

Guide to Investment

FOR a change it was good to see an investment guide released not from the host's self-praising standpoint but from the potential user's practical point of view. On Saturday at the concluding session of the ICC Asia conference in the city what we got was an investment guide to Bangladesh prepared jointly in a businesslike fashion by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Although the end of the conference was not marked by any formal declaration of its detailed outcome, yet we have assurances from ICC Bangladesh president Mahbubur Rahman that the recommendations would be made available to the press in due course. However, the just-released hand-book being an independent evaluative document encapsulating both strongpoints for and impediments to foreign investment in Bangladesh we have in it some recommendations anyway to comment on. We attach an extra-bit of importance to the ICC-UNCTAD collaborative efforts to see Bangladesh placed reasonably well on the world investment map as part of our integration with the global market.

What does the investment guide say? Frankly, it has a little more to it than has been aired by different international quarters by way of constructive criticism of our investment climate from time to time. It is common knowledge that bureaucratic red-tape and poor physical infrastructure, including grossly erratic power supply, have been our two major drawbacks as far as investment - both domestic and foreign - goes. But the guide specifies two more factors as dampers: intransparent administration and non-implementation of policies, the latter obviously referring to policies that were adopted precisely with an eye to bolstering investment but going unimplemented as an obvious contradiction. Yet we are showcasing some of them, as if those were for real!

By default therefore, our 'weaknesses' are outweighing our 'strong points.' Our social homogeneity, democratic credentials, energetic, low-cost and easily trainable workforce, and liberal regime on FDI can only work to our advantage if we implement certain strategic decisions centred on administrative and financial reforms, and steadying the power supply to entrepreneurs, which seem well within our capacity to do.

Waste Fright

THAT waste can be efficiently managed is a concept rather alien to us. We have persistently castigated the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) for routinely failing to keep our residential neighbourhoods, workplaces and streets clean. But never have we raised any question about what it does with the garbage it collects from roadside bins and containers. Many of us do know that these are dumped on to six or seven open waste sites in the outskirts of the city but have not quite bothered to sensitise all concerned about how such a method of garbage disposal poses threat to the public health. Now, it seems, our indifference and ignorance in this regard have caught up with us and we may have to pay a heavy price for that. Researchers in the developed countries have found out that gas oozing out from the landfill sites could have carcinogenic effect on humans. People living near waste dumps run four times more risk than others to develop bladder, lung and blood cancer. Put together with the fact that the mix of garbage in the open dumps and rainwater can trickle down to the water-table with micro-organisms and toxic chemicals, we may be dealing with a health emergency more serious than we can realise.

In a land-strapped country like ours, we cannot simply afford the luxury of having dumps far away from human habitat. People living closer to waste sites - perhaps too close for comfort - is the truth in our context. Instead of alternative residential plans, therefore, we need to devise alternative waste-disposal system. It is high time that we started investing our money, thought and energy into more waste treatment facilities. The ones we have are provenly inadequate to deal with the huge quantity of garbage produced daily. Besides, as speakers at the international conference on water and sanitation, held recently in the capital, observed, the composition of garbage is also changing with time.

Composting plants hold the answer to the problem we face. The government, we hope, would abandon its age-old outlook on the issue and take measures to install more treatment plants in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country. Time is of the essence again. Should it decide to sit idle on the issue, the problem could well snowball into a bigger crisis.

Precautions against Fire

OUR vulnerability to fire has once again been exposed by Sunday's blaze at the city's Rupnagar area under Pallabi thana where 400 shacks were destroyed by fire, which broke out at 6 in the evening. Fire fighting units from Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Tejgaon and Kurmitola rushed to the spot but they could not put out the blaze until it was next morning. Due to the very location of the slum - in the middle of a government-owned virtually dried up lake - and lack of electric supply there, the fire fighters reportedly had to wait till dawn to bring the fire under control. And when they completed their operation, the damage was already done; people living at the cluster of houses lost their belongings.

This incident clearly points to the fact that Dhaka city has many fire-prone places and it is time we turned our attention to them to build minimal safety precautions into their living conditions. Let's put on the list pockets that are extremely vulnerable to fire and see how we can improve their situation. It's worthwhile to mention that at several places the fire brigade people have no road access which is why when the former catch fire it is all ash that is one sees in the end. The policy measures have to be adjusted to the reality that Dhaka would have more people to live in its periphery in future whose lives would be at increasing risk unless we head this off by putting appropriate safeguards in place.

US Presidential Election and Lessons for Bangladesh

"Power, like a desolating pestilence, pollutes whatever it touches." - Shelley

ALLEGATIONS of vote rigging, refusal to accept the results by the two contenders, endless war of words and finally seeking injunction of the court are believed to be the characteristics of fledgling third world democracies like Bangladesh or Nigeria. But the controversies raging since the November 7 presidential election in the world's mightiest democracy, the United States and the looming shadow of uncertainty that still hangs over it have caused widespread consternation, dismay, anguish and animated suspense among the Americans. In the outside world also the stalemate has evoked widespread curiosities as to who will finally emerge as the next President of the only superpower the US.

It was unprecedented in the recent memory in the United States. It was the closest fight in forty years. The electioneering was heated up even by character assassination freely resorted to by both Democrat nominee Al Gore and Republican candidate George Bush.

The state of Florida has emerged as the decisive factor. George Bush was leading by a slender margin. Then came the complaints from the Democrats about widespread irregularities. Jesse Jackson, the black leader, has openly complained that fifteen per cent Afro-Americans were not allowed to cast their votes. The general feeling was that ballot papers were so

As in America so also in Bangladesh it is the power that matters and on the issue of power there is no compromise. This is the mindset of the bourgeoisie who crave only for power and democracy is just a facade to them... It should be noted that election is not an end in itself, but is a means rather the stepping stone towards democratic dispensation. If the election process itself is flawed, democracy is bound to suffer in the long run.

designed as to create confusion among voters causing doubts in whose favour they are casting their votes. Bush's brother, the Governor of Florida, has resigned from Election Conducting Committee because of severe public criticism. The Democrats demanded manual recounting of the votes and against a probable move towards this direction Bush has decided to seek a court injunction.

State Department official James Ruben has said it is indeed unfortunate to go to the court. The Democrats requested Bush not to seek injunction against manual counting of votes if he is sure of winning the race. The machine might commit big mistakes which can be avoided by manual counting of votes, the Democrats maintained. If there is a court injunction there might be more delay in announcing the result of the much-talked about presidential polls in the US. In the meantime came the most astounding news of finding two missing ballot boxes in Miami.

The fiasco in the polling and vote counting in the United States once more amply demonstrated that there is nothing to be complacent about democracy. Democracy is a matter of constant practice and even a traditionally democratic country might face an adverse situation if

timely reforms are not initiated. The United States champions democracy and human rights. But the just concluded presidential poll and the manner in which it was held are certain to create a dent in its image the world over. According to an analyst, the 'nightmare' of this election would haunt the Americans. It will take long, long time for the dust to



HEART OF THE MATTER Mansoor Mamoon

settle down. It all boils down to the focal point the power and the clout that the President of the United States enjoys both inside and outside the country. Right at this moment the President of the United States is the most powerful man in the world. In the unipolar world, on him largely depends not only how the United States will move but also how the world will move. Economically and militarily the US is superior than any country on earth. It annually imports 83 thousand crore dollars worth of goods. Its naval strength and firepower is invincible. In the foreseeable future there is not going to be any

change in the status quo.

Naturally, for a party or its candidate to win the presidential race is something highly coveted not only for global interests but also in the interests of those lavishly funding the election campaign. So every four years the United States undergoes the feverish pitch of hustings which equally catches the attention of

to derive from the US Presidential election it is over a decade that Bangladesh is enjoying democratic constitutional rule. During these years two elections were held under the neutral non-partisan caretaker government. These elections were hailed the world over as the fairest. But the contending parties the Awami League in 1991 and the BNP in June 1996 refused to accept the outcome of the plea that it was rigged. This resulted in the ineffective and virtually non-functioning Parliament because of the refusal of opposition to cooperate in strengthening it. As the 2001 hustings approaches the political arena is likely to be extremely heated up and the defeated party will presumably again refuse to accept the result. As in America so also in Bangladesh it is the power that matters and on the issue of power there is no compromise. This is the mindset of the bourgeoisie who crave only for power and democracy is just a facade to them.

The second point that Bangladesh must note is the campaign funding. Election has already turned into a big business in Bangladesh. Black money and muscle power are the two most dominant factors in the fray. The Election Commission in Bangladesh has put a ceiling on election funding which is simply ludi-

icrous compared to actual amount spent. Where from this enormous of money comes? From the bank defaulters, possessors of unaccounted black money, godfathers and mafiosi? Do they donate generously from their coffers for nothing? They take their return manifold through grabbing vital projects at inflated rates, more facilities in securing bank loans, share markets scandals, black marketing and such other things, while for the general people democracy starts sounding hollow. Lenin who defined democracy as the 'ornament of the bourgeoisie' predicted such a situation. The civil society is demanding for long for appropriate reform of the electoral process. There should be consensus on this issue and not bypassing like American presidential candidates saying 'Okay, let it remain as it is this time, we will think about it next time.' The United States can very well withstand and overcome its present row over who actually has won the race. But with weak pillars of democracy it will be difficult on the part of Bangladesh if another political crisis grips it after next year's general election.

It should be noted that election is not an end in itself, but is a means rather the stepping stone towards democratic dispensation. If the election process itself is flawed, democracy is bound to suffer in the long run as evidenced by the events in the United States. This is axiomatic. So Bangladesh should move for correct measures when there is still time taking cue from the hullabaloo of the US Presidential Election.

The Electoral College: Facing an Ethical Dilemma?

by Tasfeen Hussain

American Democracy has been tested time and again. It has gone through challenges during civil war, civil rights era, or Watergate scandal. But, every time, it successfully passed the test, because it looked at the matter from the core of ethics. What is ethics? - an ability to distinguish between right from wrong. Is it then ethical to vote for someone who didn't win the popular vote, and also did the confusion not exist, would not win the state of Florida?

PROBABLY, not even the most experienced and pragmatic political analyst could ever predict such a close call in the Decision 2000, although almost everyone anticipated that it would be a close race. Right now, what we have here is a strange limbo revolving around State of Florida. The latest shows that the unofficial recounting gives Bush a little over 300 vote margin over Gore. That of all a sudden makes the absentee votes, the deciding factor, which can amount to about 2000. Given most of these votes will come from the US army personnel who are serving abroad, and given the army personnel's liking over the Republican outlook, most of these votes might go for Bush, and can clear his path towards Presidency. However the case of almost 19,000 cancelled votes, most of which would go for Gore could be taken up to the Supreme Court. Then, of course we will experience a long and ugly legal battle. Let's assume for a moment that the Supreme Court delivers the verdict in favour of Bush. Those 19,000 votes have been cancelled because of valid reasons, no one can deny that. If that's the case Bush will be the

next President of U.S.A. The problem is that people will know that he actually lost the State of Florida and of course the popular vote. Do we then have an ethical problem here? Let's focus on the facts. Gore has undoubtedly won the popular vote. It is because of the strange electoral system for which he will lose White House. The Electoral College system was designed for reasons some 200+ years ago, which are not relevant any more. One of the principal reasons was if common people seemed to be making a grave mistake in choosing a President, Electoral College would correct the mistake. In a nation, where information is so fluid and most people being educated today, that is not longer a valid reason. Then, knowing the majority wanted Gore as the President, how can the Electoral College vote for someone who did not win the popular vote?

I understand what their logic is going to be. "Hey, Bush has won my state." However, they should not forget that an American President does not only represent one constituency or one particular state, he represents the whole nation. Then, isn't it logical that the Electoral College should reflect the majority people's will in their voting for the President? Nowhere in the constitution it says that the Electoral College needs to vote in favour of a candidate who wins the state but loses the nationwide popular vote. If Florida's Electoral College votes for Bush, they are going to send him to the White House knowing that they have decided to send someone to assume the Presidency who doesn't have the approval of the majority of the Americans, and clearly, if the ballot papers were not that confusing, would not have the approval of majority of the Florida

people either. They should also take into account the voting irregularities. In their state, if Bush wins the recount, the margin will be much thinner than the first count. What did really happen there? How can the most sophisticated computerized vote counting system makes such an error? And, what about the fact that some ballot boxes were found locked up, which were not previously counted? And, all of them had to happen in Florida, where the Governor is Bush's younger brother. Can they not smell the remote possibility of a perspicacious rigging that took place, which is unprecedented in American history of democracy? They should also consider the case of those 19,000 votes that have been cancelled for such a confusing ballot paper, even though the Florida Democrats did not complain before the election was held. No questions would

arise if these votes were supposed to go for Bush, but they didn't. Even Pat Buchanan, whose name in the ballot next to Gore initiated this confusion, agreed that those were Gore's votes 19000 is a very big number when considering that the margin is not even 500. Therefore, if the tradition for the electoral college is to vote for the candidate who carries the state, no matter who wins the popular vote, Florida Electoral College will vote for someone who actually didn't carry the state. American Democracy has been tested time and again. It has gone through challenges during civil war, civil rights era, or Watergate scandal. But, every time, it successfully passed the test, because it looked at the matter from the core of ethics. What is ethics? an ability to distinguish between right from wrong. Is it then ethical to vote for someone who didn't win the popular vote, and also did

the confusion not exist, would not win the state of Florida? In a democracy, a constitution is made to serve the people who own that constitution; people are not supposed to serve the constitution. Civil rights were not in the constitution; clearly, slavery was not against the constitution. Thus, the Florida Electoral College should go beyond the constitution, and look at those faces whose votes have been marginalized. They have been deprived of their fundamental right the right to choose. If Bush assumes the Presidency, the Electoral College should know that, in their head, the American will have a president whose name is George W. Bush for next four years, but in their heart, they will have a President whose name is Al Gore, or a question mark. The true test of democracy will fail for the first time in a land which champions the cause of democracy, simply because this is going to put American people for next four years into 'Constitutional Slavery'.

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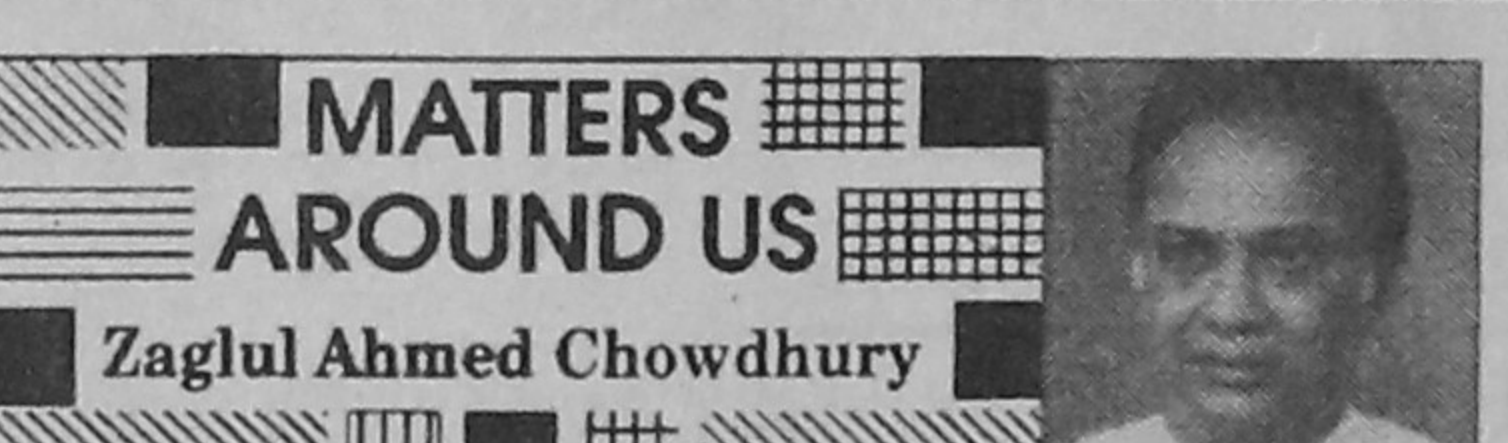
Jyoti Basu's Exit

What will be the Impact on Indian Politics?

Basu's exit from power will definitely affect the left politics in India and may also change the political milieu of West Bengal but any change cannot be drastic and immediate since he will remain around and his is a party on ideological line where personality does count but not excessively.

JYOTI Basu, a legend in his lifetime in left politics for this part of the world, has finally quit as the chief minister of West Bengal state of India after more than uninterrupted 23 years' stay. He was contemplating to call it a day for sometime past but his plan was being delayed time and again as his Communist Party (CPM) and the constituents of the ruling nine-party left front were unwilling to let him go since the elderly politician has been the main strength of the coalition. But the 86-year-old veteran has succeeded in convincing the party and the front on the need of his relinquishing on health ground. Deputy chief minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya, 56, has stepped into the shoes of his senior and respected colleague. This marks an end to a glorious career of a person who was the longest serving head of a communist state government elected in the multi-party democratic system in contemporary world history. The success was all the more remarkable when the current era is not much favourable for social-

ism particularly after the collapse of the first communist state giant former Soviet Union although the ideology remains strong in several countries. While the politics in the neighbouring country is interesting and also important for Bangladesh for manifold reasons, West Bengal is certainly of special relevance and curiosity for this country. Evidently, this particular interest for political and other developments in West Bengal broadly stems from simple fact that Bangladesh and that part of present-day India once formed the province of Bengal and people of this whole area speak the same language. The people of West Bengal are often seen as politically progressive and advanced in thoughts and ideas in India. This is the reason which once prompted Gokhale, the well-



known politician of the British Indian days, to remark that what Bengal thinks today the rest of India will think tomorrow. West Bengal is not otherwise very important of the 27 Indian states but is definitely considered politically advanced and intellectually progressive. The first Indian to receive a Nobel prize way back in 1913 was no other than a Bengalee poet Rabindranath Tagore and this clearly speaks of the level of Bengali intellect. The first Asian to become Nobel laure-

ate in economics is also a Bengalee professor Amartya Sen who won the coveted award last year. Jyoti Basu is certainly the most prominent Benagali politician in the history of independent India even though there were other figures including some chief ministers and central ministers from West Bengal who had earned great reputation. There has been a qualitative change in the electoral pattern in West Bengal as the once-

BJP. In recent times, the left front suffered some reverses when it lost the municipal elections in Calcutta city to the 'Trinamul'. Mamta, although a federal minister, is eyeing on West Bengal chief ministership. She leads a simple life and has undoubtedly earned popularity. But to dislodge the leftists from the state power still appears a Herculean task. The exit of Basu is likely to hamper the left front in the coming state assembly elections due mid next year. However, he says he will remain with the party and work for the left front. Basu enjoys tremendous respect in India and twice came close to become prime minister of the country. His successor Bhattacharya has proved his ability but he will find it a tough job to maintain the cohesion in the coalition on one hand and tackle the aggressive 'Trinamul' on the other. He himself has said after taking over the new office that challenge is big because it is difficult to match his legendary predecessor. Basu's exit from power will definitely affect the left politics in India and may also change the political milieu of West Bengal but any change cannot be drastic and immediate since he will remain around and his is a party on ideological line where personality does count but not excessively. A faction of the Congress is keen to forge alliance with 'Trinamul' for ousting the Left front from power in the next polls in the state since both feel it will be naive to think that the ruling Front can be easily defeated. This effort suffered setback before but now may receive some impetus with Basu being no longer in charge of the government. The federal government headed by prime minister Vajpayee is also likely to be buoyed by the absence of Basu in West Bengal affairs despite his willingness to continue to work for the party. But both the wishes may turn sour since Basu left at a stage when the leftists in the most powerful of their bastions in India (West Bengal) are unlikely to succumb so easily.

To the Editor ...

Electrical safety regulations

Sir, The recent fire in a knitting factory due to electrical short-circuiting in the basement switching room in a new modern multi-storey building points to training and maintenance weaknesses/lapses in this trade. Most of the mechanics in the private sector are semi-literate and do not have chance for basic formal training with theory and day to day working. The approach is more amateurish than professional. What is missing is a network of training centres for mechanics and technicians in the private sector. A chain of NGOs can assist in this respect, instead of diverting 100 per cent attention to poverty alleviation programme in the rural areas. More attention has to be paid to the professional drawbacks of the SMEs (small

and medium enterprises). The training culture cannot set in without setting up an orientation network (instead of concentrating all facilities in Dhaka metropolises). The government as a facilitator may coordinate with the industry chamber bodies to draw up plans for such training centres. BGMEA, with a million workers, can also be drawn into the training orbit for safety training workshops in industrial plants located in residential areas. The issue is not new, but it is a neglected area. AZ Dhaka

Pakistan is 60 years. A recent survey has shown that life expectancy in the country has gone up. Public Service Reforms Commission and a committee under Chairmanship of the Speaker of Parliament also recommended raising of the superannuation age to 60. In the recent past, President Justice Shahuddin Ahmed also publicly recommended for raising of the superannuation age. But everything seems to fall on deaf ears as a vested group is against this due to some unknown reason. Since the PM is head of the government, she should act fairly and impartially without succumbing to the pressure of the vested group. As a compromise measure, however, she can raise the superannuation age to 59 rather than 60. Mrs Momtaz Jahan Mohakhal, Dhaka

Palestinian struggle for freedom

Sir, Right from the Lord Balfour's Declaration till now no effective solution to the problem of Palestinian people is at sight. It seems that the West is interested only to prop up the Jewish entity as the basic global monetary structure is controlled by the Zionists. Hence no solution just and equitable to the Palestinians is sought out by the Pentagon. Perhaps, they feel that by pressuring the Arafat authority a superficial structure of peace could be attained. Therefore, a peaceful co-existence is a far cry for the Palestinians as the cluster of Jewish settlements makes it absolutely impossible for the natives to exist in peace and amity. Al-Haj S. M. Khalid Chowdhury Dhaka