

SAARC in Stormy Seas

The SAARC ship, as former Sri Lankan president Junius Jayawardene used to call the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, is in stormy seas again. Jayawardene used to say that there would be many mutinies along the journey, but with expert captainship, the ship with seven nations on board would eventually reach calmer waters.

The failure of Sri Lanka, and in particular Jayawardene's embattled successor Ranasinghe Premadasa, to hold the sixth summit scheduled for last Thursday in Colombo, showed that the ship was still far from being endowed with a captain of recognisable ability.

The storm this time was precipitated by Bhutanese King Jigme Singye Wangchuk's inability, expressed some days back, to attend the summit, and the mutiny was led by India's Prime Minister Narasimha Rao who invoked the SAARC charter and said there could not be a valid summit unless all seven leaders were present. However, Rao's position raises many questions since he must have been aware of the consequences for the future of SAARC of his refusal to attend. His reported refusal to accept Wangchuk's nominee as a valid representative also lacked credibility since there was no objection to the presence of Sri Lankan Prime Minister D B Wijetunge at the Male summit in 1990, in place of President Premadasa. However, we are still not sure what kind of diplomatic efforts Premadasa himself had put in to salvage the summit.

That Premadasa is facing acute political problems at home, both from within his party as well as without, is a well-known fact. Premadasa's failure to attend the fifth summit in Male last year and now Rao's exploitation of Wangchuk's inability to attend, are again raising doubts about greater regional cooperation among SAARC countries. The question now arising out of the rubble of the sixth summit is, what happens next?

The association was built, in the first place, to find common grounds for cooperation, while keeping contentious issues to bilateral arrangements. SAARC's lack of success has been mainly due to this limited nature of its mandate, but paradoxically, precisely because of this, the association also survived as a functional body, holding out promise for achievements in the future. But if SAARC is divided, then it is this very future which will be threatened. What hope would there be for regional cooperation? Again this brings us to the question of leadership.

During the present crisis, not one of the leaders displayed what could be called statesmanship, while the host president seemed more interested in putting up face-saving shows of regional clout. As the initiator of the concept of SAARC and as the country that proudly, and justifiably, claims to have done most to bring the regional body into being, it naturally devolves on Bangladesh to act as the mediator in times of any crisis in SAARC. We are not aware of any efforts Bangladesh made to persuade the Bhutanese King to come, and failing that, to convince the Indian PM to attend the Colombo Summit. It was essential that Dhaka followed an independent line and acted as a bridge between New Delhi and Colombo. SAARC is of vital importance to us and everything must be done to overcome the present crisis. The moment is now, and Bangladesh should take the lead.

The 'Potka' Tragedy

Priding as it does in having one of the densest populations in the world, Bangladesh perhaps also naturally tops the nations in the number of unnatural deaths. What is less appreciated is the fact of the strangely diverse ways people die here. If a count was made of the modes of unnatural death, we are hopeful Bangladesh will again hit a very top perch.

It is more sad and unfortunate than interesting that a great many people die here of eating the 'Potka' fish. The newspapers ever so often publish news of such culinary tragedies. So many people have died of the same reason over the ages that the 'Potka' fish should have by now become the most dreaded uneatable item on a traditional menu. No one has been heard of chewing the 'karabi' seed or eating the 'dhoture' ball and dying of very acute poisoning that is bound to follow. That is because even the most ignorant of our deprived and hapless classes of people are fully conscious of the danger. A 'Potka' fish doesn't poison like the narcotic drugs — giving you a comforting and even fantastic fare and pushing you slowly but inexorably to death. The Potka kills you directly — in a matter of hours. Then why eat it?

The Potka in fact represents one of our saddest national tragedies. It makes such a delicious dish that those that have savoured it even for once would all their life look forward to having another taste of it — or to unceasing partaking of the same, if that was possible. It is a peculiarly Bengali trait to pine for the Potka taste. But then you have to know how to process it. There is a cell of a quick-acting killing poison somewhere around its head. And all Bengali housewives, like the good cook all of them used to be, knew how to extricate it before putting it on the boiling pot. That knowledge and skill — almost akin to the skill and knowledge of the snakecharmer who knows all about extracting the poison-tooth and makes of it a fail-safe practice — is gone but the taste for the fish lingers.

This can be taken as symbolic of the Bengali race's loosening grip on knowledge and skill accumulated over the centuries in the life of a very ancient and dynamic people — and the lingering zest for life. Exactly as the old mother-in-law can prepare a safe and savoury Potka dish and when the daughter-in-law tries her hand — there are deaths in the family. The ancient wisdom that has seen us through the vicissitudes of national survival, its fast disappearance is tolling a bell of ethnic decline and may be extinction.

And this applies not only to our poor hapless nation — but perhaps more to the so-called advanced nations of the world. The Potka deaths do symbolise the danger of the vanishing awareness of the environment in mankind as a whole.

Top Spy Services Search for New Enemies

by Daya Kishan Thussu

As the Soviet Union gradually assumes the mantle of capitalism, Western intelligence agencies lament the loss of a familiar adversary and wonder what role will be left for them in the post-Cold War world. This is leading to a fundamental shift in their operations as spies seek a new identity and the search begins for a new enemy — imaginary or real.

WITH the Cold War over, the world's top spies are looking for new enemies. Western intelligence agencies have begun tuning their invisible eyes and ears on each other in an effort to get ahead in the lukewarm war of global economics.

Spy services are also taking advantage of warmer relations with Moscow to strengthen their control over the Third World.

Many military allies of the United States have long been economic rivals. But financial and commercial secrets now appear set to replace military strategy as the chief target for US intelligence gathering. With this in view the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is shifting its focus towards global economics.

The shift in strategy comes at a time when many officials in Washington believe the liberalisation of the world economy could lead to new national security risks since the US — now the only remaining superpower — is increasingly reliant on Japanese and European capital to finance its trade and fiscal deficits.

The new intelligence thinking also reflects a global departure from the bipolar politics of the Cold-War — a development which could lead to new regional conflicts.

Nationalism, sectarianism and fundamentalism are already on the increase, trends which have renewed concerns within Western intelligence agencies about the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in developing countries.

On the economic front, evidence is growing that long-time military allies are viewing each other with increasing suspicion.

Former CIA director William Webster, who resigned last May after the disastrous loss of computer disks and other material in a fire at the US embassy in Moscow, was quoted this year as saying that "economic security is part of our national defence."

US television network NBC. Perhaps to counter such manoeuvres, a new CIA task force on international economics has been set up to provide the public and private sectors with economic data and prevent technology transfer to competitors.

The CIA also intends to concentrate on economic dimensions of regional issues in the developing world. The agency is worried that Third World debt problems could lead to political instability in some countries, threatening pro-US regimes which provide unimpeded access to natural resources for the industrialised North.

His nominated successor, Robert Gates, has told the US Senators that "some of our allies in the Cold War are now at times serious adversaries in the global marketplace."

Gates has also accused some of America's military allies of spying on the US. Evidence for his allegation came in September when Pierre Marion, a former head of the French secret service, Direction Generale de Securite Exterieur (DGSE), revealed that his agency has been spying on American companies in France for at least a decade. The espionage, which included phone tapping, was "for the good of France," he told the

There is concern that a liberalised international economy will make business transactions easier for those involved in the international drugs, arms, technology-transfer and nuclear deals. The CIA also intends to monitor the global transfer of capital, especially from South to North.

Controlling the narcotics trade will not be easy, however, especially given the agency's past record. The trial of former Panamanian President Manuel Noriega, who was for many years on the payroll of the CIA, suggests the agency may have turned a blind eye to drug trafficking when it was conducted to finance its

political allies in Central America.

New priorities in the intelligence world are prompting both the CIA and KGB to reorganise. Under its new head, radical reformer Vadim Bakatin, the KGB has been slimmed down and reorganised. It plans to create a separate service for intelligence-gathering and shed its domestic roles, which have traditionally included customs and border duties, surveillance of Soviet citizens and fighting crime.

At the CIA, one third of employees in the Soviet division are reported to have been transferred to other sections of the agency over the past two years, and the agency's analysts and secret agents have lost much of their importance with the advent of high-tech surveillance.

Nonetheless, domestic criticism is nothing new for the CIA. Alleged links with weapons dealers, its destabilisation campaigns against Third World governments — notably in Cuba, Nicaragua, Iran and Chile — have outraged many US citizens.

Recent revelations by the New York Times that the CIA regularly used the scandal-plagued Bank of Credit and Commerce International in secret arms deals will probably further shake the agency's reputation.

Domestic criticism aside, new overtures by the Soviets for co-operation with Western spy agencies seem destined to play a more important role in accelerating the CIA's reorganisation.

One such overture was made when the KGB invited Western television crews to film inside its notorious Lubyanka headquarters after the failed August coup.

In September, Bakatin told British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, who was visiting Moscow: "I do not know why there cannot be co-operation between the KGB and British secret services. It is right that we should look at this." The new head of Soviet foreign intelligence, Yevgeny Primakov, who is also President Mikhail Gorbachev's expert on the Middle East, is also reportedly keen for Soviet spies to begin working with their US counterparts.

Already, which co-operation has been witnessed in the Gulf War, ignoring its defence treaty with Baghdad, Moscow handed over details of Iraq's air defences and Scud missile blueprints to Western intelligence.

New links between old rivals seem to have set the stage for an alliance against predominantly Third World targets.

DAYA KISHAN THUSSU, an Indian researcher and journalist, is Associate Editor of Gemini News Service.

Spying in the nineties

TAIWAN has applied to return as a member of the United Nations — under the title of "Republic of China." In fact, it was a founder-member of that body a half-century ago.

But then, for this island off the east coast of the great bulk of mainland China, such a situation only matches others in its colourful history.

It was 80 years ago that China's last imperial dynasty was overthrown. The leader of the Republican revolution was Sun Yet-sen, whose birthplace visitors can still see if they go to Macau and enter China through the 400-year-old border gate there.

His party, the Nationalists, has had a chequered history. In the 1920s it weakened as warlords began to split the country. In the 1930s Japan invaded Manchuria and began advancing southwards.

The Nationalists came under the leadership of General Chiang Kai-shek, and when Japan provoked America in 1941 into entering the Second World War, Gen Chiang became an ally of the British-American forces.

An "ABCD Front" was formed against Japan — the initials stood for American, Britain, China and the Dutch East Indies. When the war ended in 1945, this alliance did not hold together, however. The US occupied Japan for a short while, but Britain began withdrawing from all its Asian empire. Holland pursued a losing battle against Indonesian nationalists under

Shukarno, and a much-battered China was left in the hands of an ill-equipped army under Gen. Chiang.

China was rife with disaffection. The Communists had formed their own army under Mao and Chou, first collaborating with Gen. Chiang and then breaking with him. By 1949 Chiang Kai-shek had lost control of the north and west, and fled with his top men to Taiwan.

History was repeating itself. Back in 1644, when the Manchus replaced the Ming dynasty, rebels who supported the Ming cause fled to Taiwan under the great Koxinga. By the way, Koxinga planned to invade the Philippines and built a great navy to do so, but died before it could set sail and his son gave up the idea — and also the idea of fighting back into the mainland.

The island has been for various periods under the control of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the Japanese. To some people, it is still known as "Formosa," which is Portuguese for "beautiful." Its people, who are close to the people of Fujian across the narrow straits, have been in turn independent and then colonial over the centuries.

But by the 1960s, with the Chiang generals from the mainland still in political control, the island's economy was being transformed in a unique manner — and a most successful one.

Taiwan is mostly mountainous. A narrow farming plain runs down the west side. The

History Repeats itself in Taiwan

Alan Chalkley writes from Hong Kong

to the richer countries.

But they have to be pressure-cooked and canned. So a few large cannery cooperatives were formed, with their factories strategically placed in the farming areas.

By the 1960s, the island's economy was changing in a unique way — and a most successful one. Today it is the world's 13th biggest foreign trader and with the world's largest foreign reserves

The farmers were placed under strict discipline: they must grow exactly as the scientists directed, and must deliver top quality and on time. In return they were given soft loans for land and equipment, and guaranteed prices.

By 1969 Taiwan, believe it or not, accounted for three-quarters of all the canned asparagus in world trade, and the mushroom exports were also global record-breakers.

In a series of hard-thought policy guidelines, it was decided that if Taiwan was to sell goods abroad from its modest farming capacity, they should be big "value-added" items. In other words, luxuries.

They chose mushrooms and asparagus. These can be grown under cover, and in multi-layer hot-houses. They use up little acreage, but if they are produced with great care and in mass quantities they are extremely profitable when sold

'It is a part of Iman'. But in case of Urdu-speaking Muhajirs it is proved to be inoperative and of no value. Poets of all countries eulogised the importance of patriotism. The celebrated poet Robert Browning in his esteemed poem 'Patriotism' says, 'The most unfortunate person is he who has no motherland or is a stateless person.'

Approximately 3,00,000 people are languishing in different camps scattered all over Bangladesh in sub-human and adverse conditions in the forlorn hope of going to Pakistan. They are known as stranded Pakistanis. Their lives are full of pathos, mental agonies and anxieties. Is this the price of patriotism of these people? I would like to quote a famous line of the celebrated Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib "Kya ye Namrod ki khudhai bhai hua," meaning — was it the godliness of Namrod that in spite of worshipping, I could not be benefited.

So, I fervently appeal to the authorities concerned that these patriotic but stranded Pakistanis must be repatriated for the sake of humanity, justice and fairplay without wasting any more time.

Naushad Rahman
Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

Nuclear capability

Sir, Recently a startling news item appearing in the New York Times, says that, in a book authored by an American investigative reporter, it has been revealed that Israel has a nuclear arsenal far larger than previously suspected by the US Government. It further said that while Israel was under missile attack from Iraq earlier this year, the targets for this Israeli nuclear missile attacks could have been the Arab nations that were threatening Israel. Among the assertions made in the above-noted book is the one that successive US Presidents with the exception of John F. Kennedy, did little to restrain the Israeli programme, suspecting adverse electoral repercussions.

Now, let us look at the nuclear issue for the Middle East from another angle. The UN under the vigorous leadership of the US is determined not to let Iraq rebuild its nuclear capability. So UN inspectors were sent to Iraq to check on Iraq's activities in this behalf. According to a report in the London Times, evidence uncovered by UN inspectors suggests that despite sanctions and intense efforts by the United Nations, western powers will fail to stop Iraq eventually joining the nuclear club,

considering the scale and sophistication of Saddam's programme. According to that report, Iraq still has the know-how and technology to build a nuclear bomb.

So we have the picture of one country, Israel, already possessing a nuclear arsenal with the blessings of the western powers and of the UN's intense efforts directed to prevent Iraq from acquiring nuclear capability. The contrasting wish of a satisfactory solution to the problems of the Middle East. It is, however, puerile to suppose that in this age of rapidly advancing technology, the Arab world will remain supine without devising in due course appropriate nuclear deterrent, while Israel will wield its big stick over its adversaries with its nuclear advantage, however obsessive the western powers may be in the matter of destruction of Iraq's nuclear capability.

A S M Nurunnabi
Dhanmandi R/A, Dhaka

Repatriation

Sir, It is said that patriotism is the greatest, purest and noblest sentiment as well as virtue on the earth. The Holy Quran justifies it by saying

OPINION Hooliganism and Helplessness

As the days roll into months and months likewise into years, our country is gradually slipping into the grip of dark forces of violence and rowdiness. A long series of gunbattles have been raging throughout the country, most strongly being felt in the capital city, resulting in the closeness of a large number of educational institutions for an indefinite period. Many localities have become the battlefields of warring armed groups who try to establish supremacy and influence over each other. Their attempts to assert themselves through armed means make the life of the common masses captivated, risky and inconvenient to carry out their normal activities.

Intersecting conflicts of political parties or student groups give rise to clashes. Most of these gunbattles leave people helpless and silent observers like orphan children. The man with a firearm is the mighty person in such circumstances. There is every reason to banish an illusion regarding any idealistic persuasion by these rowdy elements to take our nation to any promised land: they create these anarchies only to serve their instincts to grab power and position. Nothing to wonder about the great leaders of the political parties, better to call them great orators who show sympathy in their speeches only and blame their antagonists always for all these disturbances. Major political parties are engaged in endless incidences of mud-slinging which bring no good to the general masses.

The common people are quite jittery and panicky. They feel frustrated and depressed

no action against these unwanted events having all law keeping agencies at command. The democracy loving people of the world feel disappointed by this trend of events in our nascent democracy. To stop the violence sincere and honest attitude is required and government alone should be quite competent to handle the situation, this is believed by the conscious quarter.

If the present situation is allowed to prevail in the country and the party in power fails constantly to improve the situation, it will be telling upon the democratic spirit and patriotic zeal. It is inconceivable that the ruling party should allow anarchy to continue. Memories of autocracy are still vivid and the politicians should not forget that this democracy has been earned at a high cost.

It is true that we become discouraged and frustrated very easily when we see the emptiness of solutions to the struggling masses. We must hope that bravery and adamancy of our oratory-loving political leaders will soon engage them in transforming the arms-brandishing 'partymen' into peace-making development agents. After all the anarchy let loose by the hoodlums usually rise to the climax only to cause eventual downfall of any establishment. We believe that the government will rise to the occasion and command the police to do the needful — the task of wiping out hoodlums and establishing peace before it goes beyond control.

We, however, note with discontentment that a democratic government installed nearly eight months back should keep mum about this "long continuous violence and rowdiness". Should we believe that they are still trying to assess the whole gamut of these incidents, it is a belated endeavour, we must conclude. It is a self-defeating concept to put blames on others and take

Hubert Francis Sarkar
Singtola, Dhaka