

The Admiral Speaks Out

Weeks after his controversial dismissal, Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat breaks his silence at a press conference in New Delhi, raising disturbing questions about forces that threaten the integrity of the military and endanger national security. Sukumar Muralidharan in New Delhi writes

AFTER weeks of seclusion, Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat, the Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS) whose dismissal from service on December 30 caused a storm of controversy, broke his silence about the events leading to the dramatic denouement to his military career. The occasion was a media conference at the capital city's Press Club on February 22. At his combative best, the Admiral took on the political establishment that had victimised him, pulling few punches and sparing few sensitivities. In equal measure, his fire was directed at those sections of the media that had played the indispensable function of justifying the Government's decision with supposed evidence of his wrongdoing.

"I have not come to the media earlier, though there were tremendous pressures on me to do so," said Bhagwat in his introductory remarks. But he had assured the nation on January 14, two weeks after his ouster and just prior to his departure from Delhi, that he would not let the "issue of lies" that had been fabricated by the Government to stand. This was a duty that he owed to the armed forces, and his appearance before Delhi's press corps was his settlement of accounts with political forces which threatened the integrity of the military and endangered national security.

Bhagwat took on the allegations of wrongdoing that had been levelled against him. When the tension began rising between him and the Government, he asserted, an inquiry was ordered against him by the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Intelligence Bureau. The senior police officers who were assigned this mission were, he said, "ashamed" of the sordid task that they had to do. And their final report was a certain "desperate question" to the Government: "How will this Naval Chief live after retirement?"

The Admiral chose to put on record this fact in evident indignation at a report featured in a daily newspaper published from Delhi on the morning of his media conference. With no effort at subtlety, the report made out a case that Bhagwat had been unduly solicitous of a junior officer, Rear Admiral S.V. Purohit, despite evidence of his alleged malfeasance. He had allegedly appointed the Rear Admiral to the pivotal position of Chief of Logistics in naval headquarters, allegedly sought to deflect an official probe into his alleged wrongdoing, and then allegedly falsified records to recommend his promotion to the next higher rank.

These were supposed to be damning allegations; they left Bhagwat unfazed. The charges against Purohit had first surfaced in an anonymous note circulated widely in October 1997. It had subsequently been put through a departmental

scrutiny and then referred to the CBI. Crucially, neither exercise had turned up the slightest corroborative evidence against the officer. The sudden re-emergence of these allegations in the media on the morning of Bhagwat's meeting with the media was evidently an effort to doctor opinion to his disadvantage. And Bhagwat did not conceal his disgust with the stratagem.

The former Navy Chief's main indictment was, however, reserved for Union Minister of Defence George Fernandes. His actions, which culminated in the unlawful removal of a military commander on December 30, were clearly a "politico-military coup," said Bhagwat. The supposed ground for his dismissal was his deliberate defiance of the established principle of Cabinet control over the defence services. But no such defiance could be proved. "Civilian control," said Bhagwat, is defined within a policy framework: "It relates to issues of war and peace; it relates to matters of strategic consequence. It prohibits day-to-day interference in matters of appointment, posting and promotion."

The immediate cause of his dismissal was his refusal to accept the appointment of Vice Admiral Harinder Singh, Fortresses Commander in the Andamans, as Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff (DCNS). His grounds for doing so, said Bhagwat, had been spelt out in a detailed note sent to all members of the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet on December 10. In all, they ran to 23 counts — from the damning charge that Harinder Singh had sought to foment communalism in the armed forces to basic questions about his competence and commitment to duty. Fernandes, said Bhagwat, took none of his reservations into account. In complete disregard of the offensive tone that Harinder Singh had employed in a "redressal of grievance" petition against the Chief of the Naval Staff, the Defence Minister chose to describe him as a "decent and competent" officer and actively championed his appointment as DCNS. In the process, he entered into a series of direct communications with the Vice Admiral. A parallel channel of communication was also set up concurrently, between the then Defence Secretary Ajit Kumar and Vice Admiral Sushil Kumar, chief of the Southern Naval Command.

Bhagwat's summing up of these events was dramatic: "Never in the fifty years of our history since 1947 has the subversion of the chain of military command been carried out in such a blatant manner — destroying the entire civil-military relationship, undermining the disciplinary framework of an armed force of the Union."

There must evidently have been a purpose behind the ex-

traordinary actions of the Defence Minister and his top bureaucrat. Bhagwat's conclusions on this were crisp and clear: "The Minister has supported a senior officer who has employed a communal appeal to divide the armed forces of the Union. For George Fernandes' mandate is identical."

Beyond this, there are suggestions of a deep and menacing nexus between the political establishment, top naval commanders and a flourishing arms brokerage business run by a former CNS, Admiral S.M. Nanda, best remembered as the CNS during the 1971 Bangladesh war, today runs a multi-crore rupee arms business in partnership with his son Suresh, also a former naval officer. Harinder Singh has acknowledged that he accepted the hospitality of this firm on a visit to Moscow and London in 1997. This fact was entered into his confidential report, only to be later expunged at the intervention of the Defence Ministry.

This was, in Bhagwat's reading, highly irregular. And despite his repeated requests, the adverse observations against Harinder Singh were not restored. Part of the reason, he now suggests, is that Admiral Nanda and Fernandes were in "direct communication" and met both before and after the recalcitrant CNS was dismissed. Bhagwat's reading of the Nanda nexus is little short of alarming. The Indian Navy, he says, has the highest capital expenditure component of all the defence services. It is for this reason a favoured target of the global arms brokerage firms. A single deal could mean a big payoff for them.

Further, the Navy is the only one among the three wings of the military which has the "potential to extend a nation's influence beyond its borders and extend its reach up to its strategic frontiers". International interests have, on this account, targeted the Indian Navy in two principal ways. First, "by diverting it from its strategic purpose to limit its objective to that of a mere 'coastal' force." And secondly, "by subverting the outlook of its personnel, by encouraging them to be members of a cosy club," the officer corps is transformed into a self-serving bunch who will sacrifice the cause of their force for personal aggrandisement.

Still more damning are Bhagwat's revelations on the nexus between the political establishment and an arms smuggling operation that flourishes in the Andamans Sea, with a direct nexus to insurgents in India's north-eastern region. In February 1998, the Navy had along with the Army and the Coast Guard launched a major operation to interdict a shipment of contraband in the Andamans area. The operation yielded a rich

haul of arms and narcotics. Surveillance and seizure operations have since continued in the maritime region around the Andamans.

On July 27, Defence Secretary Ajit Kumar conveyed Fernandes' instructions to the service commanders. They were that the interception of vessels suspected of carrying narcotics and arms should not be done without the prior approval of the Ministry. "One such shipment," says Bhagwat, "could mean a division of troops being tied down in counter-insurgency operations for a year."

Moreover, the interdiction operations against operations that threaten national security are sanctioned by the United Nations and have been proceeding since 1996 on the basis of joint military intelligence inputs. On August 8, the three service chiefs jointly told the Defence Minister that the interdiction operations in the Andamans were "mandated operations" which did not require the "prior approval" of the Ministry.

The Defence Secretary then reportedly followed up with a communication that operations should be confined within India's exclusive economic zone. The concept itself was absurd, says Bhagwat, since the economic zone has little to do with the zone of operation of arms and narcotics smugglers.

But the sequence of dubious interventions leads the former Navy Chief to a question that perhaps cuts Fernandes rather close to the bone and suggests a possible reason for his undue interest in the Andamans operations: "Why are LTTE, Burmese and the northeastern rebels operating from the house of the Defence Minister?"

Clearly, Fernandes now has much to explain about his conduct in office. Sheltering an officer who sought to introduce the communal virus into a force that prides itself on a secular credo was bad enough. The nexus with gun-runners and arms brokers makes things still more sticky for him.

The challenge from Bhagwat has now been forcefully articulated. His blunt speaking on the professional performance of a section of the media is guaranteed to make him some enemies but none can question the fierce sense of integrity and professional commitment that drives him. Nor can the former Navy Chief's belief in secularism, in fair play between communities and equal opportunity for all be challenged. After weeks of enigmatic silence, Vishnu Bhagwat has surfaced with a renewed force as a participant in the public discourse. The questions he poses could well spell the death of the unsavoury political coterie that believed it had administered the final solution on December 30.

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Vishnu Bhagwat: Dethroned, but still newsworthy

The 'Vital' Instincts

Army wants to play a role in peace talks with Tigers, reports Sugeeswara Senadhira from Jaffna

THE top army commander in Sri Lanka's war-ravaged northern Jaffna peninsula has said the military's involvement in any peace negotiations with the separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas is 'vital'.

However, northern military commander Major General Lohan Gunawardene said negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) could only start after the completion of the ongoing military operations aimed at weakening them.

It is the first time that a senior army official has publicly demanded that the military be involved in the peace talks with the Tigers. The earlier round of peace talks were held between civilian officials and the Tiger representatives, though a senior military official was on hand for consultations.

With 45,000 troops deployed in the peninsula, the former bastion of the LTTE, the heavy presence of the military is very visible in this town, bearing the same name of the surrounding peninsula which is entirely inhabited by the island's minority Tamils.

The town's residents believe that the military, which wrested control of the peninsula from the LTTE in late 1996, would remain there for a long time to come. Gunawardene said that of the total population of 738,788 in 1995, about one-third was still living in areas controlled by the LTTE or in Colombo and other southern areas. "An estimated 120,000 former Jaffna residents still live in Wanni, which is under the LTTE control, but they will return as soon as possible," he said.

The entire population vacated Jaffna with the retreating rebels when the military took control of the region. Subsequently, more than 400,000 people returned after civil administration was partly restored with military assistance.

Many people who fled to the South are waiting for resumption of transport services to go back to the peninsula.

"My father, brother and many relations are stranded in Trincomalee in the East, waiting for resumption of ferry service to come to Jaffna," said Sathkunanathan Arulini, a 19-year-old girl, who has finished her studies and is looking for a job.

"We cannot find jobs as there are no industrial or economic activities. All men and some women too are in agriculture, the only employment available in the peninsula," she said, although Tamil girls married early, there were many unmarried girls now in the peninsula because of few eligible bachelors.

Most of the young men had fled the peninsula, with some migrating to the West and the others moving to Colombia and other parts of the island's south. The rest had joined the LTTE, she said.

Durga Dharmarathnam, 20, said the fear of military administration was gradually decreasing in the peninsula. "We don't come across military personnel except at check points, where they ask all sorts of unnecessary questions. But now they have deployed female soldiers for body checking and there is no harassment."

There are over 1,000 checkpoints all over the town manned by troops. Almost 90 percent of whom are members of the majority Sinhalese community. "Now we deploy more and more policemen for security duty," said Senior Police Superintendent Nimal Mediawaka. He said there was a good number of Tamils and Muslims, who also speak Tamil, among the policemen in the north.

— India Abroad News Service

Giving Peace a Chance

M.B. Naqvi explains why Pakistan is in a 'no-go' area with IMF direction of the economy

THE declaration issued by a conference of peace lovers in Karachi said give peace a chance and it may open many doors for you. A ferment of new thinking was apparent and the conference was its best expression.

Economic adversity seems to have done it. Some sort of a dam seems to have burst. People are beginning to think for themselves and new alternatives are being discussed that did not seem likely before. Old inhibitions and even taboos are being overcome and disregarded. It is this strange unshackling of minds that was responsible for the kind of success that Karachi's national peace conference achieved.

Pakistan has been known as a country where hawks rule and where toleration of dissent is scant. Intolerance has been all around and many of the extremists of all kinds have sported as badges of honour their bigotry and tendency toward violence.

But this situation is happily changing. No, the ultras haven't gone away. Only, others have woken up to the fact that the unthinking bigotry and extremism favoured by the elite have landed the country in a no-win situation. It has begun to dawn on many that the country has been led by its elite into a blind alley. The economic policies of successive governments have led it in the direction of wild consumption in all sectors, both by the government and the society as a whole while the foreign policy has committed the country to a course of action that requires continuous and heavy militarization. But there is no money for it.

The economy is at sixes and sevens just because of these policies and the government is broke. It is forced to sell all its assets, usually at a throw-away price simply to plug the holes in the national accounts and all the money that it can somehow borrow gets devoted to what is mainly consumption. Some development does go on, but that is mostly for statistical purposes. The net effect is to keep the bureaucracy employed and all outlays are paid for its perks.

The intimations that the non-official experts were receiving suggest that the country was lurching toward a mighty crash that was to have begun in a default in external payments. That has been averted thanks to the US and the IMF — for a time: for two years at the most. If the economy is not turned around quickly and the trends reversed, the same problems will confront the people in the fiscal year 2001-02. Everybody will be back to square one and the finance minister will again have to perform miracles.

What Pakistan has got is a breathing space of two years at most. For the rest, we remain up against a major contradiction: national policies demand a level of development and a military effort — conventional as well as nuclear, with missile development thrown in — that simply cannot be paid for. All our economic policies have landed the country in hock to the creditors; every detail of the budget has to be cleared by them and its structure has to be approved. Pakistan's freedom of action has been totally lost. Islamabad's budget simply cannot sustain the national policies. Where can we go from here?

Against this backdrop, what Karachi conference signified was not only a quest for a new way. It was meant to show readiness to probe alternative approaches. The main thrust of the conference was, of course, on exploring and recommending the peace option. The adoption of new paradigms based on possible new economic, political, social and foreign policies would provide alternative lines of approach that will lead to more satisfying and workable policies.

The major assumption that underlay the basic purpose of social endeavour is the satisfaction of what social philosophers say happiness through freedom and full enjoyment of human rights by all the people. Everything has to be done that promotes the interests of the people constantly; an improving living standard of the common man that is to be measured in concrete things like better

nutrition, affordable health care, more educational facilities, housing, and so forth. All or most of the national resources need to be devoted to the purposes that underpin the endeavour in all spheres of activity, without ignoring collective security of the people. This approach is, in fact, a sharp departure from the unending and empty rhetoric.

After 50 years' effort by successive governments and with much popular support, neither are the Kashmiris anywhere near the stage where they can feel free, nor are the people of Pakistan much better off than they were in 1947. Even today the per capita consumption of calories is at best the same as it was 51 years ago. The same goes for per capita consumption of food, expansion of kachhi abadies throughout the country sends its own message. Health and education facilities, by all accounts, are inadequate and in a less than satisfactory state. How can the policy orientation that has held sway over the fortunes of the nation so far be continued, if we are at all interested in the people's welfare? The fact of the matter is that the whole national effort has been supposedly focused on enabling the people of Kashmir to exercise their right of self-determination. Pakistan governments, from day one, have strained every nerve to support a military deterrent against India — mainly for the sake of Kashmir.

The economy has been more or less largely militarized because of that, though there have been other causes as well. A lot of needless consumption has been permitted; a development model was adopted that required heavy borrowing.

Moreover, the country has fought three wars with India, none of which could be won. Now, of course, the viability of the economy has been questioned and further scope for financially sustaining a credible deterrent, conventional and nuclear, is rapidly disappearing. It is futile to expect to reconcile the demands of the arms race with the IMF direction of the economy. The IMF lays down something else and it is

bound to win hands down. Therefore we are in a 'no-go' area. That provided the peace conference with all of its subtexts.

One of the major decisions of the conference is the appointment of a five-member commission to produce an alternative policy orientation in the field of national security. It is too early to think of what alternative defence doctrines it will recommend. The commission has been mandated to produce progressive reports. The intention is to put before the people new ideas that will be both affordable and workable.

The commission is sure to take into account the depth of common feeling on the Kashmir question. It is likely to take the Kashmiris' right to freedom or self-determination seriously indeed in view of the popular support that the Kashmiris have enjoyed in this country. But the task before it is to suggest ways of achieving this objective that does not bring in their wake what the Kashmir policies of successive governments have done to Pakistan.

Special note can be taken of another decision of the conference: setting up of a commission on minorities. The question of the treatment of minorities throughout the subcontinent is one that requires deep and earnest thought with a view to chalking out requisite action plan by mainly the minorities in this country and hopefully elsewhere.

It should be emphasized that the problems confronting the minorities have not received as much attention and sympathy as should have been the case. It is to be hoped that the commission will suggest ways and means to the nation — government as much as the people — that will promote more tolerance all around. The minorities have to enjoy all their fundamental rights unhindered and in peace — and nobody should dictate to them or try to browbeat them.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

The 30-Cent Citizens

Spreading slums show urban poverty in India is rising, reports Lalit K. Jha from New Delhi

THE growth of squatter settlements and shantytowns across Indian cities and towns bears testimony to the rising urban poverty in this country, experts said. Unplanned growth, rapid industrialisation and large-scale rural-urban migration are the major reasons for the growth in urban poverty, said experts at a seminar on urban poverty organised here by the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) in collaboration with the World Bank. NIUA is the country's apex institute for urban poverty research and training. According to estimates, about 30 to 40 per cent of the population of the Indian cities lives in slums. Nearly 40 per cent of Delhi's 11 million population lives in settlements that are devoid of basic civic amenities.

Over 32 per cent of India's urban population is estimated to be below the poverty line. In other words, their daily income is less than 30 cents a day. "Over the years there has been a decline in the percentage of urban poverty," said NIUA director Vinod Tewari. "But the absolute number has increased due to increase in population and large-scale rural-urban migration," Tewari told India Abroad News Service.

The percentage of urban poverty declined from 40.12 in 1987-88 to 32.36 in 1993-94. But the absolute number of urban people below the poverty line increased from 75 million in 1987-88 to 76 million in 1993-94. In 1983, 40 per cent or 71 million people lived below the poverty line. Over 37 per cent of the people rural areas are below poverty line.

The three-day national conference of representatives from government, non-governmental organisations and international agencies like the World Bank and the International Labour Office (ILO) recommended the creation of a database on the poor, launch of community-based programmes and private sector involvement

in the effort to address urban poverty. "Businessmen and industrialists are responsible for tremendous growth of slums, which have now become a part of urban landscape. This can drastically decline if they provide housing facilities with basic amenities for them," Tewari said.

Slums and squatter settlements across India are notorious for their inhuman conditions. Stinking and clogged drains, poorly ventilated and congested houses, noise pollution and stagnated water pools are a common feature, resulting in poor health conditions of people who live there. Most such settlements are located on the banks of rivers or major drains and along railroad tracks.

The incidence of urban poverty is highest in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, India's largest state, where 48.38 per cent of the urban population is estimated to be below the poverty line, said urban planner P.K. Gopinath of the University of Birmingham in his paper at the conference. Urban poverty is lowest in Punjab which has 11.55 per cent below the poverty line, he added.

The absence of a relevant database created problems for policymakers in framing effective programmes to address the issue, experts said. "At present we do not have a database giving details like who are the urban poor, where they live and what they do," Gopinath said.

The Indian government's Economic Survey for 1998-99 conceded that the country's performance in poverty alleviation was not up to the desired level. "Although reduction of the overall poverty ratio in India from 55 per cent (1973-74) to 36 per cent (1993-94) during a period of two decades is significant, India's performance in poverty reduction has been weak as compared to some of the East Asian countries," the survey said.

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