The Daily Star
Founder-Editor : Late S.M. Ali
Dhaka, Saturday, January 27, 2001

Betting on Bengal Tiger

Call me naïve if you will, but when Frederick Temple of the World Bank in Dhaka said this week that the next tiger could be the Bengal tiger (and one assumes he wasn't planning a boat trip to the Sundarbans) my heart leaped in joy. That would call for happiness indeed. To prowl the world like a Bengal tiger instead of slinking about with a begging bowl the size of Africa and a self esteem as insignificant as an amoebae.

IF YOU ASK ME

Almas Zakiuddin

EVENTUALLY, being 'poor' won't be as much a matter of living in a poor country as it will be a matter of having poor skills. So remarked Bill Gates, some years ago. Now, of course, Gates has changed his mind. These days he is talking about priorities. What's the point of giving computers to children in say, Africa, when we still can't give them enough to eat, is the kind of question he is grappling with now.

One is conscious of the reality that Mr and Mrs Bill Gates are probably the most generous benefactors the world has ever known, having given away so many billions to charity that the term "venture philanthropy" was probably coined after them. But what rankles is the fact that a developing country must listen to the Bill Gates of the world to explain where it has gone wrong.

Frankly, when the affluent tell the poor how to manage their lives in order to become less poor, something happens that is difficult to explain.

Sure, we accept it the rich with impatience; the poor with gratitude or greed but fundamentally, it's a creepy relationship. I can't think of any comparable association, on any personal level at any rate, that can be considered remotely healthy or honest. Or, as development gurus might have it, "sustainable". The one can't be happy continually giving, and the other can't be happy continually taking.

Call me naïve if you will, but when Frederick Temple of the World Bank in Dhaka said this week that the next tiger could be the Bengal tiger (and one assumes he wasn't planning a boat trip to the Sundarbans) my heart leaped in joy. That would call for happiness indeed. To prowl the world like a Bengal tiger instead of slinking about with a begging bowl the size of Africa and a self esteem as insignificant as an amoebae.

Does anyone believe that might happen one day? Could the Bengal tiger really earn the title and prowl the land with a modicum of authentic pride one day? Or is everyone convinced our world is going to remain as it is now, with the icons of capitalism telling one lot exactly how to eat up their greens and wash behind their ears, and the other lot, the defeated billions, complying quietly?

The truth is, no one is really quiet or compliant. Yes, in any other part of the world, abject poverty such as exists here would be cause for a revolution as indeed, it has been on numerous occasions. But Bangladesh experienced its own upheaval to gain independence and innocently assumed that in so doing, it had breached the walls of disparity once and for all.

Now, as Mr Temple of the World Bank informed everyone this week, the problem of disparity not only continues, but also appears to be getting considerably out of hand. True, Mr Temple extolled the virtues of the Bangladesh economy, namely its achievements in food grain production, micro-credit programmes, adult education, school enrolment and export-oriented industries. All these sectors have done well and there is a great deal to be thankful for, one cannot and must not deny this.

But the bad news, said Temple, was in the general area of making a dent on poverty. It is clear that Bangladesh has not made a "significant" dent on poverty. (One is tempted to ask how a dent could be anything but insignificant, but one must not at this critical juncture split hairs.) What must be considered without ado, is why there has been no tangible progress made on eradicating poverty. According to the experts, it is because the number of poor is growing at a faster rate than the number of poor going above the poverty line. In the words of the cliché, the rich are getting richer, but the poor are still getting poorer.

As always, the World Bank was trying to get a message through, namely, that unless the government brought about radical changes in institutional governance, the World Bank would not cough up its own funds. A messy political situation, high levels of corruption, low standards of performance by the civil service, weakened investor confidence, were some of the issues raised, not for the first time of course. But the message was clear. Time to clean house, said the World Bank, or else all bets on the Bengal tiger are off.

One is all for cleaning house, now and whenever required. But it might also be a good idea to consider the issue of priorities. Indeed, as much as one may frown upon the pronouncements of outsiders, et al, the question of priorities is moot. I came across an interesting commentary, a kind of synoptic pen portrait of the world, some time ago. Called A Little Perspective, it goes like this:

If we could shrink the earth's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all the existing human ratios remaining the same, this is where we would stand.

There would be, 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western Hemisphere, both north and south, and eight Africans.

In this village, 52 would be female, 48 would be male, 70 would be non-white and 30 would be white; 70 would be non-Christian and 30 would be Christian.

Among the people here, as many as 70 would be unable to read, 50 would suffer from malnutrition and 80 would live in sub-standard housing.

Six people in this village would possess 59 per cent of the total wealth in the world, and all six (yes, all of them) would be from the United States.

One person (yes, only one) in this village would have a college education. And only one person in this entire village would own a computer.

It is worth wondering how this so-called one world has come to pass. This is not to suggest that the World Bank is solely responsible, but there has been a rumour going round since the Second World War that what we have today is at least partly the result of that cosy little chat which took place in Bretton Woods several decades ago, after which the World Bank and its siblings were born, and Harry Truman made his famous pronouncement, dividing humanity into First, Second, and Third world type countries.

In the light of these two perceptions, the one that provides a pen portrait of the world, and the other about our separate worlds made famous by Truman, one wonders if the World Bank's threat to pull the plug might be such a bad thing, after all. One is not likely to ever find out, of course, because I will bet you a free coke at our staff canteen that Bengal tiger or not, the ubiquitous donors won't go away.

Sure, there are lots of people to blame in Bangladesh. There's the government, always a useful place to start when trying to apportion responsibility for the state of the nation. There are the politicians. There are the rich. One could expand this hit list impressively, but I am sure you get the gist. Blame shifts the issue out of one's own flight path, but not for ever. People do not delude themselves as much as their leaders tend to do. People know what is wrong and, given half a chance, may even be able to put things right.

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Will there be a United States of Europe in the Near Future?

Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam writes from Madrid

Eventually, the east and central European countries will join the EU and become more prosperous and the west Europeans will have a wider market, see the triumph of democracy and feel militarily more secure. As far as political integration is concerned, under the present circumstances, it is highly unlikely that in the foreseeable future the member nations of the EU will surrender their sovereignty and form a politically integrated United States of Europe.

THE last summit of the leaders of the European Union's fifteen member-countries was held in December 2000 at the Mediterranean French port of Nice. After arduous negotiations and endless haggling, a treaty (now known as the Treaty of Nice) was signed, which according to the optimists was one more step in the right direction to bring the union closer and according to the pessimists, not only did not solve the outstanding problems from the last European Council meeting in Amsterdam but also made the integration process even more difficult. The purpose of this paper is to place this summit into its historical context, outline the structure of the EU government and try to make a fair assessment of the results of the summit. What were the principal objectives of the Nice summit? How much was achieved? What is the future outlook for Europe?

The search for an integrated European Union owes its origin to the age-long intense rivalry between Germany and France, which caused two World Wars in the 20th century with devastating consequences. In order to build a bridge between France and Germany and to lessen the risk of another Franco-German war, in May 1950, a French civil servant called Jean Monnet and the then French foreign minister, Robert Schuman put forward the idea of setting up a new economic framework for western Europe. An independent supranational authority to administer a common market for coal and steel was set up in 1951 by France, West Germany, Italy and three Benelux countries. The members of this semi-federal organisation, called the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) agreed to abolish all customs barriers and discriminatory practices affecting these two commodities. Patterned on a federal constitution, a supranational authority called the High Authority was set up as the permanent executive organ of the ECSC. A consultative committee, a common assembly, a council of ministers and a court of justice were also established to help govern the community. A complex voting system was put in place to ensure the parity between the two major partners, France and Germany. Although the immediate objective was to boost economic co-operation among member countries, there was one very important ulterior motive behind the formation of this club, that was to prepare the ground for an eventual political integration of these countries.

In June 1955, further impetus was given to the idea of greater economic integration. Intense negotiations among the member-countries of the ECSC resulted in the Treaty of Rome of 1957, which created the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). The objectives over a 12 year period were: to eliminate trade barriers among member countries, to build a common tariff policy against imports from the rest of the world, and to devise a common agricultural policy. Two years before the 12 year period was over, in 1967, the three existing communities, the ECSC, the EURATOM and the EEC merged to form a single entity, i.e. the European Community (EC). As a further step towards an eventual political integration, at a summit in December 1969, the leaders of the community, decided to set up a mechanism for co-operation on foreign policy matters. At the same meeting the UK, Ireland, Denmark and Norway were invited to start negotiations with a view to joining the community. In 1973, the UK, Ireland and Denmark joined the community but Norway rejected the idea. Greece became a member in 1981. Spain and Portugal joined the community in 1986, bringing the total number of members to twelve.

Although the immediate objectives continued to be economic, (the creation of a single European market and a single European currency), some French and German politicians kept nourishing the idea of a closer political integration as well. The Single European Act was introduced in December, 1985 and formally ratified by all member nations by July 1987. After much haggling among member countries, the European Union (EU) finally came into being on November 1, 1993 (the Treaty of Maastricht). In 1994, Austria, Finland and Sweden were admitted to the EU as full members bringing the number of members to 15 with a combined population of over 375 million people. Later a European Central Bank was established and all necessary steps were taken to introduce one single currency (the EURO) in 2002, although Britain, Sweden and Denmark decided to remain out of it, at least for the time being.

At present there are thirteen European countries, who are seeking the EU membership. While Turkey applied in 1987, Cyprus and Malta did so in 1990, Switzerland in 1992. Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Romania applied for membership of the EU after the collapse of the Soviet empire basically for five reasons (four of them economic and one strategic), to consolidate market economy, to make it easy for direct investment to flow from the EU countries, to entitle them to solicit EU subsidies for poorer members and to legally allow their unemployed to migrate to western Europe. In the EU, there are already hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrant workers from these countries. The fifth reason is of course, to secure military protection against an eventual Russian resurgence as a colonial power. As far as a closer political integration with the EU countries is concerned, most of these ex-Soviet bloc countries have hardly any intention of giving up their recently conquered sovereignty.

It would be difficult to make a fair assessment of what has been achieved in Nice and what has not without some background knowledge about the structure of the EU government. The highest political organ of the government is known as the Council of Europe. It is composed of either the head of state or head of government of member countries. It usually holds a summit every six months.

Then comes the Council of Ministers (the main law-making body of the EU), which is composed of a representative minister from each member nation. Its terms of reference do not permit it to take on the function of drafting legislation itself. However, it can accept, reject or even request proposals from the Commission, which is the Union's highest executive and administrative organ. Prior to 1987, the Council of Ministers had to reach decisions by unanimous votes, which virtually meant that every decision could be vetoed by any single country. This procedure seriously hampered the process of integration. The Single European Act of 1987 modified the voting system for the first time after the Treaty of Rome (1957), by introducing the Weighted majority system on certain subjects. One of the objectives of the Nice summit was to extend this voting system to fifty more areas.

The European Commission, as mentioned before is the highest executive organ of the EU government. At present it is composed of 20 members Germany, France, Italy, Britain and Spain have two commissioners each and the other ten have only one. Its future size, composition and powers turned out to be three major bones of contention at the Nice summit.

Then, of course, there are the European Parliament (a consultative body), the Court of Justice, the Economic and Social Committee etc.

Now we are in a position to understand and evaluate the principal objectives of the Nice summit. There were three main objectives: to redefine the balance of power between the big and small countries by reallocating the voting weight of member countries in the Council of Ministers, the Commission and the European Parliament; to streamline the voting system with a view to accelerating the integration process. The intention was to extend the qualified majority voting to approximately fifty new areas so that the integration process could not be held hostage by the veto power of one single member; and to prepare the ground for the entry of as many as twelve new members (all applicants so far except Turkey) into the club. Were these objectives achieved? And of course, what progress was made towards the achievement of the long-term goal of political integration?

The summit started off with a row between France and Germany. The French argued that the whole idea of European integration was first put forward by two Frenchmen in 1950 to eliminate the age-old rivalry between France and Germany by integrating them in a community and in that integration process they were to have equal status. The Germans argued that the situation had changed after the reunification of East and West Germany. Now Germany should carry much greater weight because of its huge population (82million), which is 23 million more than that of that of France (59million). After much haggling and bickering, although ostensibly the parity between France and Germany was maintained, in reality Germany came out as the winner because it will have more members in the European Parliament than any other country. In short, the balance power also shifted in favour of big countries (Germany, France, Italy, Britain and Spain) because of their larger population. Spain did particularly well. It maintained its status as one of "the big five." It retained its veto until 2006 over the provision of EU subsidies to poorer countries of which it is an important beneficiary.

The size, composition and powers of the Commission, the Parliament and other organs of government were discussed and finally agreed upon, although not quite satisfactorily. This is my impression that the powers of the Commission were reduced and the Council of Europe (in the form of Inter-governmental Meetings) came to be accepted as the EU's most effective and powerful organ.

In many respects, the summit can be considered as a success because the EU was able to put its own house in order before letting new members in. The summit however, failed to extend the qualified majority voting (a very difficult system to understand by ordinary people) to all the areas it wanted to. Only 29 new areas came under the new system leaving at least twenty others (probably the most important ones like tax and social security) outside this system. No doubt, this will slow down the integration process considerably because important issues such as immigration and agriculture have to be addressed by the EU, before membership can be extended to former communist countries of east and central Europe.

For the first time, the idea of having a two-tier membership system was accepted. A group of eight or more countries, could, if they wanted to proceed with enhanced co-operation (some even went so far as to talk of a "federation of nation states") in certain areas like taxation and social security.

Although, in principle, the idea of extending membership to the east and central European countries was welcomed, on practical terms, very little progress was made in this respect.

Again, even though the French talked about some sort of a "Euro-army," due to intense British and American pressure, it was finally accepted that NATO will remain as the bedrock of European Defence. The Charter of Rights was discussed but left without any legal validity.

So, what is the outlook for the future? Ever since the idea of economic co-operation was launched by the French in 1950, economic integration has slowly but steadily progressed. In the process, the club has picked up new members. On the whole, the integration has been a success because it has paid huge economic dividends to the participants. After 50 years of positive experience, there is no reason to think that it will stop. Both the new and old members will benefit from a gradual enlargement of the EU. Because of the acceptance of the idea of a two-tier membership system, a few members will most probably have a more integrated supranational inner club within the EU, which will remain open to other members as and when they satisfy the admission requirements. Eventually, the east and central European countries will join the EU and become more prosperous and the west Europeans will have a wider market, see the triumph of democracy and feel militarily more secure.

As far as political integration is concerned, under the present circumstances, it is highly unlikely that in the foreseeable future the member nations of the EU will surrender their sovereignty and form a politically integrated United States of Europe. I think it is relevant to quote here a resolution passed by the Polish Senate in 1998, "The European Community will continue to develop ... (However), ... the role of the supranational institutions will be limited exclusively to the execution of the policies formulated by the governments of these countries. ... the sovereign nation states will continue to be the cornerstone of social, economic and political life of the EU." Make no mistake about it. Recent polls have confirmed that most Spaniards, Danes, Britons etc., feel the same way.

Clinton's Eight Years

by Harun ur Rashid

PRESIDENT Clinton relinquished his office as the President of the US on January 20 after eight years. He was elected in 1992 defeating the incumbent President George Bush Sr and got re-elected in 1996 after defeating Republican veteran Senator Bob Dole. It was a remarkable career for him in Washington, having served as a Governor of a small southern state Arkansas.

How do you measure his eight years of presidency? One of the primary tests appears to be: Are Americans better off today than they were in 1992? The answer appears to be in the affirmative. Even his critics cannot deny this. One can say that the scorecard for President Clinton appears to be very good.

His presidency saw continuous strong economic growth, coupled with low unemployment rate. His foreign policy successes include ousting of Serb's from Kosovo, constructive engagement with China, restoration of diplomatic relations with Vietnam, encouragement of "sunshine" policy of South Korea towards North Korea and strengthening of relations with South Asian countries by visiting India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

President Clinton's presidency may be divided into two periods. First there was a two-year period of 1992-94 in which he did not perform well. His attempt to reform healthcare failed when the Republicans took control of the Congress. President Clinton learned very quickly how to manoeuvre the Washington politics from 1994 onwards, the beginning of his second period.

Furthermore as a Democrat he realised that big-spending government was not the right recipe for the US people. He veered the policies to middle ground the "third way" that is neither conservatism nor liberalism. (Tony Blair appeared to have learned from President Clinton). President Clinton made sweeping welfare reforms based on mutual obligations. That implied that there would not be any "free lunch" for the social welfare recipients who had to give in return something tangible to the community. The welfare queue shrank considerably from 14 million to about 6 million.

The Republican Congress under Mr. Newt Gingrich misread the mood of the people and made several political mistakes and President Clinton was able, like President Reagan, to bypass the Congress and approach the people directly for approval of his policies. He was successful in doing so because of the misplaced strategy pursued by the Speaker Gingrich. Ultimately Gingrich had to depart from the political scene.

President Clinton was a great communicator. He could explain most complicated facts to the people in simple words. He had uncanny ability to empathise with every section of people blacks, his panics and whites. He maintained very good working relations with minority leaders, including American Muslims. He provided opportunity for talented individuals in his administration irrespective of his/her background. The appointment of a Bangladeshi-American as Ambassador of the US to Fiji could be cited as an instance in point.

His disappointments appear to be his failure to strike a deal between Israel and the Palestinians and the shaky peace deal between the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, despite investment of his energy, political skill and time. His other failures seem to include the inaction by the US in preventing or stopping genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the stalemate situation in Iraq. In domestic politics he failed to get the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty ratified by the Republican-dominated Senate and that dented his administration's persuasive power to other countries in respect of the ratification of the Treaty.

His indiscretions with the White House internee Monica Lewinsky marred the reputation of his presidency, although he attempted to suppress the facts with his clever use of words before the public. He was a master craft of words. (for example, he smoked but never inhaled it). The American public supported him during the impeachment proceedings and until the last minute of his last day he remained an effective President.

Although the critics paint a portrait of Clinton as an "inauthentic" President and blessed by luck, it is reported that he leaves his office with the highest public approval rating of any post-war President of the US. History may judge him much better than he has been treated at present. *The Economists* magazine summed up very aptly in the following words: " Every successful politician is a Clintonian now."

What a great tribute to the departing President Clinton!

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

To the Editor ...

HC Issues Rule Nisi on PSA

Sir, High Court Division Bench issued *rule nisi* upon the government to show cause why the Public Safety Act (PSA) shall not be declared *ultra vires* of the Constitution. I would like to suggest the court should immediately be asked for an order of interlocutory injunction suspending the application of the PSA, because if the PSA is declared *ultra vires,* the individuals being oppressed in the meantime will not get adequate remedy. Moreover if this Act is declared *ultra vires* of the constitution, then this Act is void *ab initio.* Therefore, the effect of any arrest under this Act would be as if the person were arrested without any breach of law in force at the time in question, which would infringe the fundamental rights under Articles 32, 33 and 31 of the constitution. As a persuasive authority, an English case of *ex parte Factortame (No 3)* [1990] 3 WLR 818, can be used for instance of such interlocutory injunction on the statute.

Khairul Alam Choudhury
United Kingdom

Fire in Garment Factory

Sir, As reported (*The Daily Star*, January 6) there was another fire in a garment factory in Tejgaon this time it was due to trouble in a motor engine. There are garment factories scattered all over the residential areas, in and around cities. They are housed in multistoried buildings not suitable for factory work, with too many workers on each floor. This factor prevents quick evacuation by the workers, and also quick access by the fire brigade, in an emergency,

It will take time for new garment factory zones to be created at specially chosen sites, or garment villages. But in the meantime the regulatory authorities should consider limiting factories to buildings with a maximum of three floors, and to ensure that the density of personnel working on each floor is within a certain manageable limit. It has been reported that a large percentage of garment factories are lying unused and my suggestion is that some of these may be hired or subcontracted (up to the bottom three floors) temporarily by active exporters, so as to provide additional space.

Proper factories, with flat roofs should be recommended for the RMG sector. Building these factories could prove to be a good offshoot industry for local investors. Whatever happens, people's safety should not be compromised.

AMA
Dhaka.

India's Muscle

Barrister Harun ur Rashid's write-up "It's a Long Road" (*The Daily Star*, January 12) was highly readable He states that "relations with India under the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina are at a cordial level". One wonders though how the misgivings and apprehensions felt by smaller countries on the periphery of India might be laid to rest.

In a thought-provoking article written some time ago, a retired Indian official commented that India was following in the footsteps of Lord Curzon who had perceived the sub-continent as a single entity and its security interests to be determined from a single centre. It was also stated that the mandarins in South Bloc in New Delhi seem determined to re-establish Curzon's concepts to regain the heritage and privileges that were part and parcel of British imperial rule.Regional primacy has been India's clearly pursued objective and her tendency to play the role of a "gendarme" is more than evident. India's lukewarm attitude towards SAARC shows that she does not want a diplomatic coalition of small nations in South Asia to emerge and gain strength.

Far too often India flexes her muscles instead of adopting a policy of understanding toward weaker neighbours, as her attitude towards Sikkim and Bhutan demonstrates. Armed interventions in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, trade embargoes imposed on Nepal from time to time, and threats and bluster against Pakistan, have made India look like the bully on the block. There is no denying the fact that most of the small countries in South Asia have to exist uneasily with India.

Dr Subramanian Swamy, a scholar and an ex-minister recently stated that whereas "China has borders with 14 nations and, except for India, it has resolved its disputes with all, including Russia (and whereas) India has borders with six countries and excluding Bhutan, it has disputes with all five."

Robert Kader
Chittagong.