

Run-up to SAARC Summit

The SAARC summit scheduled for July in Colombo may have been predisposed to postponement, if not cancellation, as a repercussion of India's nuclear tests. An apprehension like this is building up in some SAARC capitals. This has been basically triggered by Indian press reports that intelligence agencies could advise Vajpayee against travelling to Colombo for the summit. But host Sri Lanka is going ahead with the preparations hoping that further escalation of tension would be averted to clear the course for the summit.

There is little doubt that India's underground atomic explosions have bred the frightful prospects for Pakistan to follow suit. A nuclear arms race is a palpable possibility on the very soil of South Asia which only in 1985 got wedded to SAARC as healthy underpinnings for durable peace and cooperation in the region. The fear is that even China might be pulled into the vortex of extended nuclear rivalries.

Even though the SAARC's cycle of summitry had once received a setback from the demolition of Babri Mosque it survived the jolt in record short time to prove its resilience. The challenge facing it is bigger now being that of nuclear belligerence but this is all the more reason why we believe the SAARC summit should be held on time in Colombo. In fact, we would have liked an emergency meeting of SAARC on a nearer date to head off all the fallout that threaten to put the SAARC's cooperation agenda in jeopardy. Could we have a provision in the SAARC charter to cover such a contingency which might keep arising out of increasing volatility in the regional political environment?

Sri Lanka for sure will not spare any effort to beef up Vajpayee's security at the summit, specially when the rule is if any one member of SAARC fails to attend it the summit cannot take place. As and when the Indian PM goes to the summit he will be expected to deliberate on how, in spite of the nuclear tests, cooperation within SAARC could remain unaffected and be advanced. Let him also hear out other SAARC members on the question so that the new bull that has apparently entered the china shop is caught by the horn.

We want the Colombo summit to be held not only as scheduled but also to be unspoiled by an all-out verbal warfare between India and Pakistan. We need to urgently work out a collective position for the WTO negotiations and make SAFTA into a reality by 2001 AD.

The Maiden Win

We are delighted. After 21 abortive attempts, Bangladesh have finally landed their first victory in one day international cricket. Our hearty congratulations to the players, coach, manager and officials. Their collective labour, single-mindedness have finally blossomed in the shape of a memorable maiden victory. What is remarkable they have done it with so much panache and élan.

With man of the match Rafiq and Athar laying a perfect foundation and the middle order showing no unnecessary bout of nerves, Bangladesh really made light work of their arch-rivals Kenya. Victory target of 236 was achieved with over two overs to spare and six wickets in hand. In fact it was a cakewalk for Bangladesh on Sunday night. What gladdens our heart most is that at last Bangladesh's performance seems to have been characterised by a degree of consistency. What the cricketers had gained in the match against India in the Independence Cup in Dhaka barring a highly deflated performance in the next match against Pakistan, served as a benchmark for a refreshing return against India the other day at Mohali. Bangladesh were defeated but not disgraced. They lost but not without a fight. Against Kenya, they started from where they had left off. It was such a thoroughly mature, professional piece of performance that more than once it seemed Bangladesh as a team has outgrown the need of proving their mettle against rivals like Kenya.

This is where we need to pull the brakes and take a few things into consideration. One day cricket is basically a day's performance. The fact that we beat Kenya on May 17, 1998 to open our account of wins in one day internationals is only a statistical landmark. We have to go out there every time and prove it over and over again. An inspired Kenya, for that matter any team with razor sharp fielding and an attitude, could have stretched Bangladesh to their limits. We are sure Mr Greenidge has the right mixture of experience and intelligence to keep our players relentlessly focused on these things. At a time when the world is warming up to a new spate of arms race and life appears a monotonous exercise in the no-go reality of home front, the victory has come as a fresh whiff of soothing and soul stirring breeze. We look forward wistfully to more such whiffs of fresh air.

We are Aghast

It has been a year since the government committed itself to the treatment and social rehabilitation of nine acid burn victims in a workshop arranged by Nari Pakkha — a women's rights organisation but nothing as a national daily reported recently, has been done so far. And from signs available those promises will remain as pie in the sky for this unfortunate nine. While one of the group gives voluntary service to the organisation that assembled them, the rest with the exception of one, are rotting in social isolation.

More often than not there are donkey's years between a government decision and its implementation. But this beats all other instances of procrastination for its sheer cruelty and insensitivity. Apparently there was nothing wrong with the initiative. The decision was promptly taken. Even the foreign agency to fund the project was not elusive. But nothing happened. So what went wrong?

Reportedly the original project underwent some 'strategic considerations' and although mouthful of provisions were incorporated in it, the more important thing — the coordinated effort for timely implementation of the decision — got lost.

This is most unfortunate. Not only the treatment and rehabilitation of these girls have been inordinately delayed but also those who had committed these monstrous crimes against them are roaming freely as hardly anything has been done to bring them to book. We feel the authorities are sending wrong signals to the victims as well as criminals. We urge them to take stock of the situation and do whatever it takes to make sure that not only those nine girls but all the acid burn victims get proper treatment and are socially rehabilitated sooner than later.

India's Nuclear Tests

The sad truth is that an arms race has already commenced and the chill of a regional cold war now blows across us. It would seem that in view of this, India's chances of occupying a permanent seat in the Security Council would have substantially receded.

and embarrassment, albeit at a personal level. At the regional level, one has to state that India's nuclear tests have created fresh uncertainties and distrust. These have triggered off an unbridled nuclear arms race that may prove to be disastrous, not only in terms of potential physical destruction in the event of a conflict, but also in ways more real than apparent, in slowing down the process of overall human and infrastructural development.

The underground tests yielded no radiation, claim the Indian authorities and yet these have immeasurably polluted the subcontinental atmosphere. Even on the ground, there are now reports of strange illnesses occurring among many in the poor little miserable hamlet of Pokhran, where the tests were conducted.

Before there horrid tests, there were times when one saw genuine possibilities of cooperation developing in the region. The nuclear tests prove that this was but a mirage. Gone with the blast winds are immediate possibilities of developing any meaningful SAARC programmes, subregional cooperation and common strategies for poverty alleviation. These conclusions may sound stark but such indeed is the situation created by the Pokhran tests.

And yet there was no real need for these tests. India has been in the state of nuclear preparedness for quite a while. The previous Indian governments had stopped short of conducting the tests in consideration of not only the nationalistic passions of the populace and will at once find popularity. Human history is replete with instances of strident nationalism finding quick favour with the masses.

In the earlier part of the century we have seen this tragically happen in Europe and in the latter, in our region. The spine-chilling fear now of course is that in certain situations, in the language of the Indian Prime Minister, there will be no hesitation in using missiles with nuclear war-heads.

Riding on the crest of a popular wave the BJP may, at a time of its choosing, go again to the Indian electorate to seek a fresh

mandate. Fresh elections may indeed give the BJP and the allies the single majority they so dearly pine for. In that event, the BJP manifesto can be pulled out of the drawer and given a free run, that the BJP and their allies hope, will take the Indian nation towards the concept of 'Sanatana Dharma' which, as the BJP manifesto says is synonymous with Indian nationalism.

The decision by the Indian government to go for the tests should not be viewed as having been taken in isolation. It is in fact the outcome of a thought process that has been clearly spelt out in the BJP manifesto. The manifesto states that the 'fivefold concept of 'Suchita' (probity in public life), 'Suraksha' (Security), 'Swadeshi' (economic nationalism), 'Samajik samarasata' (social harmony) and 'Hinduwa' (Cultural nationalism) will constitute the core content and ideological pillars of the BJP'. Viewed in this context, the series of nuclear tests only strengthen the 'Suraksha' or the Security pillars of the BJP's ideological pentagon.

The BJP manifesto mentions about the military expansion and modernization by, 'some of our neighbours' (that is, China and Pakistan) and the growing pressure and power of foreign navies in the Indian Ocean (that of course includes the Bay of Bengal). "These" declares the manifesto, "must be neutralised". BJP therefore is "committed to", "re-evaluate the country's nuclear policy and exercise the option to in-

duct nuclear weapons", "to expedite the development of the Agni series of ballistic missiles with a view to increasing their range and accuracy" and among taking other steps, "to enhance the traditional and technical capabilities of our external intelligence".

The Pokhran nuclear tests are therefore the outcome of a philosophy and thought process that may substantially alter the political and security landscape of our region. It is too early to hope, that India and Pakistan will now sit down at the table and quietly sign the NPJ and CTBT. Things may indeed get worse before they get any better.

This situation brings up new challenges for Bangladesh's policy makers. Our first task is to ensure that the new situation does not, in any way, impinge upon our freedom of action, security, independence and sovereignty. Second, we must ensure that the pace of our own development does not slacken due to all the nuclear excitement around us. Third, ever since its birth, Bangladesh has tried to play a constructive and positive regional role.

Our contribution to the "wind of change" that had been blowing in our area had been considerable. Bangladesh has all along pleaded for a nuclear-free zone in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. This has now been irretrievably lost. Moreover, China, which in the recent past had been apparently taking a somewhat detached view of the subcontinent, has now been drawn in. This has brought about a change in the geo-political scenario. Pokhran tests have no doubt put the clock of cooperation back. It is in our interest now to try and see that it nevertheless ticks on.

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