

EU constitution: Who has the last laugh?

A M M SHAHABUDDIN

IT was undoubtedly the biggest surprise and shock for French President Jacques Chirac who was rather over-confident about his people's support to his role in both national and international affairs. He was, in fact, the strongest pioneer in creating the first ever united bloc of the Western European countries -- the EU -- to play its role on the world stage, where America had been ruling the roost since the demise of the sixty-year old communist regime of the former Soviet Union. And he became a real eye-sore of America when he, along with the German Chancellor, played the leading role, both within and without the United Nations (UN), in opposing tooth and nail America's unipolar policy of invading Iraq without UN authorisation. So in his over-confidence of leadership, Chirac lost sight of what was cooking in his backyard.

A fool-proof process

Whoever might have done this successful field-work or ground-work at grassrootlevel had done it very successfully without creating any suspicion in the mind of the leadership of the two countries, particularly France. Credit must be given where it is due. And he deserves this credit. It has not been done in a day or two. He must have gone through a long fool-proof process. He must now be enjoying the last laugh and the best laugh, over his mission possible. This reminds me of two recent events that brought about radical changes in two countries, namely, Georgia and Ukraine, both belonging to former Soviet Union, and now having the closest link with present day Russia. In the recent presidential elections held in the two countries, millions of US Dollars were reportedly spent by Washington to install pro-US Presidents, which was bitterly criticised by the Russian President Putin. But Washington had its good field day.

The European media had already written 'obituaries' to the sad demise of the EU constitution, and some even to the EU itself. They consider, and that is correct, that the EU constitution is already dead and the earlier a decent burial is given to it the better. Thus metaphors of death of the EUC echoed and re-echoed in some leading British and European dailies. The British daily *The Guardian* said: "If France's vote dealt the treaty a critical blow, the Dutch have now delivered the *coup de grace*". Naturally, an inquisitive mind would be eager to find the media reaction from other countries, particularly, America. So what was the US media reaction?

US media reaction

Newsweek International editor Farid Zakaria had given a clear picture of US mind in his article (D.S. 12.6.05): "Most Americans are not quite sure what to make of this. The clearest and loudest voices have been gleeful. Conservative commentators have delighted in the results, seeing them as a defeat for Jacques Chirac and his dreams of an alternative to an American hyper power." Here the writer had focussed on reactions of three different categories of people. The first

The most encouraging voice had come from the chief of the EU foreign policy, Javier Solana, a former secretary-general of the US-led NATO forces in Europe. Dismissing all apprehensions that the EU is coming to a stand-still, following the deadly blows given to its constitution by the French and the Dutch voters, Mr Solana had vowed 'to go ahead with boosting' its role on the world stage.



category refers to the "most Americans" who are "not quite sure of what to make of this." This reflects general attitude or thinking of the most American people who care less about what is happening outside their country and that is how the majority of the Americans voted George Bush for his second term in the Presidency, despite world-wide criticism of his war against Iraq.

But the second and the third category of reactions bring out the true picture of US stand vis-a-vis EU. And most interestingly, "the clearest and the loudest voices have been gleeful". This brings out the mewing cat out of the bag, showing the suppressed US feeling about the EU. Otherwise why this gleeful delight? And the third category of "conservative commentators" had hit the bottomline of the US policy towards growing in stature of the EU as a rival power on world stage, expressing their "vicarious pleasure" over Jacques Chirac's "defeat" in his efforts to build the EU as an "alternative hyper power".

This exuberance on the part of "conservative commentators", perhaps representing the ruling Republican hawks, clearly shows that Washington was not sitting idle while Chirac and his colleagues in the EU were marching ahead to fulfil their "dream". But the "dream" of Chirac and company had been shattered.

Many may think that it would be too far-fetched to drag in America in the tragic wreckage of the EU constitution by the French and the Dutch. Yet the possibility of such a wrong track can't just be dismissed as foolish thinking. In order to preserve its dominant role in moulding and shaping world affairs, any policy would be considered, on the part of America, as justified, to cripple its new rival, the EU.

America's greatest victory in the post WW II world was the demolition of the only powerful rival, the Soviet Union, thanks to the wonderful role played by CIA there. Therefore, there will be nothing wrong if Amer-

ica had to play some behind-the-scene role in the EU countries to bring down the newly-built castle.

America had a sweet dream

History does not lie. History tells us that America had a sweet dream about making the war-devastated Europe a nice pasture to march hand-in-hand to face any eventual-ity together. That dream partially came true when US-led North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) came into existence in 1949 to serve as a bulwark with the assistance of the European forces against any push by the then Soviet Union towards western European countries. The European nations, for whom America had spent billions of dollars under the Marshall Aid Plan for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of their shattered economy, were too eager to extend their hands of cooperation to America to run the NATO to achieve its goal. But thus far, no further. And the

American dream was eclipsed. Bad for America, but perhaps good for Europe.

Then there came a renaissance in the socio-political life of the European nations. The unity among the Western European nations that was cemented by NATO took a new turn with their gradual realisations that they, as a united bloc, can also become a big force on the world stage, instead of being guided always from across the Atlantic. So the 'seeds' sown in Europe by the US-sponsored Marshall Aid Plan in 1947 produced the 'rich crop' in 1957 for Europe when on 25 March of that year political leaders of six Western European countries -- France, W Germany, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg -- met in Rome for the first time to chalk out their own future programme and thereby established the European Economic Community (EEC), which is considered as the first step towards the creation of today's European Union (EU). In 1992, there came another turning point when, under the Maastricht treaty, a new monetary programme, named Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) for Europe was set up, which ultimately evolved the new single currency for Europe, called 'Euro,' which became a big rival of the currency king US dollar. By then America was in deep water up to its neck, losing gradually its ground and grip in Europe. Henceforth, the newly-emerged EU has shown its muscle whenever it confronted a clash of interest both at WTO and the UN with its former benefactor, America. Hence whenever there appears a crack on the wall of the EU, whether it is its constitution or any other related matter, it is not perhaps difficult to guess who is having the last laugh.

Now, therefore, time has come for the EU member countries, both old and new, numbering 25, to realise the hard truth that 'A chain is no stronger than its weakest link.' If the EU constitution happens to be its 'weakest link'. Then they would have to rectify it by framing a new one acceptable to all members. That seems the only proper means to put the European 'house' in order.

EU going to play its role: Solana

Meanwhile, the most encouraging voice had come from the chief of the EU foreign policy, Javier Solana, a former secretary-general of the US-led NATO forces in Europe. Dismissing all apprehensions that the EU is coming to a stand-still, following the deadly blows given to its constitution by the French and the Dutch voters, Mr Solana had vowed 'to go ahead with boosting' its role on the world stage, adding that the vote "does not effect how we will run the 25-nation bloc's foreign policy." He also pointed out that the EU had been an 'actor' even before its member countries started to talk about a constitution. Mr Solana had shown new hopes that the constitutions mishap would not work as a hindrance to the mission for which the EU was created. It is time for the EU member states to falsify the prediction of those who think that the EU had come to an end.

AMM Shahabuddin is a retired UN official.

PROFESSOR SITARA PARVEEN

An icon of discipline and elegance

SHEIKH MAHMUDA SULTANA

"TAKE care of your health girl", she told me the last time I saw her. It has been five years. I was in the British Council, scribbling on my notebook in my own scattered way, unmindful as usual. I didn't notice her, but she did. She was Sitara Parveen, how could she ever miss any of her students happening to be around her! She certainly didn't. But could you imagine a professor coming forward to a student and asking for her wellbeing in the rush of a busy library hour? Especially when it is British Council and a Saturday? When all the parents and their children are bustling in hundreds in and out of the library? You wouldn't ever if you weren't a student of Sitara Parveen. (How many of us really care to look for the new arrivals in the library these days? We wouldn't understand her being in the library either!)

After I'd dropped off from my master's exam I was very carefully avoiding showing up in my department. She perfectly understood my predicament and didn't delay a second to make me feel at ease with her. "You have become bulky!" (She was smiling). "Why don't you come over and meet us." She read what's been going inside my mind. "Come over, I am sure this year you are not going to drop it again". I wasn't sure, but she was! All I could let out was yes, yes and yes madam! "Okay then, see you and take care of your health girl!". When she told some one to take care of health you bet she meant it. It was not only meant in her tone and her eyes or in her irresistible grin. She meant it because she practiced it. Any one could be jealous of her fitness. Any one without giving a second thought would become a life long devotee to her style and elegance. The sarees she wore, the colors she chose! A Bangali in every single way. A style to become the ultimate tradition.

"Those who already know me, please excuse me the repetition. Those who don't, I am Sitara Parveen for their information." She introduced herself in her first class with us. "This lady got some attitude," I thought. But I didn't realize this attitude would keep every one of us mesmerized the next five long years. Late for any class? Never. Postponing any schedule without any prior notice? Never. On time (early in most cases), on every occasion? Yes, always. She was the epitome of discipline in the department. The question of meeting any deadline wouldn't simply arise for her because every thing with her was meticulously planned, already done long before the deadline.

She was the epitome of discipline in the department. The question of meeting any deadline wouldn't simply arise for her because every thing with her was meticulously planned already done long before the deadline. Everybody will agree that the department saw its most successful period during the two years of her chairmanship. She would stay in the Fridays with us during our practical. She was the head of the department, but she had her whole Friday for us!

Everybody will agree that the department saw its most successful period during the two years of her chairmanship. She would stay in the Fridays with us during our practical. She was the head of the department, but she had her whole Friday for us! She introduced roll-call. Attendance was strictly counted. Not only the students, I am sure her colleagues also got their clue. We had to attend classes to get through. We did, our batch landed with the highest number of first classes. Many were declared non-collegiate, many not eligible to appear at the exam. But did we ever even think of being doubtful about her? Her terms made her all the more admirable because strict discipline suited her. Not everybody can master discipline. Some get overwhelmed and eventually collapse. But when it was Sitara Parveen, she contained discipline, discipline didn't contain her. "No man is an island, any man's death diminishes me ". Dear Sir, you recited John Donne in class. Now your colleague, your wife, your life partner is gone. What you are going to prefer sir? Remain diminished like an island? Or holding yourself strong, not letting us miss her indomitable strength always been so inspiring to us?

You two were our pride in the department. A union of profes-

sionalism, self respect and duty .You used to address her Apni or Ms Chairperson in the meetings or any formal gathering. But didn't we know how inseparable you two were? Her visions reflected your activities, being the next head of the department you proved to be her perfect successor Sir.

We know, with her right beside you, the union was strong. But now we believe it will be eternal and stronger. Conventional mourning is not the way to pay respect to her. She deserves something unique as she used to be. If we can follow her through the example she set with her unquestionable sense of duty, her sheer elegance, her extraordinary leadership, we will be paying the true respect to her. We promise we will! Please be there with us Sir.

(Professor Dr. Sitara Parveen taught in the department of Mass Communication & Journalism in Dhaka University. She died in a terrible car crash in United States on June 23, 2005. She was heading toward Missouri from Chicago to attend a seminar .Her husband Professor Dr. Ahaduzzaman Muhammad Ali teaches in the same department.)

Sheikh Mahmuda Sultana(Roma) Research Officer, South Asia Partnership Bangladesh



Prof. Sitara Parveen (extreme left) with her parents, brothers and sisters

Role of the rich in poverty alleviation

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

MATTERS relating to poverty alleviation are often discussed at the highest level and actions taken for alleviation of poverty are reported in the national dailies. But the fact remains that Bangladesh is still a poor country and is still one of the least developed in the world. Allah alone knows when our progress and development will reach the level of a small country like Sri Lanka. [Mentionable, years before, per capita savings of Sri Lanka as per statistics furnished by Geneva-based International Savings Banks Institute (now World Savings Banks Institute, Brussels) was Sri Rupee 133/00 against our Tk. 33/00 and Sri Lanka exceeded the target for investment in National Savings fixed by the United Nations against their GDP]. Rate of savings certainly indicates a country's overall progress.

Measures and actions taken by the government for alleviation of poverty will not be effective and fruitful unless wanton lapses done and serious irregularities practiced by among others, the country's, unscrupulous traders and contractors. There are numerous instances clearly indicating such lapsee and irregularities that deprive our poor country of a substantial amount of revenue and foreign exchange which could be easily utilised for poverty alleviation. Here I would like to cite just a few instances.

There are millions of people in this poor country who are unemployed and underemployed and as a result they are all in the grip of poverty. According to a newspaper report Volcan Energy International of the United States has expressed its willingness to invest a huge amount of 1600 million dollar in the country's power and fertilizer sectors. And our Board of Investment has already signed an agreement in this connection. Investment of such a big amount of money will certainly enable a

section of our unemployed and underemployed people to free themselves from the curse of poverty.

It is our earnest hope and desire this investment of the world renowned microsoft organisation in Bangladesh succeeds. Let us not disappoint them the way Asian Development Bank (ADB) has been disappointed recently by a section of our unscrupulous contractors and withdraw substantial amount of 320 million dollars which they wanted to invest in Bangla-

Measures and actions taken by the government for alleviation of poverty will not be effective and fruitful unless wanton lapses done and serious irregularities practiced by among others, the country's unscrupulous traders and contractors. There are numerous instances clearly indicating such lapsee and irregularities that deprive our poor country of a substantial amount of revenue and foreign exchange which could be easily utilised for poverty alleviation.

desh for rehabilitation of the flood affected people in Comilla and why the ADB was obliged to withdraw this amount? Because allegedly the local contractors of Comilla did not allow any contractor from outside Comilla to compete in the tender.

Numerous such instances impede efforts made by government and non-government organisations from time to time vis-a-vis alleviation of poverty. If the government takes timely and strict measures to curb the nefarious activities of dishonest people involved in such works then mitigation of poverty is certainly possible.

We may now divert our attention to another very important matter relating to alleviation of poverty. Zakat is one of the five strong pillars of the grand edifice of Islam. We have an additional advantage to supplement our

normal routine efforts vis-a-vis poverty alleviation by implementing relevant important Quranic Ayats directly connected with poverty alleviation. Islam is not only a scientific and chosen religion of Allah, according to a Quranic Ayat, He has perfected this religion also (Sura Al-Maida: Ayat 3). And as it is a religion perfected by Almighty Allah, it governs a man's life from cradle to grave. So, we must take full advantage of the relevant important Quranic Ayats with a view to

mitigating sufferings of the poor and indigent people. There are many Ayats (Verses) in the Quran wherein Benign Allah has asked His "Bandas" (servants) to be careful and cautious for payment of Zakat. He says in Ayat 110 of Sura (Chapter) Baqara or the Heifer of the Holy Quran : "And be steadfast in prayer and in payment of Zakat: and whatever good ye send forth for your souls before you, you shall find it with Allah : for Allah sees well all that ye do." (S:2: A.110). "Your (real friends) are noless (than) Allah, His Apostle, and the (Fellowship) of Believers, those who establish regular prayer and pay regular "Zakat" and they bow down humbly (in worship)." (S:5: A.55).

What would be the approximate number of our total population who are entitled or eligible for payment of Zakat in accordance

with the rules 'procedure' laid down by Islam. Enormous, of course, but in my humble opinion the number of actual payers would not be more than 25 per cent of such eligible persons. This is unfortunate. We have a Religious Affairs Ministry besides Bangladesh Islamic Foundation to look after and safeguard the interests of the Muslims in this country. If it is not possible to oblige the eligible persons for payment of Zakat, they can at least prepare an exhaustive list of those fortunate persons and exhort them for payment of Zakat every year for alleviation of poverty. Letters requesting the revered Imams of all the mosques of Bangladesh may be issued to play their commendable role and contribute their mite while delivering their sermons on Friday. Our Religious Affairs Ministry may take suitable action in consultation with Islamic Foundation for launching campaign from time to time with a view to putting moral pressure on those who are eligible to pay Zakat so that they pay it in time every year.

When an officer of the Income Tax Department issues a letter to an income tax payee asking him to deposit his arrear income tax immediately then the defaulter goes out of his way to deposit his tax for he knows the serious consequences he will have to face if he fails to do so. But the same income tax payee is absolutely oblivious about payment of Zakat regularly every year in accordance with the dictates of the Quran because there is no reminder for this. There are hundreds of thousands of eligible persons in the country who should pay Zakat, and such payment will certainly go a long way in alleviation of poverty. Let our Religious Affairs Ministry please do the needful in consultation with the Islamic Foundation.

Kazi Aulad Hossain is a retired govt. high official.

How important is human resource in organisations?

A K RAIHAN

NOW a days a questions are often asked by many entrepreneurs as to why they need an HR Department, what would be the size of the organisation that needs an HR Department, so on and so forth.

With the rapid change in a company's growth, the management style and structure change simultaneously. Certainly there is a need to carryout the human resource functions -- the most important asset of any enterprise. But does that only justify the necessity of an independent HR Department?

Are there needs for a standard compensation system based on competitive market value of each position? Is compensation tied to competence and responsibilities? Are pay and benefits tied to contributions to the company? Although it is very difficult to determine but it would be ideal to say that an HR department or at least an HR Manager may be right for companies with higher than 30 employees to set up systems.

The role of an HR Department is very different. In most cases, functions and responsibilities that no other person either wants to do or is capable of doing are taken care of by this department. From determining job specification of a new hiring to recruitment, from orienting new employees to preparing their job descriptions, from tracking attendance to annual leave, from developing policies to continuously monitoring their uses, from setting compensation system to monitoring comparative benefit packages, there has been a vital need for an HR Department. In fact its role is very important and that is to assist the senior management team in establishing a sound working

environment.

Recruiting is always a major function in smaller to bigger enterprises. Some small companies are very stable, hiring perhaps as few as one new employee in a 12-month period. Others may be very competitive industries where recruiting can be an ongoing HR function. Advertising, short listing, interviewing, selecting and placing are part and parcel of an HR manager. Hiring the wrong people is extremely expensive and painful as well. Since recruiting is a major function, it may be in the company's best interest to have a professional recruiter in the HR Department. The recruiter must have knowledge of benefits and policies and procedures but his or her primary function would be to attract the "best" person at the "best" negotiation acceptable to the applicant and affordable to the company as well.

Maintaining all employee information in personnel files is a vital function of HR Department. This should at least, contain an application for employment, resume, photo, information about nominees, emergency contact list, personal/professional reference, employee manual receipt form, job description with job standard for each task, transfer history from location to location, signed code of ethics and business conduct form, separation of employment papers, exit interview record monitoring form for measuring training effectiveness, performance appraisals reviews, promotions and changes in wages or salary. With the availability of many standard HR software, HR Manager can rely significantly on computerised filing system to ease these tasks.

There is an ongoing fight between HR and accounting as to who should take care of payroll. It

seems cost-effective to shift this responsibility onto accounting department as it does belong to accounting more than HR. HR will be the source for answering questions about wages, insurance, leave and all kinds of benefits. One of the ways that HR can contribute to the company is by keeping the costs of benefits down by reviewing the policies periodically with similar organisations to be certain that they are not increasing the overhead cost unjustifiably. HR manager will very simply have to be the expert in handling the benefit and policy issues.

The flexibility of any organisation is heavily dependent on the adaptability and skills of the employees. Incrementally enhancing their performance is dependent on the development of knowledge, skills and other competencies. Continual career development and learning are increasingly important. HR Department achieves this through the provision of training in areas to be specifically identified by training need assessment and thus developing the concept of life-long learning. The HR Section develops, promotes and implements a comprehensive employee relations policy that secures positive and progressive relations within the organisation. This is achieved through developing the partnership approach between the top management and employee unions/associations, fostering good industrial relations at corporate level, promoting resolution of issues at local level and through developing and implementing agreed human resources policies in line with best human resources practices, HR has a communication function too. Changes in policies, changes in benefits, even changes in

labour or income tax laws must be communicated to all employees. Major changes may call for training such as anti-harassment and equal opportunity policy. Thus HR becomes a kind of pass-through in the information cycle.

Certainly there are other responsibilities, but they should be considered as secondary though may appear to be very important. Many years ago, large organisations looked to the Personnel Department mostly to manage the paperwork around hiring and paying employees. Now-a-days, high performing organisations consider the HR Department as playing a major role to manage people so that the people and the organisation perform at maximum capability in a highly fulfilling manner. This is a new reality and to be picked up by all entrepreneurs. The management must look at their organisation from a new global perspective. Although each and every department is essential but, probably, HR is more important than any other. While effective executive leadership from the very top is imperative in creating the new vision and strategy for the organisation, HR is the group that should actually lead the way in implementing the company culture. HR should mentor all other departments to define and identify the new human competence needed to achieve the organisation's global company status. HR Manager must leverage operational and financial information available throughout the organisation to increase their strategic profiles.

AR Raihan, an HR specialist, is Director of Human Resources, Dhaka Ahsania Mission, and a founder of Bangladesh Society for Human Resource Management.