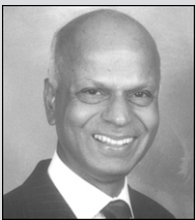


The EU presidency: Its current agenda



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

AS I wrote in one of my recent letters, Spain is on a real high after becoming the president of the European Union on January 1, 2002. The country has other reasons to feel very satisfied with its role in the EU. Besides the presidency, it also holds several other key positions in the EU government. Just to name a few: Mr. Javier Soana is the Secretary General to the Council of Europe. The president of the Council of Ministers is Mr. Josep Pique, who is currently the head of the Spanish Foreign Office. The successful introduction of the euro as from January 1, 2002 is to some extent due to the able guidance of Mr. Solbes, the EU commissioner for Economic Affairs (a kind of super-minister), who happens to be a Spaniard as well. Even though it is considered as one of "the big five" (Germany, France, Italy and Britain are the other four), Spain retains its veto until 2006 over the provision of EU subsidies to poorer members of which it is an important beneficiary. It is like having the cake and eating it too. Under these auspicious circumstances, one may well ask : What is Spain's agenda during its term of presidency?

In the aftermath of the events on September 11, 2001, Spain is trying

its best to turn its single-handed fight against ETA terrorism into a common European effort. Mr. Aznar, the Spanish prime minister wants to make it an integral part of the ESDP(European Security and Defence Policy). This, no doubt, is one of the principal objectives of the Spanish presidency. Spain also wants the EU's fledgling RRF (Rapid Reaction Force) to keep peace between the Slav and Muslim communities in Macedonia.

At present there are thirteen European countries (Turkey,

for economic survival.

In a recent speech, the Spanish prime minister , who belongs to the Spanish Conservative Party (the PP) has blamed the socialist governments in many member countries for the slow economic progress in Europe. He will no doubt use his position as the president of the EU until June 30, 2002 to introduce structural reforms with a view to deregulating markets for labour, products and financial services. But the question is: In the process of deregulation and further

Aznar, the Spanish prime minister will preside over the Council of Europe until June 30, 2002.

Then comes the Council of Ministers which is3 composed of a representative minister from each member country. Its terms of reference do not permit it to take on the responsibility of drafting legislation itself. However, it can accept, reject or even request proposals from the Commission (see next paragraph for further explanation), which is the Union's highest executive and administrative organ. Prior to 1987,

Union for a period of two years. Questions will, of course, be raised as to why the term should be limited to two and not to three or four. Again, who is going to decide who belongs to which bloc?

These and many other similar questions such as the relationship between the national parliaments and the EU, the role of the autonomous regions (the *Landers* in Germany and the *Comunidades* in Spain, which preserve the diversity of European culture),etc. have been haunting the EU for some time. Then of course, there is the eternal tug of war between the "federalists" like the Germans, who want a stronger Union (an increasingly cohesive political framework)and the "con-federalists" like the Scandinavians who want an even looser set-up. In order to address these issues a constitutional convention has already been set up under the chairmanship of Mr.Valery Giscard d'Estaing, a former French president. It is expected to submit a preliminary report in June,2002, before the term of Spanish presidency comes to an end and a full report in a year's time. The detailed procedures of the convention will be decided at the March summit of the Union in Barcelona. Spain, no doubt, will be in a position of power to influence the drafting of these procedures in a positive manner.

CHOGM venue wears a 'danger zone' look

DR RUBAIUL MURSHED
writes from Australia

THERE will be an extraordinary security blanket in place for next month's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) at Cooloom in the sunshine coast of Queensland State. The first phase of security crackdown began for CHOGM on Monday (February 25) morning, in preparation for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. Australian CHOGM spokesman Andrew Reynolds says the entire area will be swept from top to bottom to eliminate any security threats to the meeting of world leaders. He said, "This is the first part of a security procedure which will see all of the buildings and vehicles searched that are remaining within both venues and it is really to ensure that security is as tight as it possibly can be for CHOGM."

Queen Elizabeth arrived in Adelaide on February 27 before travelling to Cooloom. The Queen goes ahead with her planned visit to Australia in spite of Princes Marga-

ret's death. Princes Margaret, 71, the Queen's only sibling, died in the 2nd week of this month in her sleep in London. Queen's visit was postponed from last October when CHOGM was cancelled in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the United States.

The Defence Minister of Australia, Senator Robert Hill, says that 2,400 defence force personnel will provide security for the meeting, with FA-18 aircraft patrolling the skies. These fighters will be patrolling the CHOGM site with the capability to shoot down aircraft that pose a threat. The whole place will be considered as a 'Danger Zone' till March 6.

Senator Hill says this danger zone will also be in place within a 25 nautical mile radius of Maroochydore Airport. "Aviators should understand that there is the chance of fast jets operating in that area and it's therefore obviously better if they seek to avoid that danger zone," he said.

CHOGM will be the largest meeting of world leaders Australia has seen for some time. Australia is the sixth largest country in the world. It is 50 per cent larger than Europe,

but has the lowest population density in the world – only two people per square kilometre. The Kangaroo is unique to Australia like its World Champion Cricket team. Interestingly, there are more kangaroos in Australia now than when Australia was first settled – estimates suggest around 40 million.

Overcrowded prisons in England and disruption caused by the American Revolution were two key reasons for the first shipment of convicts to this land. It was the explorer and botanist Joseph Banks who, in 1779, suggested that New South Wales (most populous state of Australia at this moment) would be a fine site for a penal colony!

For more than 50,000 thousand years, Australia's Aboriginal people have lived and thrived in Australia's unique and challenging natural environment. Australia's rich vegetation and native wildlife helped them establish their presence on the land. Today it is believed the Aboriginals are the world's oldest civilisation.

LETTER FROM EUROPE

One of the first things Spain wants to change is the term (now only six months) and the composition of the rotating presidency. Mr. Solana, the Secretary General has already put forward a proposal according to which blocs of three or more countries (depending on their geo-political affiliations) would preside over the affairs of the Union for a period of two years. Questions will, of course, be raised as to why the term should be limited to two and not to three or four. Again, who is going to decide who belongs to which bloc?

Cyprus, Malta, Switzerland, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Romania), who are seeking EU membership. One of the top priorities of the Spanish presidency is to prepare the ground for the gradual entry of these new members.

Because of close ethnic , cultural and economic links, the current crisis in Argentina has touched an emotional chord in the Spanish mind. The Spanish government has already expressed its willingness to start negotiations between the EU and Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) with a view to helping Argentina in its struggle

liberalisation of the market economy, are the Europeans willing to sacrifice their much-cherished welfare state, which many consider as their true mark of identity?

In foreign affairs, Spain will continue to use its privileged position as the EU president to uphold the legality of the Palestinian Authority and the position of its chairman, Yasser Arafat and temper American unilateralism in this respect. In these difficult times, when everybody in the Western world seems to have abandoned the Palestinians, there are signs of growing support in the EU (particularly so in Spain) for the creation of an independent and viable (not *Bantustans*) state for the Palestinians. Spain can rightfully claim some credit for this shift in the European public opinion.

Under the current constitution of the EU, the rotating president has undoubtedly the right to set his agenda. But what are his chances of success, particularly in controversial areas such as increasing the number of members from 15 to 28, the charter of competencies, the role of national parliaments etc.?

It would be difficult to answer this question properly without a background knowledge of the structure of the EU government, which, to put it mildly, is quite cumbersome. 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. The presidency is occupied by member countries on a rotating basis for a term of six months. The Council usually holds a summit every six months. (Next one will be held in March in Barcelona). After the Nice Summit – held in December, 2000 – the Council has come to be recognised as the EU's most effective and powerful body. Mr. Jose Maria

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 European 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 of voting on certain subjects. The Nice Summit of 2000 extended this voting system to 29 other areas. Behind-the-scene negotiations are continuing to extend this system to more areas.

As mentioned before, the European Commission is the highest executive organ of the EU government. At present, it is composed of 20 full-time members, who try to function as super-ministers of the EU government but not always with great success. For example, even a proposed reprimand to the German and Portuguese governments from the European Commission for their excessive budget deficits (which everybody understands is bad for the health of the much-heralded common currency, the euro) is likely to be rejected by these governments unless some face-saving formula is found at the last moment.

Given these serious practical limitations and the diffuse and complicated way the decisions are reached in the EU government, it is highly doubtful that the Spanish presidency will achieve all its objectives unless the EU constitution is reformed and the structure of the EU government streamlined.

Actually, one of the first things Spain wants to change is the term (now only six months) and the composition of the rotating presidency. Mr. Solana, the Secretary General has already put forward a proposal according to which blocs of three or more countries (depending on their geo-political affiliations) would preside over the affairs of the