

It's Show Time with EU

By Mansoor Mamoon



At its first ever business summit with the European Union (EU) in Lisbon, the capital of Portugal, India duly reciprocated the importance that was accorded to it. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee along with a large delegation comprising as many as four of his senior cabinet colleagues and leading members of different apex chamber bodies attended the summit with gusto. It is worthwhile to mention that the EU is India's biggest business partner with the volume of current trade on Delhi's side standing at over 1,000 crore rupees annually. With this summit India intended to make its trade relations with EU a two-way traffic and to attract more investment.

The Indian prime minister and finance minister told prospective European investors and traders that for them their country could not only well become a vast market of over 100 crore people of whom about 30 crore belong to the consumer class with sufficient purchasing capacity, but also at the same time a supplier and vast reservoir of trained high-tech manpower which it has aplenty and its booming software industries. Vajpayee regretted that investment from Europe stood at only 300 crore US dollars at present. The figure should have been much higher. They divulged the fact that the highest priority has been accorded to speedy removal of poverty and 10 per cent growth rate of the economy on an average for the next ten years. Information Technology (IT) posted about six per cent GDP growth rate during the last fiscal. Towards this end, India requires an investment of at least 200 billion US dollars, particularly for the

badly needed infrastructure development. A substantial amount could come from EU. Communication, port and power sector development have also been opened up for foreign investors, who would no longer require any official permission if they intend to invest in India. For speeding up the process of foreign investment an implementation cell has recently been set up. The government at the centre has also taken various other agenda for attracting FDI and speeding up reforms.

India's big showing at the business summit with EU was designed to prove that the country is no longer inside the cocoon of bureaucratic tangles as it had been in the past. Red-tapism is no longer the proverbial bottlenecks. But as one sunshine does not make a hay, so one business summit is not going to provide India with a re-furbish image for attracting foreign investment in a big way.

The nuke race between India and Pakistan and highly destabilised situation in the entire subcontinent, communal disturbances, ethnic insurrections etc., are discouraging foreign investors. The fall-out of Vajpayee's economic diplomacy, according to analysts, will, therefore, take time to be effectively felt, though its media impact has been a bonanza

for India.

In Europe India is still viewed as an economic laggard and a highly volatile backward country albeit the fact that secularism is enshrined in the book of statute of the country as one of the cardinal state policies. Lately the Christian community has become the target of Hinduva communal forces like the Biswa Hindu Parishad on the allegation of large-scale conversion of Hindus to Christianity. Several Christians were killed and churches attacked at different places. The wrath is particularly directed against the Roman Catholics for their missionary activities. This brought forth outcry in the outside world, particularly in Europe. Pope John Paul II appealed to the Delhi government for the protection of India's Roman Catholics. Prior to his coming to Lisbon the Indian prime minister visited the Vatican city, met and assured the Pope that attacks on the Christians are isolated incidents and have nothing to do with communalism.

Meanwhile, Indian Home Minister L. K. Advani also told a news conference in Delhi that all measures are being taken for the protection of minorities who should not feel insecure. A conference of the chief ministers of the component states is

shortly being convened to discuss about how best to stop attacks on minorities and to safeguard their lives and properties from the attacks of communal forces. Law and order is a state subject. Hence the moot of the state chief ministers. But home minister's assurance has no novelty.

These types of assurances were also earlier given to the minorities. But attacks on them have not stopped. Many of them apprehend that Vajpayee and Advani's assurances are meant more for the consumption of the outside world than for containing the communal forces who are now busy in whipping up the saffron Hinduva sentiments. The communal forces could make inroads among substantial numbers of the mass people. BJP, the leading partner in NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government, itself bases its main strength on the communal groups. Hence the minorities are not going to be reassured. The fear is going to continually in them. The Congress party is in disarray. The left democratic forces are not in position of strength to counter communalism. And attempts made by four former prime ministers - Deve Gowda, I. K. Gujral, V. P. Singh and Chandrasekhar - to put up an all-India basis platform of

secular forces has not so far succeeded. They do not have strong mass mooring and adequate organisational strength.

When Vajpayee was seeking increased amount of FDI and volume of trade with EU, Defence Minister George Fernandez was busy in Russia seeking arms to further beef up India's defence capability. For India economic diplomacy and arms purchase mission are being pushed side by side. Russian President is scheduled visit India shortly and Indian Foreign Minister Jashwant Singh had already visited Moscow to discuss about the agenda of Putin's visit. Vajpayee is also scheduled to visit Washington. President R. K. Narayanan had made a successful visit to Beijing and he was apparently well received by the Chinese leadership.

All this shows that India is seemingly in a hurry and wants to emerge as a great power and player in the turbulent Asian drama. To be able to do so what India needs most is to restrain the communal elements and to bring down its defence spending to a tolerable limit. Relations with the neighbouring countries which view India with India should be removed. The NDA, and more particularly BJP, should remember that jingoism and economic development do not go hand in hand.



The Region This Week

Delight at Test status

THOUSANDS of cricket fans in Bangladesh have taken to the streets to celebrate their country's acceptance into the Test-playing nations. Many waved flags and lit firecrackers after hearing the decision, reached by the International Cricket Council. "I can't express my joy in words at this happiest hour of the nation," said Prime Minister and avid cricketer Sheikh Hasina. "I thank our cricketers who have made possible."

Opposition wins Calcutta vote

OPPOSITION parties have won the largest number of seats in elections to the municipal council in the eastern India city of Calcutta. But the opposition Trinamul Congress Party and its ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has fallen short of gaining a majority in the council. The BJP won three, and the Trinamul Congress 64 seats. This compared with the 62 seats won by the ruling Left Front coalition.

LTTE rejects truce offer

THE LTTE has rejected the Sri Lankan Government's offer on June 28 for ceasefire to be followed by peace talks, saying the cessation of hostilities would occur only if the 30,000 troops were withdrawn from northern Jaffna peninsula. The Tamil rebels' decision was conveyed to the Norwegian peace envoy for Sri Lanka, Eric Solheim, by the LTTE spokesman Anton Balasingham, in London last week.

Couple appeal opens in BD

A court in Bangladesh has begun hearing the appeal of two army officers against the death sentences imposed for their roles in the assassination of the country's first president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The four were convicted last November, together with eleven other officers who are thought to be in exile.

Tight schedule for Chandrika

WITH the Sri Lankan President, Chandrika Kumaratunga, planning several major moves before the dissolution of the present Parliament on August 16, the coming weeks hold the promise of hectic political activity. The most significant move being contemplated by Kumaratunga is the introduction in Parliament of the package of constitutional reforms, of which devolution to the Tamil and Muslim minorities forms the controversial centrepiece.

From his jail cell

IN a bid to enforce his writ, the ousted Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, has appointed as many as six loyalists as vice-presidents in the PML (N) on June 25 from his jail cell. This is his first major public intervention in the affairs of the party since the October 12, 1999, coup. Of course, the major change in the party has been the emergence of Begum Kulsoom Nawaz, the wife of the convicted Prime Minister. However, till date she has not taken on any official post in the party, though she has become an ordinary member of the PML (N).

Tripartite MoU on gas pipeline

PAKISTAN has proposed tripartite talks and signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) involving Islamabad, Tehran and New Delhi for a political understanding on the proposed Iran-India gas pipeline. "Our proposal is that before we start talking on commercial terms, the three Governments should come to a political confirmation and commitment at the top level. The three Oil Ministers should get together to sign an MoU," said Pakistan's Petroleum Minister Usman Aminuddin.

Lessons to learn

THE country-wide strike of the shopkeepers in Pakistan has entered an uncertain phase with the shutters going up in most of the shopping centres but the government teams distributing/collecting the income tax survey forms still encountering resistance at many places. The agreement which was reached between the government and the traders on June 9 has led to a softening of survey forms to a large extent with the national tax number (NTN) holders getting exemption from declaring their stocks, from reopening of their tax returns for the previous year and from on-the-spot stock checks. Of all the information that the survey forms required the shopkeeper to provide, the one about the stocks was regarded as the most crucial by the government for assessing the actual turnover tax of traders.

Tigers attack merchant ship

AMIL Tiger rebels in Sri Lanka have carried out a suicide attack on a merchant vessel carrying food supplies to the Jaffna peninsula. A fishing boat laden with explosives rammed the boat, Mercs Uhana, near the Point of Port Pedro. A fire on board the ship has been extinguished and that about 28 people have been rescued by the Sri Lankan navy. The ship is said to have been badly damaged and some crew and navy personnel are reported as missing.

-- Compiled by Navine Murshid

Bangladesh

You've Got to Do It, 'Baby'

By Navine Murshid



Excited, exhilarated, ecstatic, triumphant. These certainly could have been the words used to express feelings of our people after Bangladesh was announced the 10th Test cricket playing nation by the International Cricket Council (ICC). But these were not. Somehow, somewhere there seemed to be a lacking.

The day could have easily mirrored the emotions expressed on the day Bangladesh came after winning the ICC Cup in 1997. There are many who still remember the full before the storm: I run from 1 ball to win. And win they did. However, today, the 'great announcement' failed to have such an effect on the people. There were celebrations, processions and firecrackers, yet, there was something missing. Wonder why.

With Bangladesh new in the cricket arena, it still has a long way to go. Even before their abilities were put to test they have been given the status for which Sri Lanka had to wait for a long time. Questions are being raised as to their competency and what prompted the organisers to include Bangladesh in the elite club. While some contend that it was a political reason (South Asian teams could now easily form a majority), others believe it was a step to promote the game in the region. There are also people who say that this was brought forward



by Bangladesh's performance in the ICC championship against Kenya. Bangladesh's admission into the World Cup, and the extraordinary win against Pakistan, Bangladesh repeatedly hosted high-profile events like the 1998 ICC Mini World Cup, the final of the Asian Test Championship and the recent Asia Cup and successfully enhanced their reputation.

The greatest worry, perhaps, is the effect this would have on cricket as practised here. To date, there are only a few games where Bangladesh's performance can be called 'reasonable'. Even before adjusting to 'one-day' cricket, they have been thrown amongst practised Test players. Till today, they are in a sort of trance, unable to actually decipher what is going on around them. Time may tell a story they may not be prepared to hear. If the one-day matches are anything to go by,

then the future does not seem too enthralling. If Bangladesh begins another losing spree, what would happen to their confidence level? How would they then tackle the psychological blow? Is it really fair to ask the baby (i.e. the Bangladesh team) to run before it learnt to walk? Who would be responsible for its downfall then? It is time to be realistic. We hardly have the infrastructure: is one good field good enough? We must also accept the fact that Bangladesh did not get Test status because of their on-field exploits. Rather, organisational skills and fascination for the game were key criteria for the ICC's recognition. The government deserves applause for this.

Amidst all odds, there is a good side to it. Perhaps, it is this positive side that has the power to overshadow the criticism regarding the announcement. It is the young generation cricket

players who are coming forward with the determination to be great cricketers.

The cricket fever has caught Bangladesh. And the fever would not die out not for a long time. Today, cricket is played around the whole country, at every field, every road, every lane. A cricket mania is going around and kids dream of becoming Sachin Tendulkars and Wasim Akrams. What is more interesting is the fact that parents are supporting such ambitions as well. In time, we shall have full-time cricketers not just businessmen or officers playing as a hobby. Cricket is on the verge to become a profession. A profession that parents have begun to accept. Bangladesh becoming a Test-playing nation may well make the dreams of those kids come true.

The challenge, therefore, would be to identify those youths who play good cricket. The authorities have to make sure that the Dhaka- and Chittagong-based players are not the only ones who get selected for the national team. There may be many a great batsman hiding in other corners of the country. The authorities have to find him out. The team has to grow.

Today, we are proud as a nation: proud that we have managed to at least touch the world canvas. In time, we hope to spread our colours. But for that, we have to ensure that politics stays out of the game. Politics, over time, has destroyed many a good notions. Let's not let cricket fall under its prey.

Neighbour

Ready for Action?



UN Secretary General Annan has painted a desperate picture of life in Afghanistan, four years after the Taliban militia took control of the capital, Kabul. He also warned that the warring factions appear to be preparing for a major offensive. In a report to UN General Assembly, Annan said the Taliban - which controls 90 per cent of Afghanistan - still harbours hopes of a military victory.

Press Freedom

A Dream Needs Reality

By Ekram Kabir



Increasing access to multiple media - television, print, film, radio and the internet - apparently act as incentives for journalists in South Asia. But recent media censorship in Sri Lanka has brought to the fore the fact that 'press freedom' in the region is still 'a dream that needs reality'.

The ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka has compelled the government to institute a legislation to curb the freedom of press citing the urgency of the military situation prevailing there. The legislation includes harsh censorship laws promulgated under the Public Security Ordinance.

Under the Sri Lanka's constitution the president can promulgate emergency regulations without asking parliament. The president can enforce the will of the government by arresting editors and publishers, or by sealing media institutions. Limited censorship, however, was already in existence before this new legislation was promulgated. Censorship was introduced about two years ago on military news by the government in the wake of military successes of the LTTE rebels and bomb explosions in Lankan cities.

The ruling People's Alliance (PA) party has had a rough ride with the media over the five years it has been in power. Though it promised full media freedom in its election manifesto, with the war against the LTTE resuming and its electoral battles with the opposition United National Party (UNP),

things began to change.

The resumption of the war had the media exposing corruption in the military, inept government leadership and nepotism. The government responded by tightening screws on the media. It accused the privately-owned media of being hand-in-glove with the UNP and even of conspiring with the LTTE. It hounded editors of prominent national newspapers with criminal defamation laws and used state-owned media organs as vehicles for propagating party propaganda.

The government, which has formally been rather lax on imposing censorship on foreign publications, was careful to impose the latest restrictions on the foreign media too. In this way, till today, foreign correspondents cannot transmit stories about Sri Lanka without prior approval of the censor.

Except for defiance by one or two publications, the media houses have gone along with the censorship.

On May 3, 2000 - the first World Press Freedom Day of the new century and new millennium - the state of press freedom in Pakistan remains fluid. The year under review may be divided in two periods: the period when the Nawaz Sharif government was in place, and the post-October 12 period when the military took over.

Sharif's efforts to muzzle the press, and bring the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government under his personal control, earned him the reputation of a tyrant and badly discredited Pakistan's democracy. His slide toward authoritarianism ended with a coup on

October 12 last year, in which Pakistan Army chief General Pervez Musharraf took power. General Musharraf immediately declared himself 'a firm believer in the freedom of the press,' but made a sobering reference to the press' duty to 'play a positive and constructive role.'

As far as the number of incidents, in which journalists were punished in various ways, is concerned, there is little to distinguish between the reigns of the civilian and military dispensations. Goons of the Sharif government, acting under the orders of one state functionary or the other, set about intimidating, harassing and torturing journalists with impunity. Najam Sethi, Hussain Haqqani, M. A. K. Lodhi are some apt examples.

General Musharraf, heading Pakistan's fourth military coup in as many decades, made a concerted effort to avoid being seen as a military dictator. Calling himself the country's 'Chief Executive,' he declared: 'This is not martial law, only another path towards democracy.'

The General did, however, suspend the constitution, and with it the guarantees of freedom of expression contained therein, and abolish the national and provincial legislatures. He allowed the judiciary to function on the condition that courts 'shall not have the powers to make any order against the Chief Executive or any person exercising powers or jurisdiction under his authority.'

However, the press overall was operating freely at the end of 1999 and in 2000. While there was a marked tendency toward self-censorship, some journalists still aired frank

criticism of the new administration's policies," says Nadeem Iqbal of *The News of Islamabad*. But in one of the most telling indictments of the state of freedom and individual liberty in Pakistan is a comment from the Freedom House, a US-based independent organisation dedicated to monitoring the state of freedom enjoyed by the media in each country of the world. In its latest report *Censor But Gov 2000: The Internet and Press Freedom*, the Freedom House lists Pakistan and Sri Lanka as the two most 'seriously declining state' involving the freedom of expression.

Worse, Pakistan was bracketed along with the likes of Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Chad, Togo, Laos etc., by the Freedom House in its list of 'Not Free' countries in terms of media freedom. In 1998, Pakistan was included in its 'Partially Free' list of countries.

In Bangladesh, a recent police action against a reporter of a vernacular daily has been taken for a 'defamatory piece of news' purported to have been published for tarnishing the image of the police has, once again, brought to the fore the intolerant attitude of the law enforcers towards the journalists. According to reports, a rejoinder from the police against the report was duly printed by the daily along with comments of the reporter concerned. Not satisfied with this, police swooped down on the reporter holding him under Section 54 of CrP which is indiscriminately used by the police against any individual on the flimsy ground of suspicion. This incidence brought an instant outcry against the highhandedness of

the police and demonstrated how vulnerable the journalists are in discharging their professional duties.

However, this is not the first time that harassment has been meted out to a journalist; there have been many occasions, during the four-year rule of the Awami League government, in which journalists have been subject to assault and a couple of newspaper offices have been ransacked. These certainly give 'freedom of expression' a bad name.

As far as freeing state-run media from party influence, the Clause 7 of the AL election manifesto was dedicated to freedom of press and other related issues. Announcing that the party 'believes in the free flow of information and freedom of the press,' it said, 'To free the radio, television and the state-run news agency from party influence, these will be given the status of autonomous institutions.'

After coming to power, the government set up a Commission to work out ways towards autonomy of the state-run electronic media and formulate rules under which Bangladesh Television (BTV) and Bangladesh Betar (BB) would be run. The Commission report, submitted in September 1997, is gathering dust in the shelves of the Prime Minister's secretary. The chairman of the Commission has recently resigned from the post of the ruling party's advisory council.

Sheikh Hasina's predecessor, Khaleda Zia, had also made similar pledge before the 1991 general elections. But after winning the polls, Khaleda's Information Minister Barrister

Nazmul Huda boastfully announced that the BTV and the Betar must be run at the dictates of the Information Minister.

The state minister for information on Hasina's cabinet, Abu Sayeed, has been running the institutions following his BNP counterpart's footsteps. The BTV and the BB are still used as means of providing exaggerated versions of government performances on one hand and tarnishing the image of the political opponents on the other.

As regards 'freedom of the media and free flow of information', there has been little progress. And the government hardly tolerates the media's barking, let alone its bites. Sheikh Hasina has recently allowed a private sector TV channel. But she did not forget to impose a set of conditions, including the one compelling the channel to air BTV's primetime news - primarily government propaganda - at 10:00 pm. Besides, the government is reported to have supervised the entire recruitment process of the company through a 'politically reliable civil servant'.

However, yesterday's newspapers carried news of making the judiciary and press independent before the next elections. Time will tell how far the promise is kept.

The press in Nepal is free in accordance with the country's constitution but there are still some problems created by the government in the name of protecting the norms of the constitution and national interest. After the restoration of democracy in 1990, the constitution guaranteed the freedom

of expression and right to information. In one hand, the constitution is promulgated press freedom as basic rights of the people and guaranteed press freedom against media censorship; but on the other hand, there are many provisions that prohibit the press freedom.

To some extent, Nepali media has been facing some risks and feeling threat in constitutionally guaranteed press freedom since February 1996, with the initiation of Maoist movement launched by Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). To discourage the movement, the government is using different tactics in terms to restore 'law and order'. But its crackdown on Maoist rebels includes censorship and harassment of the press. Although the state has continuously denied the allegation to censor the news, reports from Nepal say that police in several cities prevented the distribution of newspapers containing news about fighting between government and rebel forces. Also, the journalists who are reporting Maoist-related activities, are facing severe charges. Some journalists complain that reporting on guerrilla activities leaves one vulnerable to harassment and violent intimidation by both government forces and Maoist insurgents.

Indians have, however, come a long way from its Doordarshan days. Its national network, which started in 1959 to free to air as well as pay and more than 500 television software production houses. The print medium, which is still the strongest in India, of-

fers readers a variety of formats. The Salomon Smith Barney report indicates rising press consumption on account of growing literacy levels in the country. The Internet has come of age there. On November 1, 1998, the government announced the opening of cyberspace to private Internet Service Providers (ISPs). Then again, Reporters Sans Frontiers has expressed concern about the adoption, by the Lok Sabha, of two bills that may threaten press freedom. One, a law on Internet use, and the presentation of a bill concerning terrorist activities. According to Robert Menard, the general secretary of the RSF: 'These two laws contain some clauses which are in contradiction with India's international commitments, and especially the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, which guarantees press freedom.'

Lack of education has also affected the print media in South Asia. However, regionally, the fourth estate was never completely undermined and somehow managed to retain a modicum of independence in the face of overwhelming pressures and persecution. With the countries of South Asia at the crossroads of their destiny, the media in general and journalists in particular face greater challenges to uphold the universal principles they represent and the duties they must perform to keep the spirit of freedom of expression aloft. While there seems chances to reap of state-initiated assaults that journalists went through in the past, they cannot let their guard down.