticism of the President's affair with Monica Lewinsky, he knows that the Clinton legacy will be enhanced by the election of Al Gore as President.

These days all aspects of a candidate's life are fair game. Last week TIME magazine published the Verbal SAT scores of both Bradley (485) and Bush (566). Bradley went on improving his grade and finished with a magna cum laude graduate of Princeton. George Bush went to his father's alma mater, Yale University, and graduated as a C student. What Bush has to worry about more is a "D". He has admitted to experimenting with drugs in his life, although he would not say when and what. If it can be proven that Bush had taken cocaine (a felony), the candidacy of the Texas Governor — who is extremely tough on drug felons in his state — will be dead in water. Even his opponents admit that stiff Al Gore is a straight arrow. Vice President Al Gore's greatest gift is that he is so lifeless and boring! In 1994, after the release of the blockbuster Steven Spielberg movie, Jurassic Park, late night television comedian David Letterman joked that the White House had summoned all the scientists who had resurrected the extinct dinosaurs in the movie. Their mission impossible? "To bring Al Gore back to life!"

To the Editor...

"Cheating the Poor"

Sir, the leader under the headline "cheating the poor" published in The Daily Star of February 3rd, 2000 issue has come to my notice. The blame is totally false and baseless. This undermines my personal, social and political image, status and career. I, therefore, vehemently protest against such publication.

The Daily Star has quoted the reference of the news item published in the vernacular daily "Prothom Alo" of February and 2000 and also referred to a so called report published in a Saudi newspaper named "Saudi Gazette" against which I have already published a protest in the said newspaper.

Our company since its inception has been engaged in the business with a great reputation and never came across such

false and fabricated allegations nor there was any incidents as alleged in the news item.

We are surprised on publication of such editorial without confirming any thing from the authentic sources. As a matter of fact till date not a single complaint is received from any of the workers nor any accusation was made through proper channel for such kind of ill treatment as alleged. We have reconfirmed through our sources from Saudi Arabia that the allegations made in the news item is purely deviated from the truth. I have no connection whatsoever with the alleged incident as stated therein.

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"Integrity"

Sir, While reading The Mother in Mannville, a short story by M.R. Rawlings from the textbook of H.S.C English, I came across the word "integrity". The writer defined this word with a different touch. She regarded integrity as "something that is more than honesty". It meant someone who was selflessly without aspiring to be rewarded, someone who is devoted and determined in his or her work. These types of people are guided by the purity of heart, by the serenity of mind. They are willing to sacrifice their vigor only for love, not just any other love but the love that is divine, that is respected. Their tranquility lies in servitude, their savor, in contentment.

Bangladesh needs people with such integrity. We want leaders who disdain egoism,

who are not censorious, who refrain from all kinds of profusion, whose glowing ardor will wake our sleeping spirits, who will neither bent nor crack in the hardest of situations.

Like the writer, I would like to express these qualities in a single word — integrity. Clearly, our present leaders are not of this sort. It is futile to expect anything from them unless they change their habits. Bangladesh has but a handful of leader-making institutions. Would it be too much to expect anything from them?

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