

## Bangla-EC Relations

P RIME 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 FDIs.

## AIDS Campaign Bank-rolled

T HE 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. Reluctantly, 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.

However, he delayed the swearing in of the government by rejecting two names from the far-right party in the proposed cabinet of the coalition government. If everything goes well, the President is expected to decide on within a day or two. The President is hesitant because the European Union (EU), of which Austria became a full member five years ago, has threatened to freeze political contacts with Vienna if Jorg Haider's Freedom party enters the government. The US has adopted similar approach. EU

which are being debated in Europe and elsewhere.

Freedom party's populist leader Jorg Haider (50) has expressed extreme views on immigration and human rights. He praised Hitler's policy of He praised Hitler's policy of 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 are attractive to the Austria's 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 rights. 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.

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## 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.*

T HE 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 signs of improvement in their relationship, which often remains bedevilled 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 mention about Clinton's going to Pakistan. Several reasons are being attributed for skipping Islamabad during the visit, which as of now, includes India and Bangladesh. Not surprisingly, Pakistan reacted with dismay and said the opportunities for promoting peace and harmony in the tension-ridden region would be lost if the US president chooses not to visit Islamabad. Pakistan officials in the capital as well as in Washington feel that the itinerary of the American president is not final and Islamabad may be included. A comment by Clinton on Friday that he may come to Pakistan as well gives credence to their optimism.

Evidently, the visit to Pakistan hangs in the balance because of several factors. The military takeover in the country removing an elected government on October 12 forced the US to take a hard view to the new regime even though the reaction to the development by Washington was relatively muted and it was so much so that impressions existed in some quarters that there might have been a kind of "green-signal" by the US to Pakistan development. But the fact remains that the US is the leader of the democratic world and it cannot just afford to keep quiet over the overthrow of the civilian government however unpopular it might be or disliked by the US. Another factor that constitutes as an obstacle to the visit was, evidently, the "Osama Bin Laden" issue, as the dissident Saudi billionaire is accused by the US as fomenting interna-

tional terrorism. America wants the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, where Laden lives, to be expelled from that country. And it feels that Pakistan could play a role here 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

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 an Indian airlines commercial flight from Kathmandu by the suspected "Kashmir" militants worsened the political environment in

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 indication 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

the region. New Delhi says that Pakistan was behind the hijack, but Islamabad denies this allegation. The president seems to have made up his mind to make the visit even in these circumstances. Area analysts feel that tensions may subside to some extent ahead of the visit because neither side likes to heighten the conditions although any marked relaxation of the hostilities is unexpected given the complexities in their relations. The government of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is broadly seen as pro-Western and ties with Washington received a boost after Washington took a line during "Kargil" conflict that was viewed as favouring India. Pakistan was asked

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" of the Americans. The main left party, CPI, 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.

President 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 Inderfurth 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.

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

## LETTER FROM AMERICA The Men Who would be President

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

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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, Vice 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 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 percentage points. After Gore's two to one spectacular victory over Bradley in the Iowa caucus 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 were likely to be won over by Clinton.

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-scandal tainted 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. Governor Bush has annoyed Republicans 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. Although Clinton too 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 as a

magna cum laude graduate of Princeton.