

EU takes a historic step



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

THE EU Summit in Copenhagen, capital of Denmark, decided on 13 December to sit with Turkey in December 2004 with a view to start negotiations in July 2005 for her membership of this powerful multinational body. Turkey has obtained this result through a fierce struggle, when the entire nation has been mobilized for months.

In this gigantic effort every sector of the population, the political leadership, the civil society, business organisations of all varieties have joined hands. Leaders have criss crossed the capitals of Europe, the newly elected leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) Recep Tayyip Erdogan has visited all European capitals, often two in one day, met top leaders and has argued forcefully for a date for start of negotiations. Lately he visited President George Bush in the White House and although for the time being he is not more than the elected President of his AKP party has received red carpet treatment everywhere. President Bush is reported to have lobbied with the EU leaders and there have been reports of resentment in EU circles.

Earlier, in a crucial meeting between the two heavyweights of the EU, President Jacques Chirac of France and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany, it was decided that Turkey should start negotiations in July 2005. The

German Chancellor made the unusual move of inviting the Turkish head of a tourism company working in Germany to plead the case of Turkey with the President of France.

Turkey has been waiting at the EU door for four decades. She first applied for membership shortly after its setting up in 1959 and has pursued systematically her goal of membership. She had to cross numerous hurdles most important of which being 'she will be the first

eagerness for Turkish membership since she badly needs a settlement of the divided island -- Cyprus. As the bargaining over Turkish membership gathered momentum, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan presented a settlement plan for Cyprus. UN has been fully engaged in the Cyprus dispute since Turkish troops occupied one third of the island in 1974. UN Cyprus plan is the bait that the EU has fully utilised to persuade Turkey to come on

within its fold. Almost all of them belong to the former Soviet bloc minus Cyprus and Malta. This is the largest expansion of EU and will now become an organisation of 25 members in place of present 15. The inclusion of Southern Cyprus, inhabited by people of Greek descent, creates the dangerous precedent of membership of a divided country, which will have veto against Turkey, for example. The top leadership of EU must have taken adequate safeguards against such a prickly possibility.

EU appears unwieldy. It is a great economic power and the largest market of the world. What it lacks, however, is political muscle, thus on the wide stage it does not play the kind of role that it is destined.

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THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

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Muslim member' of this 'Christian club'. She crossed her final hurdle in Helsinki Summit in 1999 when she was accepted as a suitable candidate for membership.

Turkey has campaigned energetically ever since for obtaining a date for start of negotiations. Over the two days (11-12 Dec) when Prime Minister Abdullah Gul and future Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan pulled out all stops in a determined campaign to obtain the date of start of negotiations to 2003 rather than 2005, the greatest stumbling block appeared to be the Cyprus dispute between Turkey and Greece. Greece is a EU member since 1981 and each EU member has a veto. Greece has shown great

board of the EU. Efforts are continuing; indeed the situation has taken such a dramatic turn that the Turks of the northern part of Cyprus held the other day a spontaneous meeting in their capital Lefkosha and denounced their leader Rauf Denktaş, recuperating in Ankara from heart surgery.

There will be disappointment in Turkey because they have failed to obtain 2003 as the start of negotiation date. Indeed they had braced for 2004 but 2005 appears too far. They will be tempted to lay the blame on Rauf Denktaş, although the truth is that he only carries out instructions from Ankara.

EU Summit decided on 13 December to take ten new members

Arshad-Uz Zaman is a former Ambassador.

The lady who wanted to crawl away and hide

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

BUT then she decided not to do that -- just yet. An almost tearful Cherie Blair, wife of British PM Tony Blair, expressed this sentiment in a highly emotional televised statement issued on 10th December. The circumstances leading to an extraordinary personal statement from someone in such an exalted position have been making headlines in the national press for the last couple of weeks. But the actual cause behind all the furore could not be more prosaic and mundane -- a simple property deal of the kind that hundreds of people all over the country engage in every day. In this case, however, the deal went disastrously wrong, causing acute embarrassment, to say the least, to both the Prime Minister as well as the Labour Government. It all started with Mrs Blair doing nothing more serious than buying two flats in Bristol -- one for her son Euan who is studying at the university there, the other as an investment. Naturally, like everyone else, she wanted to get the best possible deal and sought the help of someone who she had reason to believe could clinch the deal for her. And the deal went through, enabling Mrs Blair to buy the flats at considerably discounted prices. There, as far as she was concerned, the matter ended -- or it should have, but for the nosy interference of a tabloid newspaper.

On 1st December, the *Mail on Sunday* -- the weekend edition of the *Daily Mail* -- claimed that the man who had helped the PM's wife to procure the properties was actually a convicted 'conman' named Peter Foster, a native of Australia and the boyfriend of Cherie's close friend and 'lifestyle' and clothes advisor Carole Caplin. Foster has a history of being involved in a number of scams and has served prison sentences in his own country and America as well as in Britain. He was recently named in Australia as the kingpin in an alleged £1.4 million swindle. British immigration officials ordered him to leave Britain in September and after a succession of appeals he was again ordered to leave by December. The *Mail* further claimed that in return for his service Mrs Blair promised to intervene on his behalf in deportation proceedings being conducted against him. These were extremely serious allegations indeed, quickly denied by both Mrs Blair and Downing Street. The *Daily Mail*, in fact, has a long history of Labour-baiting and in its eagerness to vilify the Labour Party, has been the victim of a number of forgeries over the years. The most notable of these was the "Zinoviev letter" of 1923 published by the *Mail* which later turned out to be an MIS forgery, but nevertheless succeeded in toppling the first Labour Government. This time, however, the *Mail* vindicated its claim by printing e-mails between Mrs Blair and Foster

showing that he did negotiate on her behalf for procuring the two flats at heavily discounted prices and that Mrs Blair had actually dealt with Foster for six weeks during the process, even going to the extent of telephoning the firm of solicitors handling the deportation case against him in order to reassure his pregnant girlfriend -- who has since sadly miscarried -- that the proceedings were being handled properly. The *Downing Street Press Office* responded to this by saying: "At no point did Mrs Blair interfere in immigration case. She made one short phone call to Foster's solicitors to reassure Mrs Caplin that solicitors were handling case in the normal way." The situation had become so embarrassing by that time, with the Opposition parties demanding official clarification and public opinion threatening to turn against the Government, that the Prime Minister himself was obliged to make his first comment on the affair. In a letter addressed to Con-

also apologised for causing any misunderstanding between the Number 10 Press Office and the media. "I am sorry if I have embarrassed anyone," she said; "but the people who know me well know that I would never want to harm anyone -- least of all Tony or the children or the Labour Government or misuse my position in any way."

Downing Street, understandably, is defending Mrs Blair all the way. Insiders suggest that Mr Blair himself believes his wife is merely the latest in a long line of victims hoodwinked by the fraudster Foster. Pressed on whether Mrs Blair was indeed the victim of a con, a Number 10 spokesman retorted: "At the end of it, what is the worst that Mrs Blair can be accused of? That she believed in the best of someone? That she helped a pregnant friend understand the legal process? That she bought a flat for her son at university?" The spokesperson also raised the question whether the Prime Minis-

According to rules regulating the status of would-be immigrants until recently, persons arriving in the UK as spouses of residents or citizens were obliged to carry on with that relationship for a certain minimum period in spite of suffering violence or intimidation and torture at the hands of their partners before they qualified to gain resident status for themselves. If the relationship broke down before the qualifying period ended, the immigrant spouse was required by law to leave the country. The rules were changed slightly once in 1999 in order to offer some relief to victims of domestic violence and torture, thus allowing many immigrant spouses the opportunity to keep on living in Britain. This time the rules are being further relaxed to make it easier for the victims to prove cases of violence and torture.

Speaking of this proposed change in the immigration law, a Home Office minister said that the victims of domestic violence and torture among would-be immigrants were mostly women, a very large number of whom were Asians, and so far they had little or no redress from the suffering caused to them by their husbands or male partners. "We believe that the proposed change in the law will protect many women against domestic violence and intimidation," he said; "We want to make sure that no one will have to continue with a most painful marital relationship in order to be able to reside in Britain." Reasonable proof of violence and torture, however, would have to be provided to the immigration authorities, he added.

The areas of proof have also been expanded. In the past, a female victim of domestic violence and torture was required to produce one of the following three in support of her application for permanent residency in Britain: (1) A court injunction against the perpetrator of violence and torture; (2) Proof that he had been sentenced by the court for such offence; and (3) Proof that he had been warned by the police for such offence. The new change in the law will now require the victim to produce any two of the following: (1) Medical report in proof of violence or torture; (2) Report from the GP treating the victim; (3) Written undertaking given to the court by the perpetrator that he will keep away from the plaintiff; (4) Proof that the police had visited the plaintiff's home in order to stop domestic violence; (5) Report from the Social Services department regarding domestic violence; and (6) Report from a Women's Support Group regarding domestic violence. Nearly five hundred women on an average arrive in Britain every year as spouses of British citizens or residents and a large number of them silently suffer violence and torture at the hands of their partners.

The reformed law will bring them succour from that inhuman suffering.

ter's wife -- and the partners of other ministers -- were entitled to privacy in their personal lives or not: "Are we saying that we have reached that point" where they "have to keep a log of everything they do in case accusations are made?" And upon his arrival at the European Council of EU leaders in Copenhagen, Mr Blair -- exasperated by fresh allegations that his wife had improperly viewed legal documents relating to Foster's deportation -- said to journalists: "Let me be very blunt with you. If anyone has any evidence of all -- I mean real evidence -- of anything criminal, illegal or improper, they should give that evidence to the appropriate authorities... I think everyone's had their pound of flesh and now it's time to move on." All said and done, however, it is quite clear that Mrs Blair will henceforward have to be very careful with her 'juggling act' because the world will be ever more on the look-out now in case she drops any of her balls again.

Prospects looking up for immigrant hopefuls

Not for all immigrants though -- only for those who seek to acquire permission to live in the UK through matrimony or as life partners of permanent residents or citizens. In a press release issued in the last week of November, the British Home Office has said that from now on newly married couples or people who have newly started living together as partners will no longer have to wait indefinitely for permission to reside in Britain if they become victims of domestic violence and are subjected to physical or mental intimidation and torture.

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servative Party leader Ian Duncan Smith he wrote that Foster's case was "handled properly" and that "no political interference has taken place in this case." The PM's official spokesperson further denied that until shortly before the first newspaper story was published, anyone in Number 10 had known of the full details of Foster's convictions and that at the time when Mrs Blair called his lawyers "she had been told he had a troubled past but that he was now a reformed character." Mrs Blair acted only out of concern for her friend Carole and to help her understand the legal process, it was certainly not the same as involving herself in a case. The spokesperson insisted that nothing illegal or improper had ever been done and that Mrs Blair had suffered a "deliberate campaign of character assassination."

But more than that was obviously needed to contain a situation that was fast going out of control and Cherie Blair appeared on television to publicly apologise for causing embarrassment to her husband and his Government. She said that her prime instinct throughout had been to protect her family and admitted that she had sometimes felt like "crawling away to hide." Referring to the pressures of being a high-flying lawyer, the PM's wife and a mother of four, she said: "I know I am in a very special position. I am the wife of the Prime Minister. I have an interesting job and a wonderful family. But I also know I am not Superwoman." She acknowledged that she often felt as if her life was spent "juggling balls in the air" and ruefully added: "Sometimes some of the balls get dropped." Mrs Blair

Democracy : How are we treating it?

A M M SHAHABUDDIN

IT'S a simple question, but the answer is rather complex for many. It is easy to give a textbook definition of democracy as "a government of the people, by the people and for the people." But again the question arises how far it is of the people, by the people, or even for the people. It is rather a relative reflex that leads us to different complex answers which may not be so palatable to our expectations. Sometimes we become too hard a nut to be cracked in the name of democracy. Sometimes we are too emotional or philosophical that we fly sky-high. But we must know the ground-reality and be sure where we stand instead of building 'democratic' castles in the sky.

As they say, "these are now rules of architecture for a castle in the clouds." And we in Bangladesh, posing as the most ardent devotees of democracy, who had just celebrated the 'Democracy Day' to mark the downfall of an autocratic regime, making room for the re-birth of democracy, have gone headlong in building such castle in the clouds, during the last three decades since our achievement of independence from Pakistan at a heavy cost, particularly, during the last decade or so, when 'democracy' has been used as a nice 'window-dressing' to carry on activities by a section of our leaders more as self-aggrandisement than anything else. Is it not a case of blatant betrayal of the people's wishes and ambitions? But who are at fault: The people or their leaders they chose to echo their voice?

Where lies the rut? Basically, Bangladesh has emerged as the land of the most seasoned democracy lovers, because democracy was the basis or foundation of their struggle, first to establish their rights as the majority of the population of then Pakistan lived here, then get Bangla as one of the state languages, when the other part wanted to foist on us Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan, and lastly, the struggle for achieving an independent Bangladesh as a new country in the comity of nations. We had to traverse a long bumpy way to achieve our national objectives, when all along we were so conscious of our duties and obligations, almost pledge-bound to work for the welfare of our country and people. In fact, the country is the same and the people are the same. But, unfortunately, we have gone off the track being misled by those whom we accepted as trusted guides.

Wrong use of rights: We still have that zeal to exert our democratic rights, be it in a wrong way or right way; in this context I recall an incident which occurred sometime in 90s during a hartal call by some parties. While moving along a side-walk in a bazar area on the hartal day, I found several young chaps were trying to turn a rick-

shaw upside down to put in on fire, pushing aside the poor rickshawpuller. This was a common scene during those hartals no doubt, but what struck me most was when suddenly I found a young domestic-help going towards the nearby kitchen market with a shopping bag in is hand, left the bag on the foot-path, on the spur of the moment and ran to help those who were trying to turn the rickshaw. Mission completed, he collected his bag and ran off for the market. I was amazed, not surprised, at that domestic-help's 'unique' sense of duty to assert his rights to participate in the hartal. (It doesn't matter who calls hartal, A or B; speaking 'hartalwise', they are two sides of the same coin). They never shake hands with their opponents to accept defeat but

Go abroad to hear home news: Perhaps we don't know where we and our beloved democracy now stand. Because leaders are intoxicated with lust for power and race for the powerful 'kursi' (chair). One side wants to cling to it while the other side wants to snatch it from them. Naturally, their main 'business' is not the welfare of the people and progress of their country, but only power. Hence they are always on the look-out to find faults, real or imaginary, of the other side. To add momentum to their nasty campaign of mud-slinging (rather call it 'garbage-slinging') against each other, when they go abroad they shout 'the king is naked' at home. What 'homage' they receive as a result of such campaigns, only they can say. There is a popular saying that "Go

recourse to such dangerous mouthful "stumbles".

But we are shameless. Politically, we commit blunders after blunders. Still we go ahead shouting pure and simple nonsense that make us ridiculous. But do we care for that? What happened in 1996 when our political infighting between two major national quarreling parties reached its zenith? Perhaps we were seeking 'international peace observers' to maintain and observe any political 'cease-fire' they could bring about in this hopeless land. The Commonwealth Sec Gen. and his able representative Sir Stephen Ninian tried their hands but had to withdraw, perhaps for their own safety, leaving the field open for 'political cockfight' for the entertainment of the world audience. After the honourable exit of the Commonwealth representative, entered the arena six ambassadors, including US ambassador, to try where the Commonwealth had failed. But they also had the bitterest taste of our politics and ran for shelter in the 'pavilion'. So we were at it again!

"Alert conscience" needed: It is time for a pause, enough is enough. We have shamelessly exhibited to the world much of our misguided agility as a part of our continued 'show-biz' on 'power-game'. In fact, democracy, will never die or sink, although it may become a 'hostage' in the hands of our power-loving 'players'. At times all such players turn democracy into demagoguery, ultimately leading to a destructive 'mocracy'. They adopt a hateful posture of 'I'm the monarch of all I survey,' forgetting that leaders may go and leaders may come, but democracy will be there, undoubtedly to assert its importance. So it is the constant vigilance of the people that can ensure a smooth running of a democratic government, and not the uncouth 'shouts' and 'counter-shouts' at each other from house-tops. Thus today's urgent need is to bring the leaders to their senses to follow religiously the rules of the game and not interpret such rules in their own way to serve their selfish purpose. But in a such situation, nobody but the conscious people will have to dictate terms to the indisciplined 'players' as an umpire. And any breach of such rules, willingly or unwillingly, should be judged as dictated by the game rules. If necessary the 'defaulters' should be shown the door to leave the ground, either temporarily for correcting their faults, or permanently. We should not forget that great saying that "a democratic government is only as strong as the alert conscience of the people. If this proverbial 'alert conscience' of the people to rise to the occasion is criminally strangled by the "wrong crowds", then we should be prepared for a national catastrophe in not so long a run.

Are we in a 'black hole'? Apart from our global status, politically and economically, at home we seem to have entered a 'black hole' created by us. A wise guy had rightly advised: "When one finds himself in a hole of his own making, it is a good time (for him) to examine the quality of workmanship." Perhaps that time has arrived at our door to begin that laudable job of examining the quality of our political workmanship shown by our popular national leaders who are more eager to belittle the position of their opponents. They never miss a chance to keep their mouth open to spit on their rivals. Perhaps they forget the time-honoured saying that "when the mouth stumbles it is worse than the foot." Will our leaders ever learn to follow this golden path before taking

AMM Shahabuddin is a retired UN official.

Population: Can we win the race?

DR M ASHRAF ALI

IT seems that the race between population increase and economic growth in Bangladesh is in full swing and perhaps the result has already been decided. When Malthus propounded his theory that population increases at a faster rate than food production and that food production would never catch up with population growth, he has ridiculed and branded as a false prophet. His theory was proved totally unsound as the Industrial Revolution in the West revolutionised and modernised agriculture to such an extent that huge surplus of food was produced using the newer technology. As a result Malthus' theory was proved wrong for the developed countries.

But what about countries like Bangladesh? It has been proved beyond doubt that Malthus is very right here. The gap between food shortage and population increase has been widening at such a great scale that it may never be possible to bridge. At least in the case of Bangladesh, it appears that we have already lost the race and grave consequences are staring us. Poor in natural resources, Bangladesh is never going to be able to feed the 150 million people in the coming years. There is already a huge surplus of population and yet the population increase is in full swing.

How is that the population situation came to such a pass even with 40 years of family planning programme? After all these years, there is only a negligible fall in the rate of population increase. Huge funds have been invested in the programme throughout all these years but the result has

been minimal.

The reasons for failure are many. However, the major reason appears to be a general lack of awareness among the people mainly due to lack of education and widespread illiteracy. The technicalities involved in birth control presuppose a minimum of education. In Bangladesh, this problem has been wilfully neglected by the various governments that came to power since the Pakistan days. However, other reasons such as management and control, supporting

up with all seriousness. No particular research has been done so far to find out the rates of acceptance of family planning in relation to educational level of the acceptors, but it is my feeling that only the educated has accepted family planning with seriousness. The unlettered couples are going on multiplying in full swing. This phenomenon also has some genetic implication for the future of the country. It is very likely that within the next few years, the quality of generation will keep becoming poorer if only the edu-

to the users with the minimum of effort. (4) Finally, the most important is the supporting services and the follow-up of acceptors who might develop medical problems as a result of family planning practice. There has been complications leading to even death after vasectomy and tubectomy. Needless to mention that such things can have strong negative motivation for the prospective acceptors and can nullify the total programme. Therefore, medical services should be made available at the doorstep of the clients and it should be provided free of cost. In this regard the experiences of, say, BRAC who has been running family planning programmes in some areas of the country with some success, may be gainfully utilised.

As has been already mentioned, we might have lost the race already and the country may be drowned by a deluge of population within foreseeable future unless substantial progress is made in population control within the shortest possible time. I do not want to heighten the pessimism that is already there and sound like a prophet of doom, but if the situation is not objectively studied and appropriate actions are taken, one might find that the prospect of survival of the country is very remote.

Against such a backdrop of population situation it is imperative to make an evaluation of the existing population control programme in order to locate the most pernicious problems and take appropriate measures to solve those so that positive result in this sector is ensured.

services, follow-up programmes, etc. are no less important than the lack of awareness on the part of the people.

There is a feeling among the authorities that once the money is allocated, the programme will have no problem. Huge sums have been spent on family planning programme since the days of Ayub Khan, but what has been the result? If things were managed a bit better, we could have better results. An annual increase of 2.4 per cent is still very high and the rate circulated by the government may be underestimated to some degree.

It goes without saying that while efforts must be made to increase food production by all means, the family planning programme has also to be geared

cated practice birth control and have fewer babies. This may even lead to a social disaster.

In order to gear up the family planning programme, certain measures have to be taken without further delay: (1) The management and control system has to be improved substantially. There have been reports of abuses of all kinds in the family planning programme. This has to be stopped. (2) Conscientization about the need for family planning should be taken seriously and appropriate schemes should be undertaken in this regard to carry the message of family planning to every nook and corner of the country. (3) The delivery system of the family planning materials should be improved so that services and materials are available

Dr M Ashraf Ali is professor and director, IER, Dhaka University.