

# Quest for peace in Iraq



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

**RESIDENT Saddam Hussain's** desperate economic situation in Iraq after Iraqi war led him to ask his Arab neighbours including Kuwait to support him to get over the economic problems. He particularly accused Kuwait and U.A.E. of violating OPEC production ceiling for the purpose of producing more oil thus flooding the market that brought down oil price considerably. Iraq sustained a loss of \$89 billion, Iraq also stated that Kuwait directly robbed the Iraqi treasure by setting up oil installations in the southern section of Iraqi Rumaila Oil Field and extracting oil from it. Iraq indeed demanded "the raising of oil prices to \$25.00 a barrel", the reversal of "Kuwaiti theft" of oil from Iraqi Rumaila Oil Field, the return of \$2.4 billion stolen from Iraq and a complete moratorium for Iraq's wartime loan. Iraq also asked for an Arab Plan similar to that of Marshall Plan to compensate Iraq for some of the losses during the war. Kuwait brushed aside all these claims.

**US's alleged "Green Light" to Saddam:** On July 25, 1990 Saddam summoned US Ambassador Ms. April Glaspie to Baghdad and told her of the Iraqi problems and its position. He also reminded Ambassador Glaspie that U.S. should be grateful to Iraq for having contained fundamentalist Iran for which he had to fight for several years. The Ambassador said, "my own estimate after 25 years of serving in the area is that your claims should receive strong support from your brother Arabs". She also added that United States had "no opinion on an inter-Arab dispute such as your border dispute with Kuwait". Her conciliatory language was construed by Saddam as an American "Green Light" for moving against Kuwait.

On August 1, 1990 when the final negotiations with the Kuwait failed, Iraq moved into Kuwait and within 24 hours, Kuwait lost its sovereign status. In other words, Kuwait was occupied by Iraq, Kuwaiti Royal family (Al-Sabah) escaped to Saudi Arabia and set up a government in exile there.

However, Saddam Hussain informed the Iraqis and world that he would withdraw from Kuwait when the situation becomes stable there and the provisional government that he had established there would be in a position to take over, which may not take more than a few days or a few weeks.

**against Kuwait occupation:** UNSC passed a resolution by 14-1 condemning Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and asked for immediate and unconditional withdrawal. In the meantime, U.S. reportedly convinced Saudi Arabia that it needed American troops to protect the Kingdom from Iraqi onslaught which might come at any moment. Saudi Arabia received a large number of U.S. soldiers and allowed its soil to be used for any attack though Saudi Arabia was trying to find a settlement that would avoid war. Saddam, however, told the US and the rest of the world that as soon as the situation settles down in Kuwait, Iraq will withdraw. But the situation changed when US and rest of the world asked for restoration of the pre-invasion situation which meant return of the Kuwaiti Royal Family to Kuwait. This was unacceptable to Saddam Hussain and decided not to withdraw and that led to Gulf-war Desert Storm. Iraq was defeated thoroughly.

**Iraq stood devastated:** Iraq lost everything after two devastating wars -- Iraq-Iran war and the Gulf-war. It is necessary to mention that in 1979 when Saddam came to power Iraq was a regional economic super power. It had some 35 billion in Foreign Exchange Reserve. But after these two wars Iraq was left with \$80 billion foreign debt and shattered economic and strategic infrastructure. The economic sanctions imposed by the UN led to total devastation of the country. Food for Oil Programme by UN could not help Iraq much as the U.S. and the U.K. created series of practical difficulties in terms of supply of approved oil. After 1979, children suffered and particularly the children faced severe malnutrition and death. It is estimated that about half a million children died of malnutrition during this period.

The UN Inspection Team continued to work in Iraq so that all its weapons of mass destruction could be destroyed. The monitoring cameras were also established in the sensitive places so that Iraq would not start building nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction.

Inspectors mostly from the US had different agenda in Iraq. Apart from the work on inspection on the weapons of mass destruction, they were spying over the agents -- so that Iraq could not start rebuilding its chemical and biological weapons.

Four years after the Weapons Inspectors left Iraq in 1998, the US started accusing Iraq of building weapons of mass destruction

taking the advantage of the absence of the weapons inspectors.

**9/11 attack and US anger:** During this period the most unfortunate event took place and that was the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11, 2001 and also on the Pentagon. This is generally known as 9/11 terrorist attack on the US and nearly 3000 people died in the attack. This changed the world in terms of political and strategic relations. President Bush even went to the extent of using the word "Crusade". His declaration was that "you are either with us or with the terrorists".

**However,** after the defeat of Taliban regime and disappearance of Mulla Omar and Osama Bin Laden, one would have thought that U.S. anger on 9/11 was over, but suddenly Bush Administration started showing anger at Iraq. Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice tried to build up a case of pre-emptive attack against Iraq as the US wanted the world to believe that Iraq has been producing weapons of mass destruction particularly during the four years of absence of the Weapons Inspectors. It had weapons earlier too. Iraq was however, not accused of having any role in the 9/11 attack. Condoleezza Rice in one of her interviews with CNN some months ago clearly said that the U.S.

take place as the world pressure was strong against such attacks.

**US Congress authorizes President Bush to use force:** In the meantime, President Bush was able to manage this in the Congress. On October 10, 2002 the U.S. Senate voted overwhelmingly to authorize President Bush to use force against Iraq though considerable number of Senate members opposed it. This shows the lack of understanding of the problems by so many Senators.

**U.S. chose UN path:** However, apparently Colin Powell was able to convince President Bush to take the UN route, which he did. The US tried for one resolution that should authorize military action against Iraq in case of any material breach but France, Russia and also China were against it. After a long battle the US had agreed to return to the UN for a second resolution as was originally proposed by France.

The resolution 1441 was passed unanimously. Iraq came forward with 12000 page full and comprehensive declaration and submitted it to the UN one day before the deadline. Weapons Inspectors under Dr. Hans Blix and IAEA inspectors under E.L. Baradei started working in Iraq from 27<sup>th</sup> of November, 2002. The inspectors have indeed been ploughing through all suspected sites. Later some intelligence reports were given by CIA and other agencies which were used by the Weapons Inspectors but nothing was found.

of the UNSC. India, Pakistan and Israel have weapons of mass destruction. North Korea seems to have joined the group effectively now. John Major, former Prime Minister of Britain once said that nuclear bomb is a "deterrent". If it is so, a country should have it as a deterrent against any attack. Today the US talks with North Korea and the pressure of the neighbouring countries is there for a diplomatic solution as it is almost certain that North Korea has nuclear weapon and it can destroy South Korea, Japan and others if the U.S. attacks North Korea. Today, the strategic balance exists in India-Pakistan because both have nuclear weapons with delivery systems. As it seems, Saddam was in a hurry and without any nuclear bomb and delivery system in hand, he attacked Kuwait and hence faced a war that devastated his country though he and his cronies remained safe, and sound. Only Iraqi people suffered.

**Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty:** With so many countries having nuclear bombs, it is meaningless to have Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The treaty speaks of nuclear disarmament which is, of course, good for the world, but Clause 6 of the Treaty is not being implemented by the nuclear states for the purpose of ultimate disarmament. If the nuclear countries flout the main provision of the Treaty, then why should others follow it?

**Let President Bush ignore at least temporarily the half baked propaganda materials and briefings, sit quietly and consider the world wide opposition, think deeply the consequences of his ORDER that would kill men, women, children and devastate a country or countries. He should also very seriously consider the danger to the lives of his own men and women in uniform and lives of the innocent Americans who will surely be the targets in the event of a war.**

found no Iraqi link in 9/11 terror attack. But now the U.S. has started saying that Iraq was also involved in 9/11 attack.

**Saddam quiet for 12 years:** As far as the world remembers, President Saddam Hussain has been quiet for the last 12 years. He has not disturbed the neighbours nor any other state. The U.S. itself was on a record while Condoleezza Rice stated that Saddam has not been involved in 9/11 attack; the U.S. had no proof of such involvement. So, what is the problem? Why is President Bush all the time saying that Saddam has been lying and cheating the world for the last 12 years and defying the international community? The U.S. and its partner U.K. have not come out with any concrete proof that Saddam has weapons of mass destruction. Tony Blair came out with a dossier on Iraq, but these were not supported by any concrete evidence and as such UN did not consider them. Only satellite pictures or second hand intelligence reports or statements of the Iraqi dissidents are not enough for the world to believe in what the U.S. and U.K. have been saying. These are not also enough to launch a devastating war against a sovereign state. However, pre-emptive attack did not

But as usual the U.S. and U.K. have been insisting on serious omissions in Iraqi declaration and that Iraq was still hiding weapons of mass destruction.

**US and UK troops build up continues:** While the inspection was continuing as per UN Resolution 1441, the US and UK have been amassing troops and equipment including battleships in the region with the aim of declaring war against Iraq. So far, U.S. has deployed about 180,000 troops and UK has started sending 30,000 troops in the region. In all, there will be some 250,000 troops by the middle of February.

**Unconvincing:** In Davos, Colin Powell, in his speech to the World Economic Forum, tried to win over many, but there were considerable oppositions from several countries and delegations. Even Greece and Turkey asked for allowing more time to the weapons inspectors. The world does not appear to be convinced that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction and the U.S. has not come out yet with any concrete evidence.

**Nuclear weapon -- a "deterrent":** Moreover, the fundamental question is why a country cannot have weapons of mass destruction if some countries have? Five permanent members

**British people are against war:** The people's reactions in the UK are also strongly against war. Indeed, the Labour Party is seriously divided over war on Iraq. Tony Blair has been warned many times by his own party that any decision to join the U.S. in the war against Iraq will divide the country in the middle. But Tony Blair is hell-bent to support Bush. This is not democracy; this is pure dictatorship of a Prime Minister of a country which has such a long tradition of democracy.

**Go to war to establish peace -- Bush:** Highly responsible person like President Bush who is also the head of the superpower says he has to go to war to establish peace. Who is interested in that sort of peace? The world cannot approve of the use of weapons of mass destruction by a country in order to stop another country from producing weapons of mass destruction. In the process the people are the sufferers. Indeed, what an unjust world we live in!

**Hans Blix's report to UNSC:** After two months of inspection the head of Weapons Inspection Team (UNMOVIC) Dr. Hans Blix presented his "updated" report to the UNSC on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January. The report was extensive and he said Iraqi authorities were cooperative in the "process", but not so much on the "material". Among many things he talked about discovery of 12 empty chemical warheads and he said this was the "tip of an iceberg" thereby meaning that many more of such are still there. **This was a judgment on the matter and he was not supposed to make an argument; this was only to raise an argument on the ground. The members of the UNSC were there for making judgment on his findings or reports.**

He also highlighted the areas of non-cooperation like interviewing the Iraqi scientists outside Iraq and in Iraq without the presence of Iraqi officials. He however, said that Iraqi authorities were encouraging the scientists to be interviewed privately but the scientists

declined and wanted the presence of Iraqi officials. Iraqi scientists fear that Inspectors may exaggerate or distort their statements without the presence of any witness and hence the demand for a witness from Iraqi side. While interviewing Iraqi scientists, some of neutral countries' representatives could also be present to avoid such apprehensions.

Dr. Blix mentioned about Iraq conditions in accepting U2 surveillance aircraft. In the areas of chemical weapons, Hans Blix also found discrepancies in the account and measurement of the stock of chemical agents. This is the area where the U.S. appears adamant as the U.S. itself reportedly provided chemical weapons precursors or agents while Iraq was fighting a war against fundamentalist regime of Iran.

The reactions of the members of the UNSC were divided. While the U.S. and U.K. continued to say that time was running out for Saddam Hussain, others like France, Russia, China, Germany and the countries around the world asked for giving more time to the Inspectors.

**Iraqi reaction on UNMOVIC's report:** Iraqi reaction was restrained and they tried to explain the various issues brought up by Dr. Hans Blix. While they agreed to cooperate more with the inspectors, they however, explained their own position on some of those issues. Iraqi authori-

ties said that they did not reject the idea of using the U2 surveillance plane but as the UN asked for Iraqi guarantee on U2's safety in the air, they said that Iraqi guarantee on U2 is not possible until and unless the US and the UK stop flying in no-fly zones. They fear that the US and UK planes may deliberately destroy U2 plane and create a pretext for launching the war.

**President Bush's State of the Union address:** President Bush's statement on foreign issues was virtually a declaration of war against Iraq. President Bush practically repeated what he said earlier. He said that "Iraq covertly possesses anthrax, serine and nuclear components. Saddam Hussain gassed his own people, disfigured them, tortured them..." He also said that "Iraq aids terrorists and Al-Qaida". He told the Iraqi people that "your enemy is not surrounding you, it is ruling you". He therefore vowed to liberate the people of Iraq. President Bush went to the extent of saying that Saddam Hussain also ordered that "Scientists giving information and evidence on weapons of mass destruction will be killed along with family members". "If war is forced on us... we will prevail" claimed President Bush. He however, said "Secretary Powell would provide information and intelligence about Iraq's illegal weapons programs, its attempts to hide those weapons from Inspectors and its links to terrorist groups".

His State of the Union address mainly on Iraqi situation created a clear division between the U.S. and Europe (minus the UK). Though President Bush talked in terms of U.S. and coalition partners which now seem to be 12 as mentioned by Colin Powell in Davos, the U.S. and the U.K. stand isolated on the issue of war against Iraq. Even in the USA majority support war only if approved by the UN. The position in the UK is still more discouraging for Prime Minister Blair. Over 70 per

cent of the British people are against any war against Iraq. The worst part is that any unilateral attack without UN resolution (the chance of UN second resolution to authorise force is nil as there will be veto from at least one or two veto wielding countries. Four out five Frenchmen reportedly asked France to veto any war resolution) will inflame the passion of the people around the world and the support so far received for fighting global terror will gradually fade away.

**Terrorism to increase:** Not only that, terrorism against the US and the UK will increase though a great number of people of both countries openly oppose war. It's only two leaders -- President Bush and Prime Minister Blair -- and some of their colleagues have been pushing for war despite negative response of many others including considerable opposition from American public. The situation will now be worse as Ariel Sharon is again going to form the government in Israel. This trio -- Bush, Blair and Sharon -- may unleash hell that would engulf the present peaceful world.

**Was Iraq mad to invite Weapons Inspectors if it had weapons?** The world has to consider very seriously why Iraq would take the risk of inviting weapon inspectors into the territory if it had weapons of mass destruction. Iraq knows the intensity and level of inspection this time and only a fool would go for such an exercise if it really had weapons of mass destruction. It could simply sit tight and ignore UN call as done by North Korea.

**Allow time to UNMOVIC:** Thus if one thinks rationally, he could see that satellite images, second hand intelligence reports and dissidents statements could not be any guide to taking such a dangerous step like war. If disarmament is the goal, then allow the UNMOVIC inspectors the time they need to do their job. This is certainly the view of the majority in the UNSC and that of the world at large. If they can find some hidden things they can always take them out and destroy them and ensure disarmament if disarmament is the goal as seen in UNSC Resolution 1441. However, if the goal is something different -- like "Regime Change" which is certainly an undemocratic policy of the U.S. and against the international laws -- then the world must not be a party to it.

**Exile option not practical:** The option of Saddam's exile as suggested by the US President and also reportedly some leaders of Middle Eastern countries to avoid a war is not a democratic step as it does not appear to be anything that Saddam and his people would ever accept.

**Iraqi dissidents being trained in Hungary:** The plan of training some Iraqi dissidents in Hungary for regime change in Iraq, which is being implemented now, looks something that Al-Qaida did to spread terrorism in some countries. The majority of the people of Hungary reportedly are opposed to any war against Iraq though its government has recently joined the bandwagon and signed the letter showing support to the US President. The Hungary group has no connection with the people of Iraq. This sort of maneuver by a superpower does not go well with the democratic principles and international law. Such examples may destabilize the present political situation around the world.

**Division among Europeans:** There is now a clear division among the European countries in terms of support to the US. Apparently at the insistence of Tony Blair who has been described by former President Nelson Mandela as the "US foreign minister", Blair, Aznar and heads of Italy, Portugal, Hungary, Poland, Denmark and the Czech Republic have signed a letter giving support to

President Bush. They said " we must remain united... Our strength lies in unity." But still 10 EU countries are outside this group. France, Germany and Portugal have not been even asked to sign the letter. As it seems, this deep division among the European countries has apparently been created by Tony Blair. This is not likely to be appreciated by the people of Britain. This also smacks of split among the countries of the world.

**Mandela's criticism:** Former President Mandela has been very critical of President Bush's Iraq policy. He said President Bush "cannot think properly... has no foresight". Bush is acting outside the United Nations and both he and Tony Blair are undermining the United Nations... Why does the United States have to behave so arrogantly? Their friend Israel has got weapons of mass destruction but because it's their ally they don't ask the United Nations to get rid of them... They just want the oil. All Bush wants is Iraqi oil." This has been well reflected in the voices of large demonstration all over the world.

**Bush's personal anger:** Many people also talked about Bush's personal anger against Saddam as Saddam was allegedly trying to assassinate George Bush (senior), the father of present President of the United States. One can only hope that in such a crucial decision on Iraq that depends the future of this unfortunate Planet, personal anger shall not play any role.

**Only one man to make the fateful decision:** Anyway, whatever may be the views of the people, right or wrong, about the president of the US, war or peace would depend on the final judgment of one and the same man -- George W. Bush, the President of the only superpower. He still says, "time is running out". One can interpret it in favour of peace saying -- time is still there and Iraq must come out with everything it has for the sake of its own people and for the sake of the world peace. Let a situation be created where the world and particularly the U.S. which has strong suspicion about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, could be sure that Iraq does not have anything that can threaten any country including Israel.

**President should take time out and think seriously:** Let President Bush also take his time out of the White House and Pentagon's war pressure group and ignore at least temporarily the half baked propaganda materials and briefings, sit quietly and consider the world wide opposition, think deeply the consequences of his simple ORDER that would kill men, women, children and devastate a country or countries. He should also very seriously consider the danger to the lives of his own men and women in uniform and lives of the innocent Americans who will surely be the targets of attacks within and outside America in the event of a war. Indeed, dislodging of one man is certainly not worth the terrible sacrifice that the US and the world will have to make.

**UN route is the best:** The best course for President George Bush would be to go by the UN route and recall the troops if UNSC decides against the war. The US must not defy the UN and the international will. Let the UN deal with Saddam; the UN is powerful enough to do it. This will be the best solution.

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# Turning back HIV/AIDS in South Asia

CAROL BELLAMY AND PETER PIOT

**T**HE economies and societies of South Asia are poised to make great advances over the next decade. But the looming shadow that may destroy these prospects is AIDS.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Asia today is at what epidemiologists refer to as a tipping point. It is still relatively small compared to population size, but left unchecked it will rapidly and ruthlessly grow. Only immediate, comprehensive action will prevent at least five million new HIV infections in South Asia this decade, and begin successfully turning back the epidemic. Delay will produce larger, more damaging, and more intractable epidemics. The action that is taken, or not taken, by leaders at all levels of government and society in South Asia in the coming months and years will determine whether the future faced by the region's children is bright -- or falls further under the shadow of HIV/AIDS?

Fortunately, South Asia is well-positioned to turn back the epidemic before it inflicts catastrophic damage. At a groundbreaking conference being held in Nepal, "Accelerating the momentum in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS in South Asia", Ministers from 15 countries in the region gather to chart a course for South Asia's battle against HIV/AIDS. They are joined by Parliamentarians, religious leaders, NGOs, and -- most importantly -- the young people upon whose shoulders the future rests.

Across the globe, young people bear the brunt of the epidemic, and are the least protected against it. In South Asia too, around half of new infections are in young people under 25 years. But wherever there has been success against HIV/AIDS -- for example in Thailand, Cambodia, Brazil and a handful of African countries -- young people have led the charge.

The challenge is enormous: HIV/AIDS has caused more human, economic, and social destruction than any other disease in human history, and turning back the epidemic requires a substantial and extended effort. But the leaders at this conference should take heart. There are many examples of societies that have faced the challenge and are succeeding in reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

epidemic there has affected many parts of society, sustained efforts have resulted in high awareness among all sections of society and focused interventions have resulted in significant behavioral change among female sex workers, their clients and young people, three of the groups at highest risk for infection.

Many similar examples of success in fighting HIV/AIDS, from all over the world, will be discussed at this week's conference. But much work remains to be done to turn those lessons into real action that can stop a rapidly growing epidemic.

Today, the unmistakable signs of an expanding epidemic are all

women may cause the disease to spread quickly.

Bangladesh and Pakistan also face emerging epidemics, where high levels of risk have been found among vulnerable populations. In the Maldives, increasing levels of mobility and tourism could lead to rapidly growing infection rates. While Bhutan has few reported HIV/AIDS cases, the prevalence of sexually transmitted disease there suggests that the epidemic could spread rapidly.

Wherever it reaches, HIV/AIDS dramatically shortens life and human potential, draining family, community, and national resources. In parts of Africa and

**Schools in every country must do better in informing students about the facts of HIV infection, and in working to combat the stigma and ignorance that fuel the epidemic. But progress is being made, for example in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh which has introduced HIV/AIDS education into 11,500 schools, reaching 1.3 million children with critical, life-saving information in the space of only months.**

around us. In Kathmandu, HIV rates among injecting drug users skyrocketed, from under 2 per cent to 50 per cent, between 1991 and 1997. Infection rates among sex workers multiplied more than 18-fold in the five years from 1993-1998. While the epidemic in Nepal is still largely concentrated among injecting drug users and commercial sex workers, experience in other parts of the world indicates that without significant prevention efforts, HIV/AIDS will inevitably spread across society at large.

Not far away, in some Indian cities, HIV rates among sex workers have exceeded 50 per cent for many years, and in some states today, infection rates for injecting drug users are as high as 85 per cent. Already, 3.97 million people are living with HIV/AIDS in India, second only to South Africa in the total number of people infected -- and the Indian epidemic is continuing to grow.

As Afghanistan and Sri Lanka emerge from conflict and enter a period of rapid rebuilding, these two countries may also become increasingly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. This is especially true of Afghanistan, where the high number of refugees, the drug trade, and the vulnerability of

the Caribbean that have already been hard-hit, HIV/AIDS has reduced lifespans, strained healthcare systems, reduced agricultural production, imperiled education systems, and weakened military forces. Thousands -- in some countries, millions -- of children have been left to raise themselves as their parents have fallen to AIDS.

This vision of damaged economies, crippled social systems, and children orphaned by AIDS does not have to become a reality in South Asia. But it can only be stopped if the region, with its political leaders at the forefront and its young people fully engaged, takes concerted action to stop HIV/AIDS now.

The problems that feed the HIV/AIDS epidemic, including poverty, gender inequities, sexual violence and exploitation, have historically been best overcome by expanding access to education. An effective long-term approach to HIV/AIDS prevention should focus on keeping highly vulnerable children and young people in school, which provides the best mechanism for providing them with the economic and social skills they need to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS.

Beyond simply keeping vulner-

able children in school, however, national education systems must provide the knowledge that can save a generation from HIV/AIDS, and reach outside the traditional confines of schooling -- for example by offering night classes to reach working children. At the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, South Asia's leaders joined those from every other region of the world in endorsing the commitment that at least 90 per cent of young people would have access to the information and education they need to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS by 2005. Today, we are very far from that goal. For example, according to the World Bank, over 95 per cent of 15-19 year olds in Bangladesh do not know a single method of HIV/AIDS prevention.

Schools in every country must do better in informing students about the facts of HIV infection, and in working to combat the stigma and ignorance that fuel the epidemic. But progress is being made, for example in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh which has introduced HIV/AIDS education into 11,500 schools, reaching 1.3 million children with critical, life-saving information in the space of only months.

The other critical element in this fight is political leadership. In every part of the world, visible and vocal leadership at the highest levels of government has emerged as one of the most important elements in successful HIV/AIDS prevention. South Asian leaders are increasingly mobilising against HIV/AIDS, and working with young people to provide the resources and support they need. But the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the region is just beginning, and far greater commitment is needed if it is to be held in check. Population-wide HIV/AIDS prevention efforts must be combined with particular attention to the groups that need it most, including young people. The earlier those prevention efforts become widespread, the more manageable it will be to provide care for those living with HIV/AIDS.

The rapidly increasing HIV infection rates in South Asia hint at how quickly the window of opportunity for stopping HIV/AIDS may close. Young people will be the main casualty if it does.

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# How sustainable is the truce in Nepal?

ZAGLUL A. CHOWDHURY

**F**INALLY, the Nepalese, caught between a determined army-led operation to crush the ultra left Maoists and equally adamant rebels trying to dismantle the monarchy and establish a Republic, have heaved a sigh of relief. In the wake of escalating fighting between the two sides, the surprise announcement of a truce in preparation to a dialogue came as a welcome new year development for the impoverished country where the seven-year-old rebellion has claimed more than 7300 lives and more than 5500 in last 14 months alone. The ceasefire came following backstage negotiations by the mediators while there was no slackening of actions by either side till the truce came into effect for indefinite period. It was all the more surprising -- albeit a positive development -- as the announcement came close on the heels of yet another daring act by the ultras when they killed the chief of the armed police in the capital itself along with his wife and body guard. The assessment was that the security forces would swing into operations with further intensity to crush the rebels in the aftermath of the killing. But it was on the contrary. The news that two sides agreed towards cessation of hostilities and begin talks to resolve the issue that has crippled the nation in many ways was cheered by the countrymen. They can now see some light at the end of the tunnel. However, the road to peace remains strewn with difficulties. But the truce is the biggest news not only for Nepal but for entire south Asian region.

The interim government of Nepal took the decision to halt fighting after both sides agreed to certain concessions. Planning and works minister Narayan Singh Sun, a former army colonel, took a leading role in the initiatives to facilitate the dialogue. The interim administration was installed by King Gyanendra several months ago dismissing the elected government of prime minister Sher Bahadur Dubea, a development that led to clamouring by political parties, regardless of their rivalry, as undemocratic and also unconstitutional. The King said the Government was sacked because it lacked efficiency to contain the Maoist rebellion either by force or talks in addition to being incompetent in running the country. The dismissed prime minister denied the charges and pressed for early polls. Other political parties too echoed the demand. This brought pressure on the new pro-royal government of prime minister Lokendra Prasad Chand which increased operations against the Maoists obviously to justify its existence. Two earlier prime ministers, Sher Bahadur Dubea and G P Koirala did the same but without much success. Dubea initially took a soft approach to the Maoists but later hardened attitude but nothing paid dividends. The ultras took on the security forces ferociously in some tough battles despite losing many men of their own. In the process, the acrimony further accentuated. Chances for any talk remained elusive as before.

With the killing of the chief of the police it appeared that the radicals who are facing severe government operations are bent upon taking their insurgency to the capital itself. They operated in Kathmandu before but such actions largely remained confined in bomb blasts. This is for the first time that the Maoists struck in a sensational way by killing a key figure of the administration. Although it appears baffling how the police chief thought it plausible to take a stroll in the morning with his wife and a lone body guard in an insurgency-ridden country, the incident brought to the fore the fact that the ultras are far from being on

the wane and are firmly more on a collision course that is increasing with ferocity. The truce in such a situation is certainly a breather for both the contending sides whatever be the future of the ceasefire.

The government spared no efforts to crush the rebellion. Former prime minister Dubea paid a visit to India and a main subject of his discussions was the activities of the extreme leftists in his country. The ultras in Nepal are believed to be operating in close concert with the radical leftists in some places in India like in the Shiliguri district of West Bengal state. New Delhi assured Kathmandu of its support and assistance in containing them. Dubea also visited the United States to seek support and assistance. The emergency which was declared to face the insurgency was later withdrawn after extensions. But the menace remained a major challenge for the government even though the army has been pressed into the drive. It appears that the government is struggling to wipe out the ultras who often offer olive branch for a dialogue but again harden their posture, saying things have to be settled in their terms even if talks take place to settle the problem. Consequently, the insurgency remains far from being resolved or eliminated.

Prospects of a negotiated solution of the vexed problem occasionally brightened and then again the hopes evaporated. Dubea government took a favourable posture towards the Maoists for a settlement through discussions compared to that of previous G P Koirala government. But rather unexpectedly the radicals ended the four-month long ceasefire with the government by a series of attacks on the troops and police, killing many. Undoubtedly, the Maoists took the government by surprise by hardening their stance.

The ultras earlier announced formation of a 37-member central united revolutionary people's council as their central government. Their demands include a "constituent assembly" to re-draft the constitution so that the "Republic" can be set up. Needless to say, the government opposes these demands tooth and nail because acceptance would mean going away with the present monarchy although the country has a parliamentary democracy with executive power vested on the prime minister and his cabinet. Since 1990, monarch is the ceremonial head with certain powers whereas the elected government runs the affairs of the nation.

In view of the yawning gap on the positions of the two sides, success of a dialogue at this stage may appear slim. But the cessation of fighting has provided the much-needed opportunity for peace through talks. The opposition communist party of Nepal is understood to be trying to turn the dialogue fruitful. Maoist leader Parchanda said he believes the government would move pragmatically to resolve the crisis. All major political parties, the government and the rebels are to take part in the peace process which is clearly complex and may be intractable in a way. But the truce has opened the window for a possible resolution of the conflict through talks. All parties concerned must seize the opportunity without being stubborn to their positions. The ceasefire needs to be maintained whatever be the progress of dialogue. For, Nepal cannot afford this fight to continue any longer. This realisation augurs well for the nation. The need now is to turn this into positive outcome despite complexities.

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