

JAPAN

Football and defense agency

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JAPAN is still in the mood of celebration after the stunning performance of country's football team in the preliminary round of World Cup 2002. Although South Korea and Japan both became champions in their respective groups in the first round of the competition, which no doubt is a rare achievement for Asian football, a few hours difference in time paved the way for Japan to become the first Asian country to achieve that excellence. Nationwide celebration and a festive mood that followed the success have overshadowed most of the other important developments in country's political, economic or social fields at least for the time being. But this by no way means everything for Japan is going as perfectly as in football fields.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is increasingly coming under attack from the opposition camp at the Diet on a number of issues considered vital for the country. A bad remark on Japan's nuclear policy by a close aide of the prime minister had expanded the range of that criticism beyond the territorial boundaries of Japan. Although subsequent back tracking by the concerned influential politician and repeated statements from the government as well as the prime minister himself somehow salvaged the situation and managed to find a face saving solution for Tokyo, not all is running that favorably in other fronts.

The Japanese government has been seen in recent days falling into its own trap of making the workings of the administration more transparent. Under the provisions of the disclosure of information law, Japanese citizens are allowed to approach any government office with the request of

providing them elaborate official information on issues that they would like to know more in detail. While government agencies are legally entitled to withhold any such request from the viewpoint that a disclosure might harm national security, they are however not entitled to do so on the basis of an individual's occupation or ideological belief. This also means that a person approaching any public office for information on the functioning of the government should not be in anyway seen as someone suspicious of having ulterior motive of harming state interest. But it has been disclosed recently that Japan's defense agency was involved for quite sometime in making background checks of citizens requesting information from the agency. This practice of keeping an eye on citizens has placed the agency sharply in a contrasting position from the concept of a government open to public, the idea that constitutes the core of the disclosure of information law.

The scandal first came into light on May 28, when the news media reported that a Maritime Self-Defense Force lieutenant commander had compiled a list based on the background checks of citizens approaching the agency for disclosure of information. It was later revealed that the ground and air forces, as well as agency's central information office also had similar lists, which they posted on their local area network computer system. All those lists included names, occupations and few other personal details of information seekers that government offices are not required to collect and file under the provisions of information disclosure law.

The incident provided new ground for the opposition to intensify its criticism of the government and they claimed that the issue provides further proof of the Koizumi administration's dishonesty in its relation to citizens of

Japan. Despite initially rejecting claims that the incident appears as a proof of administration's involvement in systematic violation of fundamental rights of citizens, the government was subsequently compelled to conduct its own investigation on the allegation and eventually come up with a report admitting that the background checks conducted by a Maritime Self Defense Force officer was illegal. The Director General of the defense agency, Gen Nakatani, publicly apologized for the misconduct of defense forces officials. The report also held the agency responsible for loss of public trust on the defense agency and for having negative impact on administration's involvement in the protection of individual information.

Although the agency claims that the officials involved in making the list had not broken the law as the lists used not full names of individuals but only initials of those who had requested information, it is still possible to determine exactly from the compiled information identities of each and every individual and who asked for what. The reason or real motive behind keeping such lists has not been made clear. The officials involved in preparing such lists might have sought to help agency's central investigation office, which deals with crimes targeted against Japan's self-defense forces. Some agency officials expressed concern that spies and subversive elements might seek information from the agency using the protection of law. But in Japan, classified information concerning national security is not subject to disclosure, and also the information disclosure system itself is open to all who seek information from government agencies.

As the government eventually had to move swiftly to initiate investigation under pressure from opposition parties, it was further revealed that two air defense force officials had shared a list of information seekers' personal

details with an intelligence unit of the self defense forces on 15 separate occasions from the beginning of last year. This had prompted the opposition to exert further pressure on the government by declaring that the ruling coalition was to face an opposition boycott of Diet deliberations until an explanation on the whole issue was forthcoming. Opposition parties now want an independent investigation, which they claim is essential to protect democracy.

Many in Japan are now expressing concern that the recent incidents of keeping tracks of information seekers would most likely prompt people not to approach the defense agency for any information. This might in turn jeopardize the whole information disclosure system, which is a constitutional way for the public to deal with the government. Scandals and time constraints have already killed Koizumi's main priority in the current Diet session. The government and ruling coalition have given up on passing a package of bills to prepare the country for a possible foreign attack. Any failure on part of the government to address the issue of defense agency's mishandling of citizens' requests for information might further complicate the whole situation. The government and ruling coalition is also aware of such an outcome and as a result the defense agency was prompted to take swift action against those held responsible for the incident. It has been disclosed recently that the agency plans to impose pay cuts on officials involved in the scandal. But as the punishment is considered too light for a serious offence, many see the measure as being mere eyewash to convince people that the administration is taking the issue seriously. Reality, though, doesn't suggest anything closer to that.

THAILAND-MYANMAR

Spectre from the past

Thailand and Myanmar may belong to a broader group like ASEAN, but their historical animosity remains as deep and bitter as ever, writes Ekram Kabir, recently in Bangkok.

THE movement of Thai soldiers along the Myanmar border last month provoked the latest eruption of tension between Bangkok and Yangon. The troops were ostensibly there for a training exercise, but military sources quoted in the Thai press said they were planning a strike on a notorious druglord operating in the Golden Triangle.

Myanmar reacted angrily and their delicate relations plummeted once again. Newspapers in both countries have been fighting a war of words and Myanmar expelled hundreds of Thai workers and banned advertisements for Thai products.

Bangkok also came heavily on the Yangon's ruling regime. It said ethnic armies allied to the Yangon ruling elite produce most of the methamphetamine pills which Thai authorities claimed are flooding into Thailand.

The row is believed to be a setback for the policy of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who has been trying to improve relations with Myanmar through "personal diplomacy". Bangkok tried to defuse tensions by sending videotapes of two popular Thai soap operas to Yangon, but the gesture did little to soothe the ongoing tempers. Senior Myanmar officials have publicly come heavily on Thailand, announcing last month

that a white elephant with pearl-coloured eyes had been found in the west of the country. The announcement was timed to annoy the Thais.

Tensions between Thailand and Myanmar - formerly known as Siam and Burma respectively - have their roots in hundreds of years of conflict and distrust. Three centuries have passed, but the hostility has not died.

Recently, Myanmar's state-run media denounced Thailand after a series of border clashes, calling the latter "Yodaya" - a phrase which left many observers wondering. However, it turned out the word was a corruption of the name of the city of Ayutthaya - the glittering capital of Thailand which was destroyed in 1767 by an invading army from Myanmar. The army left Ayutthaya in ruins and carried off 90 per cent of its inhabitants. The destruction of Ayutthaya, where thousands of temples and Buddha images were allegedly taken apart by Burmese, still rankles the Thais.

Again, a previous battle between the two countries, in 1549, also occasionally comes back to haunt bilateral relations. Last year, a blockbuster Thai movie dramatised the exploits of *Queen Suriyothai*, who was killed as she rode an elephant against an invading Burmese army. The movie was the most successful

ever made in Thailand and has been re-edited by Francis Ford Coppola for an international audience. Myanmar's government, however, was not amused, and Myanmar newspapers criticised the film.

There are more reasons of the Thailand-Myanmar border to be a hotspot. Drug trafficking, territorial disputes and refugees problems that are the main contentions between the two countries.

Drug trafficking across the border has reportedly become one of the primary concerns for government in Bangkok. While opium and heroin from the Golden Triangle area spanning Laos, Thailand and Myanmar have long been a concern for ASEAN and the United States, the Thai government is especially concerned with the more recent trafficking in methamphetamines. The Thai press has made numerous references to an epidemic of methamphetamine addiction throughout the country, a phenomenon that has led the public and military to call for increased interdiction.

The movement of refugees across the border has also contributed to bilateral tensions. Refugees come from Myanmar to Thailand to seek employment and escape fighting among the various insurgent groups. The Thai government expelled many of its

migrant workers and refugees in the wake of the 1997 economic crash, but with limited success. Clashes between the Myanmar military and the Karen ethnic minority in 2000 produced periodic flows of refugees into Thailand, further exacerbating the situation.

Moreover, lingering territorial disputes are also the reasons of bitterness between the two countries. Tension could easily escalate from these territorial disputes as less than 3 per cent of the border has been demarcated. Myanmar's building of embankments on the Moei River and construction of heroin from the Golden Triangle area have resulted in protests by the governments of both countries. Additionally, Yangon has accused the Thai military of aiding the Karen National Union in assaults on government troops. There are also disputes over territorial waters on the seas off Thailand. In one incident in January 1999, the Myanmar government accused a Thai naval vessel of firing at one of its naval ships.

Now, these tensions could escalate said one Thai analyst - into regional problems for two reasons. First, ASEAN - the Association for South East Asian Nations - has placed these issues on its agenda. For example, it has accelerated the deadline for establishing a drug-free area from 2020

to 2015. Second, Thailand is especially concerned about these issues and has demonstrated a propensity to involve ASEAN in matters that had previously been off-limits.

Disputes between older members of the Southeast Asian regional bloc, such as Singapore and Malaysia, would not cause so much concern, say the ASEAN officials. There may be areas of disagreement between Singapore and Malaysia, but both the countries are long-time members of ASEAN, with "stable leaders" who have a track record of working out their differences peacefully. But the situation between Bangkok and Yangon, they consider, is different.

Thailand is one of the founding members of ASEAN, while Myanmar is a newly admitted one, joining in 1997. But the status of Myanmar has not changed significantly since then. Myanmar expresses its desire to keep its domestic issues off the table, seeking to benefit economically from ASEAN membership but, say observers, that it is reluctant to make any significant concessions in the area of political reform. Thailand, on the other hand, has been promoting various positive political issues.

Therefore, the uneasy and tense relation between Thailand

and Myanmar could upset the overall stability of ASEAN and hamper its ability to pursue more important regional goals. If the problems are allowed to escalate, it is the future of the ASEAN the organisation to promote regional cooperation will be jeopardised.

Both Myanmar and Thailand need to remember that they are close neighbours sharing not only a long border of over 1300 miles, but more importantly, they share the same religious faith, and cul-

tures born of that religion. Their two peoples resemble each other in looks and manner. It can therefore be said that Myanmar and Thailand also belong to the same racial regional family.

The best way out of their troubled ties is for the two parties, to give a little, take a little and talk things over and cool things down to allow the sense of kinship to reassert itself to be together. Only then both side of the border will feel the fruits of progress and peace.

Unfortunately, if we cut to the heart of their relations, Thai-Myanmar relations are like those between Greece and Turkey, or India and Pakistan. The two countries may belong to a broader group like the EU or SAARC, or in this case ASEAN, but their historical animosity remains as deep and bitter as ever.

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CHINA

More jobless than statistics reveal

The protests highlighted an acute social dilemma. While state companies have heeded government calls to raise efficiency by laying off redundant workers, authorities have made little headway in weaving a social safety net for pensioners and the unemployed.

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A SEMI-OFFICIAL study initiated by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has challenged the government's statistics on the jobless rate in the country, sounding an alarm just months before a sensitive transition of China's political leadership is scheduled to take place.

The study, conducted by a team

of 50 academy researchers and government experts, concludes that China's real unemployment rate is double the official rate of 3.6 percent, and that it has reached a critical level, threatening the country's social stability.

In the "Green Book on China's Population and Labor" unveiled this week, the authors estimate that China's actual jobless rate to be 7 percent, and likely to worsen sharply in the next two years as it

faces heightened competition following its World Trade Organization entry at the beginning of the year.

Last week, China again put the number of registered urban unemployed at 6.8 million, which is about 3.6 percent of the urban working population. However, this is regarded as a gross underestimation of the real situation. The figure excludes the millions who have migrated from

rural areas, plus those in urban areas who have not registered with the authorities, analysts say.

The prospect of angry urban workers joining forces with the discontented peasantry has always troubled Chinese leaders. An estimated 120 million people live below the poverty line and about another 150 million migrant workers can only find seasonal employment.

"We think government officials are also working on a more accurate data about China's unemployment situation but their findings haven't been made public," Mo Rong, one of the authors of the report and director of the Institute for Labor Science under the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, told the Southern Weekend weekly.

While talk of high jobless rates has always been a sensitive topic, with the communist country undergoing painful market reforms, the new estimates come on the heels of large labor protests in China's industrial rust belt and just months before a key Communist Party gathering convenes.

The party is due to elect a new team of leaders at its 16th congress this fall. The new leadership, the so-called "fourth generation" of leaders, is likely to comprise technocrats such as current Vice President Hu Jintao and Vice Prime Minister Wen Jiabao.

But smooth political transition has been threatened by a spate of mass labor protests in China's northeast where tens of thousands of laid-off workers from state firms protested against insufficient severance payouts. Protests erupted in March in Liaoyang, Liaoning province, and the oil town of Daqing in Heilongjiang province and went on for more than five weeks - the longest-running demonstrations mounted by workers in China's communist era.

The protests highlighted an acute social dilemma. While state companies have heeded govern-

ment calls to raise efficiency by laying off redundant workers, authorities have made little headway in weaving a social safety net for pensioners and the unemployed. In recent months, protests by disgruntled laid-off or unpaid workers have become common all over the country. While the urban economy in the coastal areas is robust and growing, huge parts of the countryside where 900 million people live have stagnated. Rural incomes have not increased, and in many cases have declined, over the past five years.

Independent economists have warned that more than a third of China's urban population of 400 million could be affected by government efforts to cut back the workforce as part of economic restructuring.

One of the most worrying signs, according to the researchers, is the rising ratio of jobless youths among the people out of work. The number of young unemployed has risen sharply from 50 to 70 percent over the past two years, the survey found out. Jobless workers below the age of 35 now account for 70 percent of the total, compared with less than 50 percent two years ago. "The younger age of the jobless serves as a major proof that the country is facing serious labor oversupply," the state media quoted Mo Rong as saying.

Another indication of the severity of the problem is the fact that only 70 percent can now find jobs after graduating, in stark contrast with an almost 100 percent record during the time of the strictly planned economy in the 1960s. Cai Fang, director of the Institute for Population and Economics of Labor under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, criticized the government for withholding the truth about the magnitude of the problem. "By not making the unemployment figures public, the authorities create a lot of room for speculation," he said in an interview with Southern Weekend.

Courtesy: Inter Press Service.