

# Guinea Gambit

The ICB banking group scores with its Guinea operation.

**W**ITH Africa being the thrust of the ICB banking group's expansion in the coming years, ICB Guinea's recent success in clinching *The Banker* magazine's 'Bank of the Year' award is seen as an encouragement for the group.

'The award means a lot to our young institution considering the difficult environment and stiff competition we are facing in a market which for a long time has been dominated by bigger and more established international banks,' says its chief executive officer Sashidharan Nair.

Considered as a medium-sized bank, ICB Guinea is one of seven banks in the West African country. Endowed with enormous and untapped natural resources such as bauxite, iron ore, diamond, gold and other minerals, it has a population of eight million.

Nair feels Guinea offers a great opportunity for bankers who have vision and are well equipped to endeavour in such environments, which offer prospects for high returns.

'I would say that in Guinea, a successful banker has to always look at the fundamentals such as building a strong deposit base with a good portfolio of exporter clients,

fees and commission-based businesses, and advisory services to investors and businesses,' he says.

Replying to questions via e-mail, Nair notes that in eight years since the bank started operations in 1996, its total assets have increased 10-fold, while shareholders' funds and profits have grown accordingly.

'For FY2003, we recorded growth in assets and deposits of 20% respectively,



Nair: The initial years were difficult

with ROE increasing to 24% from 17% in the previous year,' he says.

Moving forward, the bank is positioning itself as a strong and reputable niche player in the provision of financing for the export and import sector, the public sector and the fast-growing consumer banking sector.

Nair believes the bank is well placed to tap the potential Guinea has to offer as it has well-trained, experienced and dedicated employees who know the country well and are well equipped to identify opportunities.

For instance, the bank has launched and developed products such as education plan, housing plan, pension fund and call deposits that did not exist before. At the same time, it targets sound and reliable importers for tailor-made trade-financing packages.

'We are still on track to achieve the bank's mission to promote and facilitate trade and investment between Guinea and the Far East, and Malaysia in particular. We hope more Malaysian investors will come to Guinea to take advantage of the vast business opportunities here,' he says.

He adds that size is important and that the bank's main target is to be among the top three banks in terms of profitability and to be recognised as an important player in the development of the Guinean banking industry and economy.

'ICB's ambition in three to five years' time is to be the reference bank for import & export financing, advisory services to corporate and government entities as well as for education, housing and pension,' he says.

Sharing his experience as a banker in Guinea for three and a half years, Nair says it was a difficult period initially.

'Being a Malaysian and not having been in Africa before, it was not easy at the beginning, as the language, culture, beliefs and values of the people are different. It takes a lot of effort to understand the work culture and to convince the employees to adopt new ways of doing things,' he says.

But today, Nair points out, he is happy that the staff is willing to accept changes, and that ICB is accepted by the employees, customers and the public as a progressive and caring bank. **mb**