

Ranked by Export 12 months	Bhutan	Bangladesh	India	Maldives	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Nepal
Exports 12 months	\$4.1b.	\$3.5b.	\$39.2b.	\$0.1b.	\$8.3b.	\$4.7b.	\$0.5b.
GDP growth	6.0%	4.4%	5.3%	6.8%	5.3%	4.2%	3.5%
Per capita GDP (PPP)	\$1,570	\$1,040	\$1,760	\$3,395	\$1,570	\$2,625	\$1,100
Per capita GNP (PPP)	\$458	\$299	\$436	\$1,167	\$492	\$827	\$225
Population (millions)	0.8	130.0	1,000.0	0.3	138.6	19.3	23.4
Population growth	2.3%	2.2%	1.9%	3.0%	2.6%	1.2%	2.3%
Inflation (CPI)	9.2%	3.8%	5.0%	-3.1%	3.8%	6.8%	1.8%
Current account balance	-\$0.1b.	-\$0.3b.	-\$3.3b.	-\$0.02b.	-\$1.5b.	-\$0.3b.	-\$0.1b.
Reserves excl. gold	\$9.3b.	\$1.4b.	\$33.8b.	\$0.3b.	\$1.3b.	\$1.6b.	\$0.8b.
GDP (PPP)	\$1.2b.	\$132b.	\$1,710b.	\$0.9b.	\$219b.	\$49b.	\$25b.
People per tel.	66.3	336.5	45.5	12.5	49.0	32.9	112.9
Life expectancy	61	60	62	67	63	73	57
Literacy rate	42.2%	38.1%	32.1%	92.6%	37.8%	89.3%	27.5%
Urban pop.	7%	20%	28%	32%	35%	23%	14%

Women

Right to Respect and Gratitude

By Ekram Kabir



SOUTH ASIA can boast of having the highest number of women holding the highest political positions in the political arena. From now on, there will be women soldiers in Bangladesh. There are women performing great jobs all over the region. These are certainly happy news for women in the region. Unfortunately, there's another side of this mirror. The recently released statistics in UNFPA's State of the World Population report is a testimony to that. It said in the report that their male partners physically assault 47 per cent of women in Bangladesh. UNFPA put Bangladesh in the second position among a dozen women-bashing countries. India follows Bangladesh with 45 per cent.

Again, according to a recent Amnesty International report, governments, notably in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, show a bias against women by failing to investigate serious human rights abuses. The AI report catalogues a series of abuses suffered by women in the region. In Pakistan abuse against women is part of a wider picture of arbitrary arrests, torture and execution without legal process. The report accuses the government, the police and the judiciary of persistent bias. Hundreds of women and girls have been killed for allegedly dishonouring male relatives - by having sexual relations outside marriage, choosing a marriage partner against parental wishes, or seeking a divorce. Often a mere allegation -- without proof -- leads to a killing.

Similarly, in Bangladesh, the report says the government has failed to protect women from acid attacks and dowry-related murders, or to investigate rape in custody by police. Attacks on socially and economically weaker sections of society in India were commonplace and often with the apparent connivance of the police and local authorities. The report, however, does sound a positive note in Sri Lanka where the government has taken steps to address past human rights violations by the security forces. They include the exhumation of the remains of 15 people reported to have disappeared four years ago.

A survey in northern India has found that nearly half of husbands interviewed abused their wives either physically or sexually. The report, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, is one of the most comprehensive studies of its kind carried out in India. Violence against women is increasingly being recognised as a global healthcare problem. Studies from a variety of countries around the world suggest that between 17 per cent and 60 per cent of women face some form of abuse from their husbands. The data in this study, one of the biggest of its kind, comes from more than 6,000 men who were interviewed privately in their homes over a period of two years in the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh. In total, 46 per cent of the men interviewed said they either beat their wives or abused them sexually.

These manifest a sort of depravity, unless checked right now, sends an awry signal to tear apart the entire social fabric in the region. But again: why is the society so repulsive? Why such criminal and savage instincts are on an alarming rise? If any psychological component is affecting our conscience, then it merits more attention in analysing the issue to identify the cause.

In trying to make the society safe for women efforts by human rights organisations and women activists however still remain elusive for the women to rely upon. On the other hand, national leaders are locked in a war of words in parliaments, undermining each other, ignoring the escalating crime scenario in the country that affects half the

population. It's time we took honest initiatives to create a women-friendly society in which every female irrespective of age feels secure, and take more stringent measures to shower human values on those who are already looking at the women in a 'de-humanised' manner.

Again, it would be an injustice to say that governments in South Asia haven't done anything about protecting women from repression. In their efforts to improve women's position and to enhance women's role in the process of development, they have tried to break down norms segregating men and women over the past two decades. Policy decisions were taken by governments to integrate women into the process of economic development; efforts were made to increase utilisation of rural hospital services and improve maternal and neonatal healthcare, including training activities, and development of a human resource plan under several projects, there has been budgetary increases to the education sector, particularly primary education; and there has also been significant progress in recent years in school enrolments, especially that of girls, at both primary and secondary levels, due to the implementation of compulsory primary education stipends for female secondary school students.

There is more. Human rights activists in Pakistan have welcomed the creation of a national commission to protect women's rights and help raise their status. At the commission's inauguration recently, the Minister for Women's Development, Atiya Inayatullah, said the commission would look at violence against women as one of its first tasks. Pakistan's military leader, General Pervez Musharraf, has been praised for fulfilling his promise to set up the commission. He has also announced that a third of the seats in the upcoming local elections will be reserved for women.

A report from India's Law Commission has called for sweeping changes to the country's rape laws after an increase in the incidence of sexual violence. The report, which focuses on abuse within families, calls for rape and sexual assault cases to be tried in special courts. Statistics on rape and child sexual abuse in India are just beginning to emerge, and they paint a grim picture. The Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development says that on average one woman is raped every hour in the country.

The call by the Law Commission for sweeping changes in laws against family violence is part of growing pressure for change in an alarming situation. Women's groups say deeply conservative attitudes about sex and privacy within families have all contributed to making India's rape laws brutally ineffective.

But can law alone protect women from being mistreated? Possibly not. Because the root cause of all violence against women is poverty. Why? Because poverty is conducive to aggressiveness and is in itself an absolute form of violence. Women living in poverty are often the victims of an accumulation of violence. But this does not prevent them from tapping into a fund of courage, endurance and wisdom within themselves which enables them to surmount these problems and progress, protecting their families all the time.

Governments in South Asia must help their women, not only by promoting awareness of the violence they endure, but also by publicising the many initiatives women have taken and seeking to strengthen their peace-building potential. With their responsibility for the well-being of their families and for transmitting the heritage and their clear-headed approach to modern values, women are in the forefront of the struggle against barbarism and dereliction and have a right to make their voices heard.

They have a right to the respect and gratitude of every one of us.

Sri Lanka

Polls: A Challenge for Democracy

By Mansoor Mamoon



AS the date for holding parliamentary polls in the ethnic strife-torn island republic of Sri Lanka scheduled for October 10, violence is reaching its peak. An independent European observers team is now in Sri Lanka to monitor the hustings said the poll is going to be the most violent in the history of the country. So far over 500 incidences of violence have been reported in which over a dozen people including two candidates were killed. The latest killings were due to a suicide bomb attack on Monday in which Muslim Congress candidate Mohammed Battulah along with scores of others were killed and many more injured.

Earlier in a helicopter crash another Muslim leader from the north - Ports Minister Mohammed Ashraf with his companions on board the chopper tragically perished. His death was a blow to the ruling People's Alliance (PA). Because late Ashraf used to slice a chunk of Muslim Tamil votes. Meanwhile, the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Elam (LTTE) guerrillas have mounted their attack against the government troops in the northern Jaffna Peninsula, inflicting heavy casualties on them. To scare away the civilian population from the area LTTE insurgents are targeting them and pounding residential areas incessantly. According to reports, a large number of people are fleeing from the area as intense battles rages in the vicinity of Jaffna. The area is, however, out of bounds for polls. That means election is not being held in the area.

October 10 election is the 11th since independence from the

British domination 52 years ago. More than 12 million Sri Lankans will vote for 225-member parliament. The two main parties in the fray are the People's Alliance (PA), some sort of a coalition, of President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the opposition United National Party (UNP) led by Ranil Wickremsinghe. According to observers, both the parties are running neck and neck. But PA has a slight edge over UNP. In the last parliament, PA and its smaller allies bagged 135 seats.

Recent price spiral of essentials like fuel, cooking gas and electricity has affected the general public, particularly the fixed-income group. Losses among government troops and gains by LTTE have also made the largely Sinhalese voters angered against the ruling party. The situation has been further exacerbated by the sudden unannounced departure of President Kumaratunga for unknown destinations. Later on, it was revealed that she had gone to London for the treatment of her eye, damaged during last year's presidential election by LTTE suicide bomber. The opposition made this hush-hush.

President Kumaratunga tried to curry the favour of majority support through army offensive against LTTE. But it did not work. Sri Lanka has adopted presidential type of government as in France. A UNP victory could create complications because it would then have to work with the country's real executive head now President Kumaratunga who

belongs to PA - the opposing party. The UNP said it would clip the powers of the executive president but PA forcefully said this would not be possible and the president would remain the all-powerful executive head of the government as provided by the country's constitution. Amendment to the constitution would require two-thirds majority which neither of the two big parties are likely to get.

Kumaratunga's mother - world's first woman Prime Minister Srimavo Bandaranaike - has resigned due to old age. She is 85 and almost incapacitated. Kumaratunga has picked up a new prime minister to give a new revamp look to the party.

The 17-year ethnic insurgency in the northeastern region of the country is the dominant issue in the election. The insurgency has so far cost 60,000 lives and drained the country's huge resources on arms expenditure. In the last parliament, Kumaratunga made desperate attempt to pass a new autonomy proposal for the Tamils, who comprise only 17 per cent of the population. But due to lack of required majority the autonomy proposal fell flat Buddhists and other Sinhalese, particularly the vociferous print media vehemently opposed the move. They apprehended that this might in the long run cause the division of the country and establish a separate independent Hindu state. The autonomy proposal was also not acceptable to the Tamils whose leader V. Prabhakaran is for total independence of the Tamil majority area. Kumaratunga's tragedy is that she could neither satisfy the Sinhalese, nor the Tamils. Kumaratunga said she would once again push her autonomy proposal if she gets the required majority in the upcoming election. But sensing the opposition

People

Yes Minister to in Hindi

THE famed BBC Television satire, Yes Minister and its sequel Yes Prime Minister are being reshot in Hindi with Indian actors for the new series to be screened in January next. Monisha Shah, the south Asia territory manager for BBC Worldwide, which is making the series for Rupert Murdoch's STAR plus Asian channel, said the British comedy about bungling bureaucrats and dithering politicians, had secured a cult following in the region for over a decade after it was telecast on Doordarshan.

Book on Narayanan Released

A book on the President, K. R. Narayanan, and other internationally renowned Malayalees was released by the Indian Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), K. C. Singh, at a function. The book, written by Nissar Syed, news editor of Radio Asia, talks about the yesterdays of the Indian President, the Kerala Chief Minister, E. K. Nayanar, noted personality, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and seven other famous Malayalees.

It is titled *Prasastharude Innale* (Well-Known Men - Unknown Beginnings).

Homage to Gandhi

India fondly remembered the Father of the Nation on his 131st birth anniversary with leaders saying that the Gandhian philosophy was relevant even after more than 50 years of independence. The President, K. R. Narayanan, the Vice-President, Krishan Kant, the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and other leaders paid floral tributes to the Mahatma at his samadhi in Rajghat. Vajpayee stood in silence with folded hands for some time as the representatives of different religions offered prayers.

The Buzz...

Pervez Musharraf, Chief Executive of Pakistan: "The present government believes in free and healthy criticism in national press, because the healthy and positive criticism in the press will provide a wide support in resolving different national and international issues as to mitigate the people's problems."

Nawaz Sharif, deposed Prime Minister of Pakistan: "After every dark night there is a dawn of brighter morning and soon the country would be rid of oppressors."

Anuruddha Ratwatte, Deputy Defence Minister of Sri Lanka: "The LTTE will do everything it can to disrupt the elections. We are in a continuous process of retrieving land we lost to the LTTE, starting with the peninsula... The main issue of this election is peace, and that is what we are promising."

Kingsley T. Wickremarathne, International and Internal Commerce and Food Minister of Sri Lanka: "It is Kumaratunga's inspiration to convert Colombo into the leading financial capital of South Asia. By 2003, 50 per cent of the homes in Sri Lanka that have electricity would be equipped with a low-cost, home-based Personal Computer complete with Internet access and an e-mail address."

Ram Naik, Indian Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas: "I am confident that the Prime Minister will be able to resolve the problem of the Ministers' resignations... The Centre has a still higher capacity and hence we have reduced the import and excise duties on the crude oil and petroleum products."

The Region This Week

School collapses

POLICE in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh say that at least four girl students died when a school building collapsed in the eastern district of Azamgarh. More than twenty other students were injured. Police said that at the time of the accident the students were standing on a veranda. It's not clear what caused the collapse.

Gangster 'could go free'

SUSPECTED underworld don Chhota Rajan - injured a shoot-out last month in Bangkok - could end up a free man because the Indian Government's failed so far to seek his formal extradition from Thailand. India does not have an extradition treaty with Thailand.

India and Russia boost ties

INDIA and Russia have signed a strategic partnership agreement which both sides hope will revive a relationship that has faded since the end of the Cold War. The deal was signed in Delhi by President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. It covers a whole range of bilateral concerns from defence and peaceful nuclear co-operation to trade and science and technology.

Military starts BD relief

MILITARY helicopters have started relief and rescue operations in Bangladesh for the victims of the country's floods. A military spokesman was quoted by the French news agency as saying that two helicopters had left the capital, Dhaka, for the Jessor region to operate in the worst-hit areas.

Lankan bomb warning

SRI LANKAN police have warned of a bombing campaign by the separatist Tamil Tigers ahead of the country's parliamentary elections next week. A senior officer said that the separatists had infiltrated the capital Colombo to carry out bombings. The Tigers were showing "desperation" after the failure of counter attacks against government troops in the northern Jaffna peninsula.

Ex-PM in the dock

A COURT in the Indian capital, Delhi, has convicted the former prime minister, PV Narasimha Rao, of corruption in a voting scandal. It is the first time an Indian leader has been convicted on corruption charges. A former senior minister, Buta Singh, was also convicted in the same case. The two men were members of the Congress Party, which governed India in the early 1990s.

Lanka rebels 'repulsed'

THE Sri Lankan military says it has repulsed fresh attempts by Tamil rebels to overrun its positions in the northern Jaffna peninsula. There were four attempts to attack the main defences at Eluthumaduval but they were unsuccessful, military spokesman Brigadier Sanath Karunaratne said. "It is like a prestige battle for them." He said airforce jets had bombed Elephant Pass, the strategic gateway to the peninsula which the Tamil Tigers captured from the army in April.

Gangland probe

A TEAM of Bombay police officials is to leave for Bangkok to help the Thai police with their investigations into the suspected Indian underworld boss, Chhota Rajan, injured in a shoot-out on 15 September and now in the custody of the Thai authorities. According to the home minister in the western state of Maharashtra, Chagan Bhujbal, an assistant commissioner of police and two other police officers from Bombay will also explore the possibility of bringing Chhota Rajan back to Bombay.

Nepalese minister resigns

THE Nepalese Home Minister, Govinda Raj Joshi, has announced that he is resigning, less than a week after more than 20 policemen were killed in Maoist rebel attacks. Joshi told a news conference that his resignation was aimed at helping a government committee to investigate why the authorities failed to prevent the attacks, which are among the fiercest the rebels have ever carried out.

Blast in Kabul

REPORTS from Afghanistan say a powerful bomb exploded in Kabul outside the offices of an aid agency and a newspaper run by a Pakistani religious group Al-Rashid Trust which supports the ruling Taliban. The reports, which come from witnesses, say the bomb shattered windows but caused little other damage. No group has admitted planting the device.

-- Compiled by Ekram Kabir

West Bengal

A Deluge of Misery

By Soutik Biswas

It had been three days since Gokul Bairagi and his fellow villagers had been marooned without food or water on a mound of dry land at Khanakul, less than 100 km from Calcutta. Then Bairagi heard a chopper over their mound. He started running, for food had finally arrived. But Bairagi died on