

Carnage in Eastern Sri Lanka

AS September 18 dawned in eastern Sri Lanka, a total of 50 Sinhalese villagers, men, women and children, lay dead. The innocent villagers, residing in a nebulous zone in a linguistically polarised island nation, were hacked to death in their sleep, reportedly by members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). An otherwise silent night was shattered by the killing spree. Gonagala division of Ampara district, bordering Batticaloa district, bore the brunt of the attack by the LTTE. The hacked remains of 14 persons in Chilaw Bund village were a sad sight. Butchered and chopped, the remains spoke of the intensity of the attack by the cadres of the LTTE.

A dissected palm in front of a pulverised skull was the final act of protection a middle-aged man had desperately sought before he was butchered. In the same room, barely a few feet away lay an overturned cot, under which one could see the body of a boy, perhaps, not yet into his teens, "sleeping" in a pool of blood. Next to him was a severely hacked body of a teenager. Both appeared to have been sleeping on the cot when they were butchered. Herath Premasiri was the lone survivor

of his family. The living room of his house was a veritable morgue. Walking across the blood-spattered floor one came across mutilated and hacked bodies. Twelve hours after the cold-blooded murders the remains awaited the arrival of judicial authorities with body bags written out in paper and strapped around their wrists.

Of the 50 villagers hacked to death, 46 hailed from Gonagala. Of these, 14 were children. A total of 31 men and 15 women were done to death. No firearms were reportedly used by the killers as they "preferred" the silence of the night to operate. Two villagers each were killed from two other hamlets. While no information is available on the number of attackers, details provided by some of the villagers indicated the presence of women cadres as well. Defence authorities estimate that the number of attackers could have been about 10, going by the magnitude of the deaths. The attackers had apparently arrived from nearby Batticaloa district, parts of which were under LTTE control. Going by previous incidents and the cold-blooded trail left behind, the hand of the Tigers in the killing does not appear to be in doubt.

The immediate provocation

for this attack appeared to be an aerial bombing on September 15 by the Sri Lanka Air Force of Puthukudiyiruppu, a Tamil village, killing 22 Tamil people. While the incident was reported by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Sri Lankan defence authorities had denied it. They continue to maintain that the Puthukudiyiruppu bombings were "on selected and positively identified LTTE targets" and say that the ICRC was known to have made mistakes in the past.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga, expressing "shock at the massacre", said that the act, committed at a time when the "Government is doing all possible efforts to solve the two-decade-long ethnic crisis in the island, was not acceptable to any civilised society. Assuring the Government's assistance to the families of the victims," she "called upon political and civil authorities to take all measures to restore normalcy and provide protection for the affected areas."

Deputy Defence Minister Gen. Anuruddha Ratwatte, who visited the affected areas along with the Army Commander and the Chief of the Air Force, condemned the act as "dastardly

and carried out by a set of cowards". He said the LTTE was "acting in desperation" and was "taking revenge" for military setbacks in the Vanni area.

Reacting to the massacre, the Parliamentary leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), Joseph Pararajasingham, did not fail to mention the bombing of Puthukudiyiruppu. While "condemning the murder of innocent civilians in Ampara, Pararajasingham in a letter to the President said, "When your Excellency's air force bombed the Puthukudiyiruppu village in Mullativu 22 Sept, killing 22 innocent Tamils, your Excellency neither expressed grief nor conveyed your sorrow." This "contrasting behaviour" he said "has gone to reinforce in the minds of the Tamil people that your Excellency too have decided to follow the same communal path of your predecessors."

While much blood has been shed in the decades-long separatist strife, this month's killings were the extreme manifestations of deeper maladies which come in the way of well-intentioned peace-makers and liberal political leaders.

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Governance of South Asia's Discontent

The recently-released UNDP report in Colombo was right in portraying South Asia as the worst governed region in the world, writes Ekram Kabir



Who gives orders in South Asia?

S LAMMING the South Asian leaders for corruption, an inefficient bureaucracy and discrimination of women, a recently-released UN report on human development says the region is one of the worst governed in the world. Titled *The Crisis of Governance*, this year's report focuses on a range of issues like poverty, corruption, governance, economies, military spending, gender discrimination and social injustice.

The report by the Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, should be read not only for all those South Asian leaders who go into bouts of mutual backscratching during their annual SAARC Summit but also to all politicians and others involved in governance in the region. It is, indeed, a devastating indictment on all South Asian leaders, politicians and bureaucrats who had been at the levers of governmental power since the British dismantled their Raj 50 years ago.

The island newspaper of Sri Lanka published an overview of the report on September 16, 17 and 18 last which should inspire the categories mentioned in the report to read it. Even though on certain circumstances the conclusions may not be exactly as they are, due to generalisations, yet there are definite parallels identified with specific instances cited. The report is dedicated to Pakistani Mahbub Ul Haq and is authored by Khadija Haq. It was released at a press conference held mid-last month at the UNDP office in Colombo. The 1999 Human Development Report, prepared by the Centre, was also supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Peter Witham, UNDP resident representative in Sri Lanka, quoted to have said that the Haq-guided Human Development Reports have had a tremendous impact all over the world and revolutionised the way the UN system approached development. "There has been an enormous impact on development arising out of these reports," he said. South Asia, the report said, was facing a crisis of governance which, if left unchecked, could halt the region's democratic progress and economic social wellbeing of its teeming millions.

"South Asia has a history of democratic institutions but studies show that the democracy that is practised here is not at all conducive for the welfare of the people," Khadija Haq, president of the Mahbub Ul Haq Centre for Human Development (HDC) said at the

press conference. The region is still divided between the hopes of the rich and the despair of the poor in which the richest one-fifth earned almost 40 per cent of the South Asia's income and the poorest one-fifth "make do with less than 10 per cent." "...where today begins the struggle of survival for 115 million poverty-ridden destitute, and tomorrow threatens the future of 395 million illiterate adults.

It went on to reveal the nuclear crisis in Pakistan and India; weak coalition governments in India and Sri Lanka that are unable to guarantee a full term in office; political demonstrations and strikes that force Bangladesh to regularly shut down and urban chaos from the streets of Karachi to the ravaged Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka. "All the nations face the pernicious evils of endemic corruption, social exclusion and inefficient civil services which plague them uniformly."

Though nations of the region have undertaken structural adjustments in recent years, the burden of adjustment fell on the poor with social and development expenditure being slashed. Deprivation made South Asia an ideal breeding ground for crime and violence. It said, it added that income disparities in South Asia were one of the largest in the world with women suffering the most.

One of the most trite observations made is that democracy as understood by the region's leaders and much of the illiterate population "begins and ends with the ballot box". It points out that only a small part of the political system—the parliament—is ever exposed to a political mandate. Other features of a democratic political order which are associated with western democracies such as: rule of law, separation of powers, checks and balances on public power and the protection of basic liberties such as freedom of speech, religion and assembly are missing.

The report notes: "In many South Asian countries, democracy is fast turning into an empty ritual. Elections are often the only bridge between state and society. People continually feel excluded from the larger political process through which decisions are made." Pointing out to the fact that "South Asia is at war with itself," the report cites the breakdown of any social contract binding the diverse societies of the region together. The "ruinous war" threatens to undo all of the major advances in education and health which few countries of the region had

won in previous decades, the report notes.

Perhaps the most interesting observation made on South Asia is on "Dynastic politics". Mentioning the political dynasties of Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh the report states: "The domination of political dynasties is symptomatic of the widespread belief that political power is derived from patronage rather than performance." This indeed is another tragedy of South Asian politics. Performance is hardly the criterion on which politicians seek votes and voters too judge their leaders on criteria where performance takes a backseat. This is the main reason why politicians who have failed to keep most of the election pledges get away by uttering lies that are not even believed by their own gullible and faithful supporters.

Economic and political issues are hardly the subjects mentioned on political platforms. Accusations of violation of basic political parliamentary and judicial traditions are conveniently ignored. Personalities and personal problems are grist to the mill.

Besides being ravaged by a 17-year long civil war, Sri Lanka, for example, had the region's highest rate of murders and armed robberies with nine murders and 20 armed robberies per 100,000 people. And Bangladesh recorded the region's highest rate of car thefts and rapes per 100,000 people while India witnessed 23,000 dowry deaths since 1994.

If Bangladesh, one of the poorest economies both of the region and the world, were to improve the integrity of its bureaucracy—suggests the report—to Uruguay's level, its yearly GDP growth could rise. And if Pakistan were to reduce corruption to the Singapore level, its annual per capita GDP over the period 1960-1985 could have been much higher.

The report said that corruption in South Asia was unique because it led to promotion not prison and a flight of capital while resulting in massive human deprivation and even more extreme income inequalities. The report disclosed that South Asia had one of the world's most buoyant NGO sectors with, for instance, a mushrooming of over 100,000 non-governmental organisations in the region.

Of these 25,000 are in India, 19,000 in Bangladesh, 10,000 in Pakistan, about 18,000 in Nepal and some 30,000 in Sri Lanka. "Some of these NGOs are quite small and exist only on paper. But many NGOs have a national impact and some—

including Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya movement and the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh—are international role models," it noted.

Yet, their pivotal role is a far cry. In Pakistan, the dominance of a narrow band of elite—consisting mainly of landlords, bureaucrats, big industrialists, and military officers—reflects the concentrated nature of political power. The concentration and personalisation of state power has coincided with a parallel erosion of institutions. The country's weak institutions enable powerful individuals to thrive and control state resources directly. In such a state of personalised government, rules are flouted and policy decisions are based on personal whims. The sanctity of Pakistan's governance system rests upon the prevention of individual domination and the separation of power among state institutions that follow the law—Pakistan violates both of these conditions.

Institutional decay is evident in parliaments that cannot protect peoples' interests, in a civil service that is heavily politicised and unable to provide basic public services, and in a judiciary that fails to deliver social justice to all.

While South Asia is wallowing in poverty there are other regions that have succeeded in achieving economic growth and more humane governance, the report says. Since the 1980s countries from the Philippines and South Korea to Chile and Brazil have seen rising standards of living where massive movements had cut across class and ethnic lines and helped to end long standing dictatorships. In some of those countries, the political crony system had ended with the appointment of competent local government officials and decentralisation.

Many reforms have been suggested but it is said that "none of the reforms will take place without a political will". The founding fathers of South Asian nations decades ago certainly had that will to bring about effective governance. But are present leaders more pre-occupied with political survival and return to power than good governance? Reported appointment of political stooges and cronies to top government posts and widespread corruption have been a part of the South Asian political culture which has held back a billion people remaining as the poorest quarter of humanity, which is undesirable to the peoples of this star-cross region.

A No-win Situation

Bringing peace to the northeastern region of Sri Lanka requires more than a smart military operation. Lack of progress on the political front has created a no-win situation here. V S Sambandan writes from Colombo

NORTHEASTERN Sri Lanka is going through a painful phase, marked by an impasse, in both political and military terms. With the country set to face national and presidential elections in the year ahead, it is possible that positions will harden among both the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government. The Opposition United National Party (UNP), whose endorsement of the policy decisions taken by the ruling People's Alliance (P.A.) is crucial to resolving the crisis, is also expected to adopt a tough stand.

Exactly a year ago, following a fierce battle between government troops and the separatists, Killinochchi and Mankulam changed hands. While Killinochchi came under the control of the LTTE, the government regained Mankulam.

Since then nothing much has happened to alter the situation. But the security forces have scored a string of successes in the Vanni area, regaining chunks of territory from the Tigers. The crucial gain was the retaking of Madhu, a pilgrim centre in Mannar district. In the second week of September, the security forces started a fifth round of Rana Gosa (Battle Cry) operations in the Vanni area, comprising four northern districts. The previous such operation had been conducted with remarkable ease. Going by reports coming from the northeastern area, Rana Gosa V has not made much gains as the LTTE has put up stiff resistance.

Reportage on military operations is largely confined to information based on secondary sources as journalists are not permitted to enter the areas until after the completion of a military operation. Moreover, censorship of news related to military operations has been in place since June 1999. The Defence Ministry said that the troops advanced from general areas north and west of Melmaradadu Tank and general areas east of Periyandu Tank. Indications are that the total number of casualties on both sides could well be above 150. Heavy casualties have been reported from the northern Mannar district, where a fresh offensive was launched on September 12. The operation has strategic significance in that it seeks to cover areas which would, if successfully penetrated, lead to the opening of a much-needed main supply route to the northern Jaffna peninsula. The operation launched in September 1998 implied a rethinking on the part of the government with regard to its plans to open a main supply route to Jaffna through a series of offensives called Operation Jaya Sikuru (Sure Victory). After Operation Jaya Sikuru was given up, the western offensive was launched and it has been widely perceived as one aimed at opening a main supply route along the western coast. Operation Rana Gosa also marks a shift in military strategy

after the Killinochchi operations in that an earlier approach to open a main supply route along the Kandy-Jaffna road, which runs through the Tiger heartland, was abandoned in favour of a more practical western route. Bringing peace to the troubled northeastern region would require more than a smart and successful military operation. While the military advance is crucial, equally important would be the progress made on a resolution of the political issues. Unfortunately, nothing has happened on this front as the goals of both the government and the LTTE have remained unachievable. For its part, the government is keen on a solution within a framework that envisages a united but non-unitary nation, while the Tigers remain committed to their separatist agenda. And so the attrition continues. So it is imperative for the government to address the ground realities in the northeastern region, especially the situation faced by civilians living under the LTTE's sway. Regulations on fishing, and movement between the government-held and LTTE-held areas, lack of proper transportation facilities between Jaffna and the rest of the island and mounting pressures on the food delivery system are but early manifestations of more trouble ahead. The advantage now lies with the military, successive operations having eroded the territorial base of the LTTE. With the ongoing military thrust, the efficacy of the civil administration already handicapped as a result of the government having to run basic affairs in an essentially enemy-held area, has been further affected. The prevailing no-win situation, according to Tamil politicians, could help the LTTE to try to prove that it has a presence all over the northeast. This could impel it to launch attacks on economic installations and security personnel, as was seen in a recent attack on a police station in Trincomalee. By systematically dismembering the other militant groups, the LTTE is better placed to claim the status of the "sole representative of the Tamils". The assassination of Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam, senior leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), and those of Rizeek of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front and Manickavasagam of the People's Liberation Organisation (P.L.O.) are indicators of the LTTE's unwillingness to accommodate an alternative leadership for the Tamils, either political ally or militarily. However, the present delicate balance and uncertainty could change dramatically if the LTTE were to strike at any Army camp. Military strategists are in no doubt about the LTTE's capabilities. The question now is when and where it will strike.

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Women in Indian Politics

Women are as ever underrepresented in the election fray and in party structures, but in many ways, most of them qualitative, they have never been as important as they are today. Jayati Ghosh writes

IT is scarcely news that women are underrepresented in Indian politics. The issue has come sharply into focus in some years now, partly because of the thwarted moves towards providing one-third reservation for women in legislative bodies including Parliament, along with the more successful moves to enforce such reservation in elections to rural panchayats. Of course such an issue naturally becomes more apparent during a period of elections as well. What has emerged quite clearly in the current very long drawn out election process is how little has changed at one level since Independence.

The candidates fielded by the various political parties are still dominantly male: women account for only five to ten per cent of all candidates across parties and regions. This is the same broad pattern that has been observed in virtually the 12 previous general elections in the country. This is the case despite the Preamble to the Constitution (84th Amendment) Bill relating to women's reservation even last year. The very parties that were most explicitly in favour of pushing for such reservation have put up the same proportion of women as always, and certainly not more than other parties that had opposed the Bill. The Congress party, led by a woman and supposedly pushing for reservation for women, has only 10 per cent of women among the candidates announced so far. For the BJP the proportion of women candidates is even lower at 7 per cent. Even in the case of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), only 7 per cent of the candidates are women.

What may be more significant in terms of political power than the proportion of women fighting the Lok Sabha polls is the importance of women in inner party structures. Here women are by and large even less represented, in all parties. Only in the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) has there been a conscious move to bring more women into decision-making levels and posts within

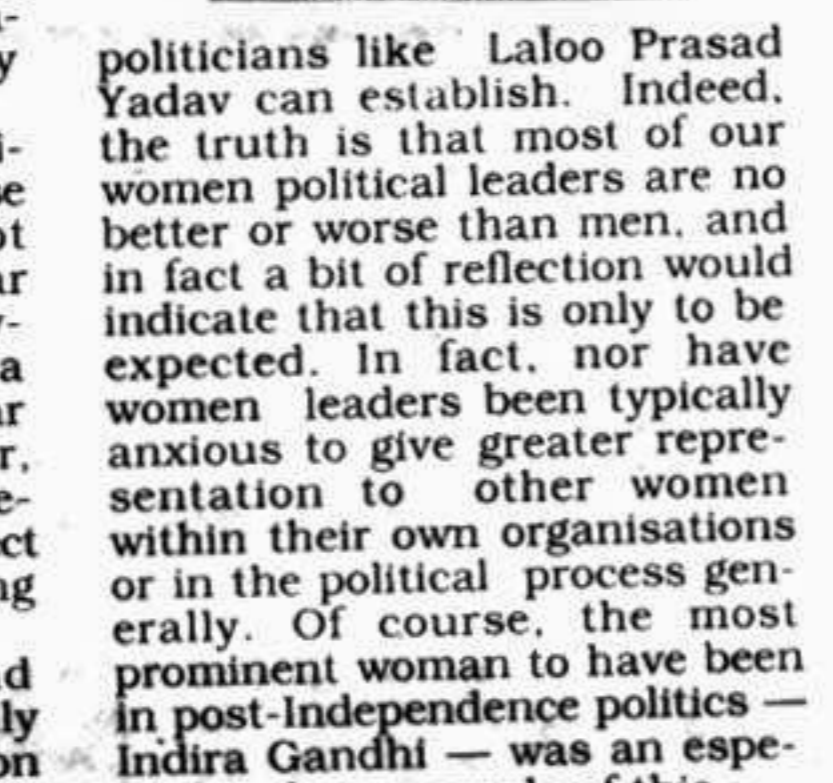
the party. In most parties, the women members are by and large thin on the ground if not invisible in the actual decision-making bodies and rarely influence the more significant party policies. Most often, indeed, they are relegated to the "women's wing" of the party, and made to concentrate on what are seen as specifically "women's issues" such as dowry and rape cases, and occasionally on more general concerns like the rise which are seen to affect especially "housewives". Despite all this, only the foolhardy would suggest that women are unimportant in Indian politics today. In many ways, most of them qualitative, they have never been as important as they are today. This is most evident in the proliferation of women leaders and in the fact that, even though some are relatively small in the national context, they simply cannot be ignored.

What is even more significant is that in many cases these women leaders have not emerged through the familiar South Asian paradigm of dynastic advantage. Sonia Gandhi, obviously, is a clear example of a dynastic leader, with an almost iconic relevance, but in fact in this respect she is in the minority among women leaders today.

Thus, Jayalalitha and Mayawati may have originally based their rise in politics on their proximity to particular male leaders, but they are clearly now significant leaders in their own right, who can influence not only the decisions of their own parties but even the course of national politics. Mamata Banerjee, despite or indeed because of her controversial nature, is the leader of a party who can claim to have got where she is on her own, without male assistance in any of the more obvious ways. Of course, one myth that is easily exploded by the role played by such women leaders is that political leadership is reserved by women is different from that by men. Nor is it necessarily more colourful, as some of the more extravagant male

politicians like Laloo Prasad Yadav can establish. Indeed, the truth is that most of our women political leaders are no better or worse than men, and in fact a bit of reflection would indicate that this is only to be expected. In fact, nor have women leaders been typically anxious to give greater representation to other women within their own organisations or in the political process generally. Of course, the most prominent woman to have been in post-Independence politics—Indira Gandhi—was an especially clear example of this.

BUT there is one interesting question that is thrown up by this relatively new development in Indian politics. What is it that makes the political system receptive to the emergence and even dominance of certain women leaders, even as it continues to suppress the voices of ordinary women as party workers and citizens? Why is it that in terms of qualitative impact and media prominence women leaders are suddenly up front as never before? Clearly, the answer is not to be found in any dilution of the male chauvinism which runs deep in Indian politics. If anything, the campaign process so far has indicated a resurgence of patriarchy



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Agony in the Himalaya

M Abdul Hafiz writes on the refugees in Nepal and Bhutan

IT is an issue of dispute in South Asia it has been only between India on one hand and other regional countries sharing border with her. Seldom has there been a clash of interests among other South Asian countries, one of which shares border with another. The Himalayan kingdoms—Nepal and Bhutan are perhaps the only exceptions not because they share border but in recent years they clashed on specific issue.

Their problems cropped up when the royal government of Bhutan enacted its citizenship Act-1985 and started implementing it from the mid eighties. As a result more than 120,000 Lhotshampa minorities were made "stateless" overnight according to the stipulations of the act. These minorities of Nepalese origin had been living in the southern plains of the Kingdom for generations. A mass exodus of these Bhutanese nationals who were—according to the Nepalese authorities—subjected to ethnic cleansing suddenly sparked off tension in otherwise cordial relationship between the two kingdoms.

According to these "stateless" people, the Bhutanese authorities confiscated their citizenship certificates and forcefully evicted them. Ever since they are compelled to live as refugees in Nepal and India. The first group of Bhutanese refugees arrived in Nepal in December 1990. Since that time nearly 110,000 Bhutanese nearly one-sixth of the total 700,000 population of the Kingdom—have fled their country. Of them more than 90,000 are living in Nepal as refugees whereas 20,000 are said to be living in different parts of India, though

Indian government does not recognise them as refugees. Not only they have been languishing in various camps in the Morang district of eastern Nepal for almost a decade, they have also become an unbearable burden on Nepalese economy.

Bhutanese authorities have however a different argument to put forward on the issue. They repeatedly refer to their 1985 Citizenship Act which stipulates forfeiture of citizenship in case of a citizen leaving the country voluntarily. Bhutanese officials insist that the refugees have left Bhutan on their own which the refugees do not agree. They claim that they have adequate proof to prove their nationality. To bridge the difference Nepal proposed that the refugees be given the rights to exercise their option to return. Whereby those who did leave on their own can refuse to be repatriated. Bhutan has not responded to this proposal.

As many as seven rounds of ministerial level talks since early nineties to resolve the problem failed to produce any tangible results. These talks also have ceased to take place since April 1996 when the last bilateral meeting was held. Despite repeated requests from the Nepalese side the ministerial level talks did not resume for more than three years with the situation now looking rather bleak. A number of Nepalese blunders are attributed to the prolongation of the problem.

One such blunder was committed when then Home Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba led the Nepalese delegation to the bilateral talks with Bhutan in 1993. On Bhutanese insistence he agreed to the categorisation of the refugees residing in seven camps in eastern Nepal. Ac-

cordingly the refugees were classified into (i) forcefully evicted Bhutanese, (ii) Bhutanese who left voluntarily, (iii) Bhutanese with criminal records and (iv) non-Bhutanese. This classification has led to an undue procedural delay which, the Nepalese now admit, was a mistake.

The Nepalese also failed to monitor the developments taking place in Bhutan during the late eighties with regards to its citizens of Nepalese origin. The problems could perhaps be dealt with less complication at that stage. Instead, through sheer neglect, the issue was allowed to snowball into a major problem later. The Nepalese neglects were enormous also in the following years when the Nepalese leaders were bogged down with power struggle in the wake of the restoration of democracy. The prevailing political flux particularly since 1994 did not allow Nepal to pay much attention to those hapless refugees!

Now on the eve of another ministerial level talks—either in the series an assessment of its likely outcome does not appear quite encouraging. Because Bhutan continues to insist that the two sides harmonise their positions on the four categories before launching field verification. It has remained silent on the participation in verification by an independent and impartial third party in accordance with international norms and practices. To Nepal, it is an international problem as the refugees sought refuge in a third country i.e. India before entering Nepal which does not have contiguous border with Bhutan.

Now, out of the three options before Nepal—the bilateral negotiation, seeking Indian mediation and the internationalisation of issue—the bilateral efforts, it is thought in Kathmandu, should be given the maximum chance and to be exploited to its fullest extent with, of course, intensification of confidence building measures among the affected countries. Because neither India is willing to mediate nor an internationalisation of the issue of feasible with Nepal's diplomatic resources.

Yet the Nepalese leaders who indeed matter are still inclined to an elusive "Indian mediation". Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai while talking to the "journalists" last month viewed that the Bhutanese refugee problem can be solved immediately with the small help of India. The former prime minister Mr Koirala recently said that India's help was a must to resolve the issue. But on the other hand India's declared policy on the issue has been that both Nepal and Bhutan should resolve the issue through bilateral negotiation.

In the meantime, the Nepalese hope to make some dent this time on Bhutanese intransigence on the issue with a measure of political stability at home. A Nepalese parliamentary delegation recently visited Patharia and Sanischari in Morang to reassure the refugees of a graceful repatriation soon. But the refugees remain sceptical saying that they have been hearing it for years. And a gloom continues to prevail in their habitats in the wilderness.

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