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## **Bhutan: Tobgay Government makes a good beginning: Update No. 100**

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**Note No. 694**

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The Tobgay government has begun well. The Prime Minister's visit to India between August 30 and September 2 was very successful and he was able to get an assurance from India that all his requirements will be met in full.

The assistance for the 11<sup>th</sup> plan projected at 45 Bn. rupees was fully assured besides 5 Bn. as an economic stimulus outside the plan aid as well as the balance amount of 4 Bn. that is yet to be paid from the 10<sup>th</sup> plan were all committed.

The enthusiasm and the over generosity of India towards the new regime gives the impression that India was happy to see the exit of Thinley's regime. If this is true, I would call it unfair as Thinley was equally a good friend of India and he needs to be credited in getting democracy take firm roots in a country that had not experienced it earlier.

The Tobgay government is faced with many critical problems. The growing debt of the country that has the potential to become unmanageable, continuing rupee crisis, unemployment amongst youth and the rising menace of corruption – all these need immediate attention.

But one lesson PM Tobgay must have learnt within a few days of his taking over was that one should never make "tall promises" before the elections as there would be many procedural difficulties, lack of resources and above all absence of proper research on the issues before making such promises.

Take for example the pre election promise of providing a stimulus to the ailing economy. The PDP must have made a serious research on

the resources available and the quantum needed before making such promises. But they did not. The Indian delegation which visited Thimpu to discuss the 11th plan was not inclined to provide the additional sum which they felt will not make an adequate impact to trigger as a stimulus. Yet India committed for the amount later when Dr. Tobgay visited India.

The expectations from the people are high. The civil servants are expecting additional house allowance, people are expecting chopper service very soon ( the helicopters will have to be purchased first), electricity to the rural areas and the list goes on!

One immediate campaign pledge Tobgay could and perhaps would do, is to restore the lottery business which would provide an additional revenue of 200 million rupees each year. When in despair, moral aspects do not seem to matter.

Some cost cutting measures have also been undertaken like reduction in domestic help to the ministers, use of car pool, retention of old salaries by the ministers etc. So far so good.

### **Border Talks with China:**

The 21st round of border talks took place at Thimpu on 22nd August. The Chinese delegation was led by the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin and Bhutan was represented by its foreign minister Rinzin Dorjee. The talks ended with the usual and routine formulation that "both sides reaffirmed to resolve the boundary issue at the earliest through mutual consultation, understanding and accommodation on the basis of the four guiding principles agreed to in 1988 and 1998 agreement in the maintenance of peace and tranquility in the Bhutan-China border areas."

This formulation means nothing and there appears to be no hurry on the Chinese side to expedite the talks. The only point agreed to between the two sides was that both sides agreed to conduct a joint technical field survey in the first week of September in Pasamlung area in Bumthang.

The media pointed out two points which do not seem to fit in with the situation on the ground. While the four areas of dispute in the western sector, included Doklam, Charithang, Sinchulumpa and Dramana pasture, the official view was that so far as Bayal Pasamlungi is concerned, China had conceded Bhutan as part of a package deal and that position has been consistent since 1990.

There was another mention that in 1996 China proposed the swap of Pasanlung and Jakarlung valleys that make up of about 495 sq. Kims towards north-central part of the country with the pasture land of Doklam, Sinchulung, Dramana and Shalkhatol towards the north west part of Paro and Haa of about 269 Kms. Two points need mention here. One- that the Chinese are known for shifting the goal posts and I am not sure whether they are sticking to this formula even now. Our own experience in the border negotiations would show that the Chinese do not stick to any previous understanding made. Secondly, the impact on Indian security when territory is being conceded in Paro and Haa valleys

do not seem to have been examined.

### **The refugee Issue:**

On 6th September, the British Ambassador to Nepal while visiting Damak is said to have remarked that efforts to involve India in repatriating the interested exiled Bhutanese are underway.

There are hardly 30,000 refugees left in the camps at Sanichare and Beldangi and soon the refugees will be housed in one of the two and the other will be given up.

Of the thirty thousand, 10,000 more are expected to be settled in third countries, leaving a residue of 20,000. These are mostly those who refused third country settlement for reasons varying from developing local interests to ideological identification with some parties in Nepal. A considerable number may belong to the Bhutanese Communist Party ( Maoists).

It is not clear which category of refugees are still left that needs to be expatriated as the British Ambassador has claimed. What is the point in India in getting involved when most of the refugees have already been settled?

It makes sense, if India allows those elderly Bhutanese who have been settled abroad to come back to India and spend the last of their days in a cultural milieu that is familiar to them.

One finds that HUROB ( Human rights organisation of Bhutan) is also demanding that the new Tobgay government should start a dialogue for repatriation. Repatriation of whom? It should be noted that Bhutan has got away without taking back even a single refugee out of a hundred and odd thousand refugees who languished in the camps. What is more, even a few hundred Bhutanese who were certified to be Bhutanese citizens in the Kudenabari camp by the joint verification teams of both countries were not repatriated. What is left now for repatriation? It is also time to dismantle the two remaining camps at Beldangi and Sanichare.

The issue is not going to rest here. Those Bhutanese exiled and now settled in third countries are working on a network to keep in touch with each other. A small museum, the funds for which have been contributed by the exiled Bhutanese themselves is coming up not far from the refugee camps that existed before. A temple is also said to be coming up.

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