

JAPAN

A new UN Rep urges to help the poor

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

THE term Least Developed Countries (LDCs) was first used in the vocabulary of international diplomacy in 1971, when for the first time a group of developing nations were singled out as being most vulnerable among the lot. The idea behind coining of the term was to make sure that a significant portion of foreign aid provided by donor nations were channeled to those countries where people were devoid of the benefit of development initiatives being pursued by their respective governments. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) played a crucial role in popularizing the concept of LDCs in that early stage. But if the main purpose of such an initiative was to improve the situation of the poorest of the poor in this world, it can be easily said that the idea miserably failed to reach that desired goal. For in 1971 where there were only 21 countries falling into the category of LDCs, today the list has been expanded to accommodate 49 nations. As a result, numerous development initiatives during the past quarter century not only saw the situation of LDCs gradually being deteriorated, but also witnessed the plague of poverty spreading its wings to countries that once were considered to be relatively well off.

This dilemma of development initiative somehow compelled the United Nations to give serious thought about the issue and the eventual outcome was the convening of periodic international conferences to address the problems being faced by countries falling increasingly behind in all respect. Till today three UN conferences on Least Developed Countries were convened during the past two decades to recommend appropriate measures for helping those countries overcome obstacles in their development process. The last of those conferences was held in Brussels last year, which recommended that the United Nations should set up a special office to coordinate the initia-

tives being taken by different bodies and entities in the process of helping the LDCs. Subsequently the General Assembly adopted a resolution last December approving the structure of the new office that later came to be known as the Office of the United Nations High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

If LDCs are facing problems of structural nature related directly to the economic situation of countries belonging to the grouping, the problems being faced by landlocked and small-island developing nations in that case can be termed more as of geographic nature linked to their locations and surroundings. But even so, the burden of being situated at inconvenient locations has created problems that are posing serious threat to the development initiatives of those countries and the nature of such problems are similar to those being faced by LDCs. Taking into consideration this reality, the new UN office was given the combined responsibility of serving the development interest of those second group of nations as well. As a result the Office of the United Nations High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing Nations has the mandate to work for well over 100 independent states, by far the largest within the UN groupings.

At the onset of a new millennium, an estimated 1.2 billion people, or roughly a little less than one in every five now live in absolute poverty and are failed to meet the demands of their basic human needs. As the predominant majority of such vulnerable groups of people live in LDCs or in landlocked or small island developing countries, the new UN office has indeed the responsibility to address problems for which there is no easy solution on sight. The UN Secretary General, Kofi Anan, was probably aware of such difficulties when he made the choice of nominating the celebrated Bangladeshi

diplomat, Anwarul Karim Chowdhury, to head the new office with the rank of Under Secretary General of the world body. As the Permanent Representative of Bangladesh at the UN until the middle of last year, Anwarul Karim Chowdhury became a well known and much liked personality in world diplomatic circle for his able handling of the presidency of the UN Security Council as well as other important matters.

Mr. Chowdhury was designated United Nations High Representative in March this year and took up his new assignment a month later. He is now busy setting up his new office at the UN headquarters, as well as briefing the main donors about the importance of helping the backward nations considered vulnerable from different angles. As part of that PR effort on behalf of the new UN office, the United Nations University in Tokyo organized a public lecture earlier this week by the United Nations High Representative, where Mr. Chowdhury described the plight of LDCs in general and role of his office in helping those nations finding a sustainable solution to numerous problems being faced by them. The aim of the lecture was to enhance public awareness in Japan on the work of the United Nations in addressing the challenges being faced by the LDCs.

The Brussels Program of Action approved by the Third UN Conference on Least Developed Countries in 2001 came up with a definite suggestion to overcome the absence of a mechanism to follow the outcome of numerous meetings and conferences that come up regularly with suggestions and recommendations to improve the situation of backward nations. The Brussels resolution also clearly set out goals towards that end, the message of which the UN office is now trying spread around the world with the aim of ensuring a proper implementation of the action plan.

The new UN High Representative reminded the Japanese audience of the numeric target of 0.2 percent of advanced nations' GNP to be designated as ODA for

the least developed countries. Japan is lagging far behind in this respect as only 16.7 percent of Tokyo's ODA went to LDCs in last fiscal year. And if we take into account the fact that country's total ODA budget in 2001 fiscal amounted to a mere 0.27 percent of country's GNP, the target for LDCs might sound a far cry.

The UN High Representative's public lecture was also a timely one from other considerations too. Drastic cuts in Japan's ODA budget has already displaced Tokyo from the position of the leading donor and a proposed further cut for the next fiscal year might pose serious threat in the process of generating much needed funding for the backward nations. Japan has never been particularly keen on providing generous assistance to LDCs. Much of Tokyo's help traditionally went to mid-income developing nations with which Japan has significant business ties. Hence, the new UN office might stand as a moral reminder that the poorest of the poor in the world probably deserve more than 16 percent of Japan's ODA share.

The lecture was followed by a lively question-answer session where the issue of opting out by any of the 49 countries from the list of LDCs was also raised. The UN High Representative made it clear that any country has the right to opt out from the list. But he also didn't forget to remind the audience that opting out would not necessarily mean an automatic graduation from the grouping or elevation of country's economic status. Any country willing to follow that path might end up to be a great loser, as the political decision to that extent would only deprive the nation of numerous lucrative benefits that the Brussels Program of Action and other recommendations offer. May be our finance minister should take note of this small fact.

THAILAND

Gunning for cops

Police in southern Thailand are being hunted and killed and nobody knows who's pulling the trigger. Robert Horn reports from Narathiwat

NO one knows for sure who is to blame for the murders. But even by the bloody standards of Thailand's troubled Muslim south, it's the worst wave of violence in decades. Police stations, train stations, hotels and government offices have all been bombed lately. Since January alone, 17 policemen have been murdered, and a bounty of 200,000 baht (\$5,000) has been offered by a shady Muslim group to encourage further cop killings. And nobody knows why. "It's creepy," says Sergeant Marohsae Moohanon of Sungai Padi Station near Thailand's border with Malaysia. Earlier this month, two members of his patrol were shot dead in an ambush just outside town. One minute, he and his partners were cruising on motorcycles toward an elementary school; the next, they were getting fired at by strangers who then vanished into the forest like ghosts. Now, at the once languid station where patrolmen used to doze in the midday heat, officers cradle their assault rifles and eye every visitor with tense suspicion. "We're all pretty spooked," says Marohsae.

In Thailand that's a twist. Throughout the country, and particularly in remote and rural areas, it's the police who have traditionally inspired fear. While there are plenty of honest cops, many others are corrupt and abusive. Misuse of deadly force is so brazen that officers once allegedly shot dead six drug dealers who had already surrendered and were handcuffed. Television cameras showed them

being marched into a shack, six shots were heard, then six bodies wrapped in white sheets were carried out. But here in the deep south, it's the police who are afraid. Among the Malay Muslims of Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, Songkhla and Satun provinces, hatred of the mostly Buddhist police runs deepstemming from what Muslims contend are decades of religiously motivated violence and discrimination. "They used to beat us at will. People disappeared every day," claims Yuso Pakistan, a former Muslim separatist. Locals also claim that police are deeply enmeshed in much of the illegal business that plagues the area. Says Pattani lawmaker Vairoj Phipipakdee: "Sadly, there is some quiet satisfaction the police are getting killed."

The question is: Who is killing them? As the deaths began to mount, the government at first blamed Muslim separatists. A group calling itself the Pattani Islam Mujahadeen grabbed attention by posting the bounty for cop killings. But the Mujahadeen have never made any political demands, and some doubt they even exist. Vairoj says they do, and claims he made contact with them in the jungle. A few, he says, have received combat training in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Dangerous as this group may be, however, almost no one believes there are enough Mujahadeen in Thailand to have wreaked all this mayhem.

In the poor and desolate Muslim provinces of the south, violence is a hallowed tradition. The thick forests

and craggy hills of this region provide an ideal haven and hideout for outlaw gangs that run contraband, sell drugs and weapons, or extort protection money. But it's not just the impenetrable terrain that shields the bandits, says Perayot Rahimula, a political scientist at Prince of Songkhla University. Both Perayot and Vairoj say what most locals are afraid to: the outlaws are controlled and protected by corrupt local politicians, rogue soldiers and the police. As disputes over these illicit businesses flare up, so do the killings. So far, most of those who have been killed have either been cops or civil servants.

Locals are wary of getting caught in the cross fire. By dusk, streets are deserted and homes and shops shuttered in many small towns. "Frankly, we're too afraid to go out at night," says Waehamad Ismail, a farmer who lives on the edge of Sungai Padi. The police are even more nervous. To calm his officers, National Police Chief Sant Saturanon headed south last week to hand out 1,500 bulletproof vests. And if Kevlar doesn't work, maybe magic will. The chief brought along a revered Buddhist monk to distribute sacred, protective amulets.

Some cops have applied for transfers, anxious to be posted anywhere except the five provinces. But the south is Sergeant Marohsae's home, and he won't leave. "Of course we're scared," he admits. But he vows: "We will fight back. We have no other choice." If only he knew whom to fight.

Courtesy: Time.com

THE SPRATLYS

No end of the dispute in sight

ALAN BOYD

IMPROVING relations between Southeast Asia and China have fueled expectations of a breakthrough in their decades-old standoff over the contested Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

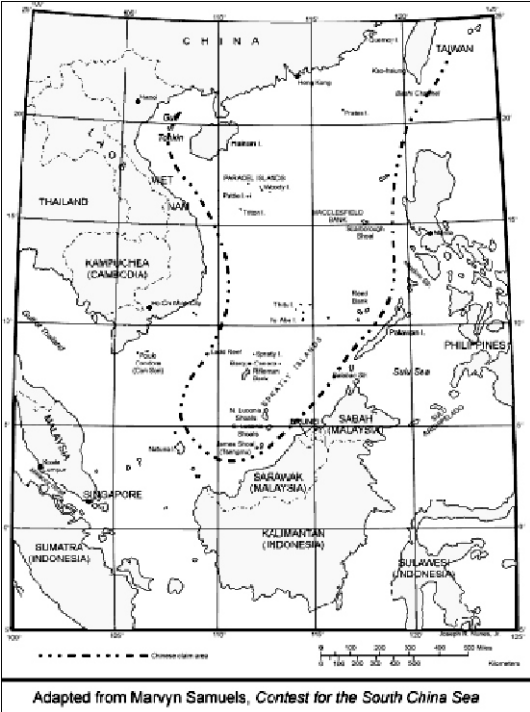
But this is unlikely to come through the latest initiative by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for a code of conduct on the peaceful use of the scattered atolls. Rather, it appears that the claimants will gradually move toward a joint exploration accord that - if nothing else - will establish whether the area really contains commercial oil deposits and is worth fighting over.

Meeting in Brunei, ASEAN foreign ministers have given backing to Malaysia's initiative for an accord limiting military and economic activities, despite the failure of a similar bid three years ago. China rejected the earlier framework, brokered by the Philippines, because it sought to include the nearby Paracels, which it seized in 1974 and has consistently declined to put on the negotiating table.

A deeper issue, running through the history of informal discussions on the Spratlys, was China's refusal to deal with any pact that originated from ASEAN rather than the individual claimants. Vietnam and Taiwan want the entire Spratly and Paracel groups, as does China. Malaysia claims three islands in the continental shelf of the Spratlys. The Philippines says it owns eight Spratly islands under the collective name of Kalayaan. And Brunei claims part of the South China Sea, though not the islands themselves.

Recognizing the complexity of the conflicting claims, ASEAN is now seeking a broader consensus on tension reductions while deleting any mention of individual islands. The outcome will be a document worded so vaguely that it can only benefit China, which continues quietly to consolidate its presence in the area by exploiting ASEAN's indecision.

In rejecting multilateral negotiations on the sovereignty of the islands, or the intervention of outside medi-



ators, Beijing has succeeded in isolating weaker claimants such as the Philippines. At the same time, Malaysia and Vietnam have helped consolidate the Chinese position by rejecting a negotiating role for the US and pursuing their own development agendas for the islands.

Yet the pressure is on both ASEAN and China to find a resolution, as the terrorism scare and economic slowdown have made the region acutely aware of its vulnerability to disruptions in oil shipments. Lying at the cross-

roads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the sea lane is the second-busiest in the world and accounts for more than 50 percent of all global supertanker traffic.

Oil consumption by developing Asian countries, including the ASEAN members and China, is expected to rise by 4 percent annually during the next two decades, with half of the total volume being consumed by the burgeoning Chinese population. The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates that oil demand will reach 25 million barrels a day - more than double current consumption levels - in 2020 if this growth rate is maintained.

Offshore oil deposits in the South China Sea may help break the over-reliance on Middle East supplies, but the sovereignty issue has stopped anybody from finding out. So far the evidence seems thin. Proven reserves, mostly found in coastal areas, amount to only 7.5 billion barrels, which will mostly be depleted within 15 years unless new discoveries are made.

Studies by the US Geological Survey in 1993-94, when some of the Spratlys were under the control of South Vietnam, suggest there may be only 1 billion to 2 billion barrels in the Spratlys, well below China's estimate of 100 billion barrels. Combined resources in the offshore basins of the South China Sea were calculated at 28 billion barrels: China believes they contain as much as 213 billion barrels, of which 10-20 percent might be exploitable.

Drillings on the southern boundary indicate that the sea is more likely to contain commercial quantities of natural gas, widely viewed as the region's most promising future energy source. But again, there is no corroborative evidence for China's production estimate of 500 trillion cubic feet of gas a year. European and US studies indicate it might not exceed 0.5 tcf.

So why the intensity of Chinese efforts to control 200 rocky outcrops and submerged islets in the middle of a busy waterway that nobody wanted prior to the late 1980s?

An expanded military presence, including a permanent garrison of several thousands troops on six contested islands, emplacements of naval guns and anti-

aircraft batteries, indicates just how seriously China rates the area.

According to the US Defense Department, Mischief Reef in the Spratlys is being developed as the command headquarters and control facility for air and naval forces in China's southern waters. A 1999 Pentagon report, angrily rejected by Beijing, concluded that the base would be used as a spearhead for realizing "its objective to be a regional and eventually a global power".

One reason China is unwilling to test the sovereignty question is because its case is based essentially on historic access rights that might not stand up to a searching legal challenge. Under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which China ratified in 1996, signatories are permitted to establish territorial boundaries up to 12 nautical miles offshore and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of a further 200 miles.

Both of the Chinese parameters are well short of the Spratlys; in fact, the Chinese claims intrude deep inside the EEZs of the Philippines and Vietnam, which are also signatories to the UN convention.

However, there is one potential loophole that might support any bid by China to set aside sovereignty in favor of joint exploration: Article 121 of the convention states that rocks unable to sustain human habitation or economic life of their own have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf. All of the claimants have sought to skirt the ruling by building stilt communities over the rocks, with Malaysia even shipping out tons of soil so it could build a hotel on one tiny islet.

But some diplomats contend that these efforts do not constitute "sustainability" in the spirit of the convention, and believe that the area might be legally declared uninhabitable if the issue were forced.

Recent overtures from Beijing suggest that it may be warming to a collective solution - even one from ASEAN - if this would offer wider economic gains.

Courtesy: Asia Times Online