

Duty-free access for our RMG

Build upon the potential opportunity

We think it is a very good beginning, albeit a modest step towards reducing the huge trade imbalance between Bangladesh and India. The quantity of eight million pieces may seem small to begin with but the recently concluded MOU has the potential for enhancing the quantity in future. Even more, the significant aspect of the understanding is that an item that had so long been in India's sensitive list of import items will at last be de-listed in the case of Bangladesh.

We must make use of other concessions too, like being able to export the goods from any port in Bangladesh as well as the waiver of the rules of origin in so far as raw materials is concerned, to gain a larger share of India's garment market in future.

However, it is only but a potential for a bigger opportunity that we must go all out to realise. With our garment sector facing the prospect of increasingly tougher competition from next year we must make our products more competitive in terms of price and quality, not to speak of meeting the deadline for supply.

We feel that there is a need for a close look at our trade with India and the very gross imbalance weighed against us. The volume of trade between the two countries amounts to about two and a half billion USD annually; our share being a paltry 300 million of it. Although India is our second largest trading partner it is tenth in the list of export destination of Bangladeshi goods. This, notwithstanding the spurt in export to India, which has seen a rise of more than 400 percent in the last five years as compared to about 100 percent to the rest of the world during the same period. We have been assured that many more items will be allowed into India's market duty-free from 2008. This is indeed a good opportunity and our exporters must not only look for market diversification within India but also include non-traditional items in the export basket.

Let us seize upon the opportunity to enhance our trade cooperation with India and bring down the trade deficit.

Dhaka's move on workers in Malaysia

Those doing wrong must be identified and penalised

ONLY a couple of days after we first commented on the subject, we note with some relief that the Bangladesh government has formally lodged a complaint with the Malaysian authorities against PTC Asia Pacific. The Malaysian firm has been remiss in not being able to provide Bangladeshi arriving in Kuala Lumpur (and recruited by it) with appropriate jobs and wages. Such behaviour is a clear breach of contract and action needs to be taken against those responsible for such cavalier treatment toward Bangladeshi workers travelling all the way to Malaysia to earn enough to keep themselves and their families back home in a satisfactory economic state. That our workers are often treated badly, with hardly any way for them to have their grievances redressed in Malaysia, has been highlighted by the hunger strike resorted to by more than a hundred Bangladeshi on the premises of the country's high commission in Kuala Lumpur.

The striking workers have now been handed over by Malaysian police to a human rights organisation. But the problems of low wages, arrear money, etc., that these men have brought to public notice have yet to be resolved. The Malaysian authorities must now, in view of Bangladesh's complaint, take appropriate action against the recruiting company responsible for the workers' plight with the specific goal of ensuring that their dues are cleared. At the same time, steps should be taken (and this is where the governments of the two countries can cooperate) toward providing these workers with jobs in other firms considering that they have already lost a good amount of money paying the recalcitrant company's agents to go to Kuala Lumpur. Much the same approach ought to be taken in dealing with the case of 4,000-5,000 Bangladeshi now stranded in, of all places, the car park of Kuala Lumpur airport only because their Malaysian employers did not come to the airport to receive them. For the Malaysian authorities, therefore, the job should be one of locating the employers and taking them to task for such irresponsible, indeed culpable behaviour. For the Bangladesh government, the need is to go after the recruitment agencies in Dhaka responsible for the workers' plight on foreign soil.

The role of the Bangladesh high commission also comes in for some scrutiny here. It needs to answer a few questions regarding the way it has been tackling migrant worker-related issues in Malaysia, especially the incident of an attack on the striking workers allegedly by agents of the recruitment agencies. The government's decision to send a team led by the expatriates welfare secretary to Kuala Lumpur to look into the issue is a good move that should not end up being yet another instance of tokenism.

Pakistan's beleaguered president



DILARA CHOWDHURY

JUST two months before his term of office as president expires, General Pervez Musharraf is getting increasingly embattled, and he now needs all the political skill he can muster in order to delicately balance the currents and cross currents of events that surround him, so that he can survive in office.

The first issue is the issue of his credibility as the key person to fight US's War on Terror. Pakistan's most "trusted ally," Washington, of late has been somewhat skeptical about his ability as well as his sincerity in eliminating the Taliban. It may be recalled that a couple of years after his bloodless coup that toppled former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, General Pervez Musharraf's regime got a new lease of life following the 9/11 tragedy.

Overnight, his service became essential to the West, in particular to the US, in its war on terror targeted towards the Afghan Taliban. Billions of dollars in economic and other aid flowed into the country, giving Musharraf a much-needed boost in the context of rejuvenation of the economy of the country.

The crux of the problem is whether or not Musharraf can retain the presidency while still in uniform, which was allowed by a special act of parliament in 2003 when he reached the retirement age, on November 15, 2007. Another issue is the army's insistence that JUI once again be part of any future government. However, before he could reach any agreement with Ms. Bhutto, the arrival of former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, who was sent into exile to Saudi Arabia in 2000 after a presidential pardon in two criminal convictions, made Musharraf's balancing act difficult.

In 2002, he was featured on the cover page of the prestigious Time magazine, and was declared the "man of the year." Much of that glow has now dimmed with the passage of time, with the West now complaining that Musharraf was not doing enough to eliminate the Pakistani Taliban from Pakistani soil.

On the contrary, large-scale Talibanisation has taken place along Pakistan's western border. The people of Federal Administered Tribal Area (Fata), who are mainly Pashtuns, have a great deal of sympathy for their Pashtun brethren of Afghanistan, and initially it was them who provided sanctuary and help to the Afghan Taliban who were fleeing from US bombardment following 9/11.

Today, the whole of Fata is under the influence of the Taliban, and the development has given rise to their Pakistani version. And ever since the political crisis in Pakistan began, the Taliban have been causing severe damage to the Pakistani army who are fighting them along the western border.

But nothing outstanding could be achieved. No wonder Americans are unhappy with the ways the

Talibans have been handled by Pakistani authority since 9/11. The US is now threatening to attack al-Qaeda hideouts in Fata if the government does move fast. For Musharraf and his army, this is a difficult task.

Secondly, there have arisen numerous internal challenges to his rule. His handling of the Taliban not only upset the Americans, it has also failed to convince the ordinary people of Pakistan that he is indeed trying to get rid of them. The issue has divided the nation. Another challenge came rather inadvertently when he fired the chief justice last March, which sparked protests by the opposition and important segments of the society.

He suffered a setback when the Supreme Court, in a popular move, reinstated the chief justice in July. Since then, a new dimension has been added to the movement against Musharraf, which is now being led by the lawyers. In this regard, one cannot but recall the courageous role played by the lawyers against authoritarianism, dating back from the British period

to date. This development, with its far-reaching consequences, has made Musharraf's situation all the more precarious.

In order to pacify external and internal challenges to his regime, the beleaguered president (under pressure from the US) attempted to negotiate a power-sharing formula with Ms. Benazir Bhutto, who had been exiled by Musharraf in 1999, and her party PPP. The main issue in the talks has been whether or not Ms. Bhutto could be made the prime minister in the next government while Musharraf retained his position as president.

The crux of the problem is whether or not Musharraf can retain the presidency while still in uniform, which was allowed by a special act of parliament in 2003 when he reached the retirement age, on November 15, 2007. Another issue is the army's insistence that JUI once again be part of any future government.

However, before he could reach any agreement with Ms. Bhutto, the arrival of former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, who was sent into exile to Saudi Arabia in 2000 after a presidential pardon in two criminal convictions, made Musharraf's balancing act difficult.

It presented Musharraf with two options: first, allow Sharif back into the country and allow opening of a new front by his followers, and second, send him back again at the cost of facing the Supreme Court, which had earlier given a verdict in favour of Nawaz Sharif to return to Pakistan, and somewhat losing face with the people of Pakistan and the international community.

He opted for the second. From his point of view, this was best, especially in the context of a renewed campaign by the lawyers against Musharraf running for another term, and probable toughening, or complete pull out from the talks, of PPP's stance in the negotiations. However, his choice may have saved him only temporarily, because the move is fraught with several risks.

First, it may be viewed by the lawyers and the opposition as an illegal move. Second, the Supreme Court, with its new-found freedom, may be under moral obligation to uphold the rule of law once a petition against Sharif's deportation is filed by his PML-N party (which has already been filed, although the government says that Mr. Sharif was allowed to return to Pakistan and then deported on charges of corruption).

Third, Ms. Bhutto, who is already under pressure from several quarters for negotiating with Musharraf's power-sharing formula, may pull out of the talks completely (which she has already done, but says that the doors are still open).

From the above discussion, it is amply clear that President Pervez Musharraf would need all the skill and ingenuity in order to get another term to serve his nation. This is definitely going to be his tryst with destiny.

Dilara Choudhury is a columnist for The Daily Star.

What made him go so early?

CLOSEUP JAPAN

Now that Abe is set to leave, the race for the leadership is on within the LDP. His opponents, both within the party and outside, are somehow relieved and satisfied with the outcome. If critics within the party are now regrouping behind possible successors, the opposition is just keeping an eye on the movement and making it clear that the option of choosing the next prime minister should be given to the people by dissolving the lower house.

MONZURUL HUQ

HE has not gone yet, but his imminent departure is now only a matter of days. Almost a year ago, when Shinzo Abe took the helm of Japan's main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and with that post also received the additional and more important reward of being the prime minister of Japan, nobody could imagine that his reign would be so short.

It is because, prior to that, he had been seen and considered by many in Japan as the natural successor to his charismatic predecessor Junichiro Koizumi, and he was carefully elevated to the post through a long process that even saw the creation of a special party post that nobody had heard of before.

He was loud and vocal too, probably a bit louder in expressing his views on matters considered controversial in Japan. He also found time to write a book explaining his vision of a future Japan, and how he intended to turn Japan into a beautiful country. The book became a best seller and, ever since its

appearance, has been loved and adored much by those who are longing for turning the wheels of history to make Japan a beautiful country again.

Moreover, he also had the added support of his wife, who herself at one time was seen as a role model for a new generation of wives of Japanese politicians.

So, the setting seemed from outside to be a perfect one for Shinzo Abe to rule, if not as long as his predecessor then at least for a relatively lengthy period of time. And he started also not that badly, as he tried to mend relations with Japan's Asian neighbours by selecting China and South Korea as destinations for his first official visits.

Then, all of a sudden, everything started to turn upside down as his new administration, filled up with his friends and close associates, got bogged down in the muddy waters of financial and political scandals one after another.

With that came the pension fund fiasco, causing much anxiety to the people as many of them thought that they might have been robbed of their lifetime savings just because of the

arrogant and careless attitude of government officials.

Added to all that was a growing disparity between the haves and have-nots in Japan, a country that until recently boasted of its egalitarian middle class standing. This disparity has largely been reflected in the income levels of people living in big cities and of those who had to stay in provincial towns and rural communities to keep the lifeline of Japan's economy floating.

All these negative aspects dealt a severe blow to Abe administration in the upper house of the Japanese Diet's election last July, when the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) suddenly realised that it had been robbed of not only of its traditional support bases in rural areas, but also the capability of outmanoeuvring the opponents in the numbers game that was essential for paving the way for the bills it submitted to the parliament to be implemented.

The prime minister was visibly shocked and upset. Though he adamantly refused to bow down to the pressure coming both from within the party and outside, political

analysts and observers have already started counting the days to his departure. But nobody really thought that the departure would come so suddenly and so abruptly.

It was only last Monday that Abe hinted of resigning should he fail to pass a crucial bill at the Diet, which would allow Japan's Maritime Self Defense Forces' vessels to continue providing fuel to the coalition warships involved in the war in Afghanistan.

In the policy speech that he delivered at the opening of the extraordinary session of the Diet, Abe wanted to make it clear that the mission was a vital contribution by Japan, as the fuel supply support was not being provided to US ships alone, but also to the ships of other countries like the United Kingdom, Germany and Pakistan.

No one obviously asked any questions about what Pakistani warships were doing with the free fuel they received to fight against terrorism in Afghanistan, as Pakistan hardly needs to dispatch her ships to somewhere as far as the island of Diego Garcia and then return to the port of Karachi to fight the war in Afghanistan. But that's a different point.

The opposition block is adamantly refusing to extend the mandate of the Maritime Self Defence Forces' deployment on the ground that the mission has proved to be a failure, as its declared purpose of helping the people of Afghanistan improve the standard of life and ensure greater security in the country has clearly been not achieved.

The prime minister was still willing to go ahead with the parlia-

mentary debate, hoping that if the upper house, where the opposition now holds majority, blocked the passage of the bill, he could still go through by getting the support of the two thirds in the lower house in the second voting, which would allow him to implement the bill without depending on the upper house.

But something must have gone wrong in that equation, which put Abe in a disarray, and he felt that he had no other option left but to announce his resignation. What really went wrong is not clear yet, but speculations are rife about two possible scenarios.

First, the mandate of Japan's Maritime Self Defence Forces' mission in the Indian Ocean is to expire on November 1. So there is a time factor in passing the bill before that expires, and Abe, probably after going through careful calculation of date and time, could realise that though he would be able to bypass the upper house in the second attempt, he would not be able to do it in time, which would require him to bring back the vessels and resend them after the adoption of the bill.

This would, no doubt, raise many unpleasant questions about the rationality of taking such a drastic measure, and Abe probably concluded that going that far would most likely hurt not only his own standing but that of the LDP as well.

The second factor that might have prompted Abe to leave office is the possible stance LDP's junior coalition partner, the New Komei Party, was supposed to take should the bill return to the lower house for a second voting.

The July election results were a severe blow to the Komei leadership as well, as the party that usually relies on block votes of diehard supporters of the religious group that it represents also suffered as it lost a few valuable seats.

The party leadership obviously now feels the need to keep some distance from the LDP, at least to convince its frustrated supporters that not everything has been sold out. So, there is also the speculation that Komei might have hinted at a different approach if the bill got back from the upper house and was placed for a second voting.

This might have been seen by a handful of insiders as the main cause of some kind of a nervous breakdown for Abe, and he simply could not avoid falling sick.

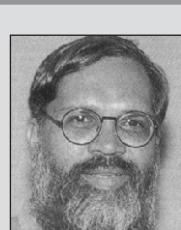
Now that Abe is set to leave, the race for the leadership is on within the LDP. His opponents, both within the party and outside, are somehow relieved and satisfied with the outcome. If critics within the party are now regrouping behind possible successors, the opposition is just keeping an eye on the movement and making it clear that the option of choosing the next prime minister should be given to the people by dissolving the lower house.

But LDP simply cannot afford to take that risk right now and, hence, moving ahead with the election of a new party leader on September 23.

The outcome of the election would leave Abe as a past prime minister, who fell short by just three days in holding the post for a full year.

Monzurul Huq writes from Japan.

Musharraf scores an own-goal

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

Some Indian officials have misread the meaning of Mr. Sharif's deportation. They reportedly feel "a grudging admiration" for Gen. Musharraf's handling of it. For the past year, India has been in contact with Ms. Bhutto, but not Mr. Sharif. This needs correction -- with a clarification that India would like a "smooth democratic transition" in Pakistan for its neighbours, or the larger world, to be indifferent to its people's struggle for full democratisation, which demands solidarity.

humiliated, and deported.

Only the naïve will buy the propaganda that Mr. Sharif was offered "the choice" of being jailed or deported, and preferred the second.

Even assuming that he was reluctant to face incarceration -- and some of my Pakistani friends believe he almost broke down when jailed in 1999 -- he wouldn't have easily spurned the chance of becoming a powerful symbol of the anti-Musharraf resistance.

Besides, he would probably have been granted bail.

If Mr. Sharif were an astute politician, he would have staged a dramatic sit-in at the airport and made a fiery anti-regime speech.

However, that doesn't let the Musharraf government off the culpability hook. It stooped low by privileging an extra-constitutional "secret" agreement over Mr. Sharif's fundamental right, pronounced "inalienable" by the Supreme Court, to return home.

Gen. Musharraf has, thus, only brought discredit upon himself. This will inflame the popular sentiment against him, and more broadly, against the military. Already, anti-military slogans have acquired great currency in Pakistan.

Gen. Musharraf has set the stage for another showdown with the Supreme Court, which ruled in favour of Mr. Sharif's right to come home. Its spirit was clearly to affirm

his right to live in Pakistan. Deporting him to Saudi Arabia makes nonsense of that rationale. It'd be a surprise if the court doesn't reaffirm it. That would bring the government more ignominy.

It would convince the public that the government isn't willing to meet a political challenge politically. This is likely to foment mass protests. Under repression, some of them could turn violent. The government will probably cynically try to exploit this by engineering inter-ethnic conflict, or prepare the ground for imposing martial law or emergency. That would be disastrously reckless.

That's where the "foreign hand" comes in! The United States has been interfering aggressively in Pakistani affairs. Although it says Mr. Sharif's deportation is Pakistan's "internal matter," Assistant Secretary of State (and "Virtual Viceroy") Richard Boucher was in Islamabad when the drama was taking place. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte later joined him.

Clearly, the US wants to directly supervise a power-sharing

arrangement between Gen. Musharraf and Ms. Bhutto. Last month, Gen. Musharraf was contemplating the imposition of emergency. But Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice famously dissuaded him in a 2 a.m. telephone call.

How will the US behave today? If it acts in the myopic fashion typical of it, driven by its "counter-terrorism-at-any-cost" preoccupation, it may go along with Gen. Musharraf's adventurist temptations.

The US desperately wants to bring Ms. Bhutto into a power-sharing deal --