

**LDC Conference****Better deal for LDCs in rich nations' interest**

In realistic terms, the week-long UN global conference on poverty, which began yesterday in Brussels, can promise very little for the least developed countries (LDCs). Their plea for more official development aid (ODA), foreign direct investment (FDI), debt relief and market access looks unlikely to draw any significant response from the richer and developed countries. The bleak outlook is premised more on global economic reality than any prejudice induced by failures of the last two editions of the conference in 1981 and 1990. After a spectacular growth last year, the world economy this year has well and truly chilled down.

The United States and Japan, which account for almost half of world output, both appear headed for a recession. Over the past year, nearly ten trillion dollar has been wiped off global share values, equivalent to America's annual output. In such a gloom global economic environment, the richer and developed countries would obviously be more interested in getting their own houses in order, rather than extending to the LDCs more opportunities and initiatives for their socio-economic development and thereby poverty alleviation.

They should, however, try to strike a balance between the two and pay more attention to the needs of the LDCs than they have done so far. In an era of increasingly inter-connective global economy, co-existence of the extremely rich and the hardcore poor makes little sense. It is extremely difficult to believe that the 49 LDCs, which actually represent more than ten per cent of the world population, account for less than one per cent, 0.4 per cent to be precise, of global trade. Such discrepancies could be disabling for the developed nations and might well retard their own economic growth.

Lest the perennial poverty in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Caribbean and Pacific island states start eating into world economy, the affluent nations should invest more in the LDCs. More than ODA, FDI and debt relief, what the LDCs need is enhanced access of their products to the markets of the developed countries. The more the export growth, the less dependent these countries would become on aids and grants. The equation may not be as simple as it sounds. However, the rich nations can easily make it simpler.

**Encore in West Bengal**  
**Tremors at centre, Congress smiling**

THE elections to five state assemblies in India have produced stunning results. These have yielded clear-cut verdicts bearing the stamp of voter maturity and a no-nonsense decisiveness about the choices made. All this is a big gain to the Indian polity, hitherto somewhat destabilised by the knock-on effects of mixed bag results producing hung parliaments and minority governments.

In West Bengal voters have preferred stability to the hyped variety of *Bangla Bachao* (save Bengal) rhetoric, sans any concrete programme, spearheaded by a seemingly tireless campaigner of Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee. Her mercurial antecedents of quitting central ministry twice as NDA partner and aligning with the state Congress, rather late in the day, with Ajit Panja keeping out, could not have presented the visage of a viable alternative to the time-tested Left Front seeking a sixth term in office. The incumbent Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya with his simple middle class living habits and a newly grown rapport with the business community proved more than a match for Mamata. Besides, the better showing of the CPI (M) and its other left front allies in the crucial Calcutta constituencies has been put down to an underperformance by the Trinamool municipal office-bearers who had made a mess of their new-found civic responsibility to serve people.

What is significant about the post-poll reaction of the vanquished Mamata is her resignation from party leadership accepting the blame for the electoral debacle in good grace. This amounts to bowing down to the verdict of the people that she otherwise considers as the outcome of a massive rigging resorted to by the left front government.

With the Congress and its allies now headed to form governments in Kerala, Assam, the Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu, the BJP-led coalition at the centre is bound to be under pressure from as many as 10 Congress-led state governments in the Indian Union. BJP's fundamentalist card seems to have been overplayed.

**End of India's nuclear thunder****Collusion with nuclear offence****PRAFUL BIDWAI**

writes from New Delhi

**W**HAT could be a more sour irony than India's exuberant support for President Bush's "missile defence" and that too on the third anniversary of Pokharan-III?

New Delhi "out-Blair'd" even Tony Blair. It rushed to welcome Mr Bush's "Star Wars" before the US's Western allies. What it supports is not some noble peace project, but US pursuit of global domination.

This is abject surrender of Indian sovereignty. Where does it leave the best conceivable argument for the Indian Bomb? Bomb supporters had said nuclearisation would expand India's room for manoeuvre in the international arena, itself marked by great inequalities. Nuclear weapons might extract huge economic and social costs, but Nuclear India, they said, would stand up even to mighty America.

Today, that argument stands demolished. India isn't standing up, but down before the Power most responsible for skewing the world order.

Support for "Star Wars" is far, far worse than virtually anything New Delhi has done in the international arena, including signing the unequal World Trade Organisation agreement in 1995. History will judge

India harshly for reversing its role as a nuclear disarmament advocate.

Why is "missile defence" (MD) bad for global and Indian security? MD is America's strategy to acquire decisive superiority over its adversaries by shooting down their nuclear missiles. This super-sophisticated technology with capabilities in space, land, air and sea will need highly accurate radars, satellites and hundreds of "kill"

"madcap" missile defence.

What is demanded of MD is "highly effective" 360-degree 24-hour protection. This is like being asked to stay bone-dry under a tropical thunder shower with a leaky umbrella.

Unlike in conventional conflict, the advantage in MD lies overwhelmingly with the attacker. He can act any time, any place, from any angle. He can "fool" with

missiles Treaty.

In the early 1980s, President Reagan tried to undo that Treaty. Now, Mr Bush is threatening it. Both are driven by America's uniquely narrow interest in world domination. The US couldn't achieve this during the Cold War, given the USSR's strategic "parity". Today, there is no parity. The US is returning to its old hegemonic pursuit.

There is one difference, though.

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