

Was it Wise to Postpone SAARC Summit?

by Ekram Kabir

Such meetings open grounds for dialogue and help each member-country to understand others better. It unites the member-states to work for a common goal, namely progress for all, and understand each other's constraints. India and Pakistan have to realise that for SAARC to have any future.

THE indefinite postponement of the 11th SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation) summit, scheduled for November 26-28 in the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu, seems to question the future of the seven-nation grouping.

The Indian foreign ministry spokesperson is reported to have said on Thursday: "On account of the military coup d'état and consequent concerns and disquiet expressed in the region and beyond, the government of India has informed the SAARC chairperson in Nepal, the host country of the next SAARC summit, that in the interest of SAARC and of a productive meeting it would be appropriate to defer the summit for the time being."

Although speculations had been rife in Kathmandu last week about the summit being postponed because of developments in Pakistan, the host country went on with its preparations for the summit.

The print media in the region, particularly in India, was explicit in expressing concern over the Indian government's move. A *Hindustan Times* editorial titled *Clouds over SAARC* expressed anxiety over the regional body's future, and "very ticklish" was how *The Indian Express* described the quandary facing the regional association which has not gone beyond rhetoric and banalities ever since it was formed in New Delhi in 1983.

"The expression 'regional cooperation' is meaningless unless accompanied by a willingness to live up to its connotation," said *The Pioneer* in its editorial. It basically blamed Pakistan's "obstructionism" for SAARC's failure to achieve faster progress in such areas as dismantling trade barriers. "The odd country outright from the beginning, it has been dutifully attending all the meetings, doing everything possible to hinder and not promote coop-

eration," *The Pioneer* blamed. The newspaper further argued that Pakistan's Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf's presence at the summit would only confer "legitimacy on his forcible usurpation of power" and encourage him to stay on indefinitely. India, committed to a political democratic process, "cannot countenance military takeovers," it said; and it would be hypocritical for the Indian government to attend the summit until General Musharraf at least broadly indicated when he intends to restore democracy.

The *Indian Express* said the dilemma facing SAARC this time was to decide what was the right time to do business with General Musharraf, who seized power after toppling Nawaz Sharif's civilian government on October 12. "SAARC is obviously an awkward spot," was the view of the newspaper, which said to see what kind of stance Pakistan's neighbours take after their participation in the Commonwealth decision to suspend Pakistan from that forum, "the newspaper remarked. But the *Express* also said that India had to accept that it had to deal with Islamabad irrespective of Musharraf's presence at the helm.

Now, what all this means is not new if Indo-Pak tension is taken into account. First of all, a postponement of the summit would only signal that India-Pakistan "as-usual" strains are spilling over into SAARC. This would certainly do injustice to the region at large. On the other hand, the present balance of forces within Pakistan and its history suggests that the Chief Executive is likely to entrench himself sooner, rather than later and, with the passage of time, the whole world will do business with Pakistan. It is not a sacrifice on India's part to do business with Pakistan!

But the bad news is that it will be very tricky for the SAARC and its future may be in peril, because Pakistan's coup

leader does not seem to be in a hurry to leave, and if India decides not to talk to him, then the summit might remain postponed till then. This is enough to scare the other member-nations. Again, what if India asks: "Who does the General represent — the brigade commanders, or the people of Pakistan?" India may well say that it is the brigade commanders and argue that it joined the SAARC when there was at least a semblance of democracy in all the seven nations.

Well, if the then Pakistan's military strongman Zia-ul-Haq's facade of democracy, Nepal's Panchayat Raj system etc., are any semblance for "democracy", then India certainly does not have a strong point not to join the '99 summit, putting the future of the sub-continental association at stake.

However, it would be too early to write off optimism for SAARC. The body has a checkered history of summit-time inconsistencies. For example, the 1991 summit in Colombo had to be deferred for a month, because Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuk expressed his inability to attend. The King reportedly did so at India's behest because then Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao was unhappy with Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa's action in unilaterally asking Indian troops deployed in Lankan north and east, under a bilateral pact, to leave. And in 1993, the Dhaka summit was almost cancelled as India objected to the hostile attitude of Pakistan and Bangladesh towards New Delhi over the demolition of the 16th century Babri mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu zealots.

Again, when the late Bangladesh president Ziaur Rahman first raised the idea of regional cooperation in 1980, the response was less enthusiastic because most of the countries had bilateral problems, especially with India.. the pre-

dominant regional power. Only countries like Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives, with nothing to lose and all to gain, welcomed the idea. Ultimately, the bigger and more powerful countries had to give in to the enthusiasm of their smaller neighbours, and SAARC was formally launched in New Delhi in August 1983.

Though there have been criticisms that SAARC had basically remained a talking shop, none of the member-countries would dispute the organisation's gains from mutual cooperation in spite of suspicions and prejudices between certain countries. However, the proposed South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) and a free trade zone concept are yet to take off because of the rivalry between India and Pakistan, among other factors.

Now, South Asian nations are faced with this prickly test of their resolve to promote regional cooperation as India and Pakistan bicker over the timing of the next SAARC summit. After the 10th summit in Colombo on July 29-31 last year, amid nuclear tension, South Asia's outlook is again faced with instability and seems unpredictable. India and Pakistan are again at each other's neck, blaming each other for everything that goes wrong.

There are two opposite views as far as the regional cooperation is concerned. One hopes that in pursuing what they believe, India and Pakistan will not jeopardise the interests of other member-nations. The importance of holding such summits is basically to reinforce relationships at a more personal level. Such meetings open grounds for dialogue and help each member-country to understand others better. It unites the member-states to work for a common goal, namely progress for all, and understand each other's constraints. India and Pakistan have to realise that for SAARC to have any future.

ANNIVERSARY OF THE FALL OF BERLIN WALL

I am a Berliner — and a Citizen of a New World

by Thomas R. Pickering

When we celebrate the fall of the wall, we celebrate the achievement of people around the world who have claimed democracy and freedom. We celebrate those who are working for reconciliation and tearing down walls within their own countries.

ON November 9, we mark the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The wall that so unnaturally divided a city against itself and split a nation in two symbolized the great tragedy of the post-World War II period. East and West became not two points on the compass, but a line dividing the continent, and ultimately the world. Just as the wall once symbolized bitter division, its fall has become poetic shorthand for hope, as country after country has chosen democracy in Europe and the former Soviet Union, in Africa, Asia, and South America.

When we celebrate the fall of the wall, we celebrate the achievement of people around the world who have claimed democracy and freedom. We celebrate those who are working for reconciliation and tearing down walls within their own countries. We celebrate those who are setting the stage for a 21st Century in which countries can work ever more peacefully and cooperatively together. The question is, what will we do with this good fortune?

As President Kennedy said in the Paulskirche in 1963, "Our liberty is endangered if we rest on our achievements, for time and the world do not stand still. Change is the law of life. ... And those who look only to the past are certain to miss the future."

America's future rests with Europe as together we build a peaceful, prosperous, democratic, and united community.

After World War II, our strategic challenge was to defend ourselves, help rebuild war-torn countries and form a partnership dedicated to peace and stability. We have been successful. After the Cold War, the pattern holds. Together with both new and old partners across the continent, we are working to extend the reach of peace, freedom and cooperation. A Europe whole and free, peaceful and prosperous, is the vision that inspires us.

Russia's role is vital. We welcome Russia's increasing international engagement, including in the Balkans and the NATO-Russia partnership. We also look forward to Russian participation at the summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) later this month. The



The fall of Berlin wall 10 years ago.

OSCE stands ready to provide assistance to Russia in working towards a political solution in Chechnya.

We continue to encourage Russia's internal reform. A Russia in which democratic institutions are strong, free market principles guide the economy, and the rule of law reinforces political freedom, is in our interest and the interests of our citizens. These developments would also provide a firm foundation for Russia's international engagement. With the fall of the wall, we celebrate the opportunity to work in friendship with countries we once counted as adversaries.

The promise inherent in the fall of the Berlin Wall must also be extended to Southeastern Europe. After the Balkan wars, one strategic challenge is to stabilize, transform and eventually integrate the democracies of Southeastern Europe into a prosperous, democratic and secure community. We do this through the Stability Pact, which aims to extend peace and prosperity to Southeastern Europe, by encouraging reform there and by helping those countries to learn to live together and to become a part of a larger Europe. It is part of a broader European agenda for cooperation.

As the transatlantic community grows, we must be attentive to the foundations on which it rests — foundations of mutual security, shared values, and open societies and markets. We are true to our Berlin heritage when we maintain our strength in the defense of freedom. NATO's political value is clear in 50 years of peace. Expanding NATO helps erase

artificial divisions, strengthen mutual security and ensure that more countries can live in peace. Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic are strong new members, and we look forward to the next round of enlargement. When NATO is ready and candidates demonstrate they are prepared to fulfill the responsibilities, NATO's military strength must be mutual. Europeans have the skill, desire and resources to contribute more to the common defense. European governments spend about 75 per cent of what the US does on defense, but do not get anywhere near the capability. There is room for smarter spending that strengthens NATO, improves European capabilities, and eases the inevitable political strain on both sides of the Atlantic from an imbalance of contributions.

We are true to our Berlin heritage if we remember another lesson: when democracies work together they can change the world. What might we achieve together? A Europe whole and free. Coordinated support for those suffering on other continents, whether from conflict or famine. A helping hand to the scores of new democracies around the world. Hard work on hard problems that cross borders — from diseases, to terrorism, to pollution. When Berlin and Germany were divided, we were trustees of unity. Now, in the transatlantic community can serve together as stewards of freedom, and demonstrate that countries can safely tear down the walls that once separated them.

In Berlin in 1963, President Kennedy declared that he, too, was a Berliner. Today it is to say that you are a citizen of freedom and democracy. It is to say, "I am a German, a Hungarian, a Latvian, a Slovene." It is to say, "I am a South Korean, an Indian, a Nigerian, a Chilean."

It is to say that. The past does not mean that the future cannot be different. As the new century begins, to say that I am a Berliner is to say, "I am a citizen of a new and hopeful world."

The author is Under Secretary for Political Affairs, US Department of State. This piece is distributed by the Office of International Information Programs, US Department of State.

Save Democracy

by A H Dewan

Democracy as we saw in the fall of the Vajpayee government in India, then Parliamentary elections and later swearing-in of a new government in the presence of the opposition leader(s) is what it incites and people look forward to. But it is our ill luck that our two honourable lady leaders at the top could not evince that kind of tolerance and feel glad or sad over each other's successes or failures. ... The recent episode that was staged in Pakistan as a sequel to misgovernance by Mia Newaz Sharif is the burial of democracy in whatever hue it was working there.

THE Daily Star as I always find it is a pleasant reading since it prints writings of contributors both for and against the government. Its leaders and column-writers that appraise the currents and cross-currents and that never fail to unveil the frailties and follies of the men at the helms of affairs in the government in particular have made the DS truly deserving of the recognition that it precisely plays the role of the Fourth State that a newspaper is expected to do. But to speak without prejudice the coverage and weight the DS in its different columns (including letter columns) lays on castigating the AL government is little seen in criticising the misdeeds of the opposition BNP who have already walked away from the legitimate forum of political fight, the Parliament, making it quite inactive on the pretext of debarment of BNP MPs from speaking. They have, instead, taken hold of the streets, creating violence and panic under the cloak of democratic rights and have now unleashed out government movement which is virtually leading to the atrophy or demise of our nascent democracy. For its return and resurrection many commoners laid down their lives but the leaders who thrived on their sacrifices do not seem to be concerned to hold on to that.

Democracy as we saw in the fall of the Vajpayee government in India, then Parliamentary elections and later swearing-in of a new government in the presence of the opposition leader(s) is what democracy incites and people look forward to. But it is our ill luck that our two honourable lady leaders at the top could not evince that kind of tolerance and feel glad or sad over each other's successes or failures. Although the cause is rooted in the bloody incident of August 75, the closure of that chapter of animosity was not out of our hopes following the 1990 general election which brought the country under democracy, by

being a bit liberal in their outlook, by sacrificing the party egoes and accommodating their two dead leaders in their own position of esteem that they had carved out for them. BNP then in power made full use of its men and media to efface Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from the history of Liberation War and now the AL in its efforts to re-establish Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the architect of independent Bangladesh is leaving no stone unturned to strike out the name of General Ziaur Rahman from the annals of history.

In the recent episode that was staged in Pakistan as a sequel to misgovernance by Mia Newaz Sharif is the burial of democracy in whatever hue it was working there. The Pakistani military in keeping with their tradition stormed into the citadel of power. The world was taken aback. The military take-over was widely deprecated with threats of cessation of all sorts of aids that practically sustain the impoverished Pakistan. So we do not like to see the democratic process that is being institutionalised in Bangladesh put to stake by the misuse of AL and the whims of BNP by keeping it out of the Parliament. The BNP has gone a step further towards that end by boycotting by-elections, and has resolved to resist all future elections under this government with clear indication that it would not return to Parliament. Whereas for Parliamentary democracy to function, there is no alternative to strong opposition party in the Parliament to keep the Treasury Bench on tenterhooks so that they go by the rules and deliver the goods to the nation.

It is not that BNP does not comprehend that it would gain more by exposing the misdeeds of AL through parliamentary debates rather than blaring them out in the street programmes. We want the democratically elected BNP MPs to make their forceful presence felt in the Parliament and substantiate their allegations of corruption, looting by AL as

BNP MPs are doing in the Parliamentary Standing Committee meetings where they are pinpointing the anomalies in the various government agencies. That is the way transparency can be ensured and accountability is let to work. But what then led BNP to go militant and destabilise the Parliament and for that matter, democracy?

As things look like BNP has been severely wound up with the loss of power, and therefore does not want to wait until the next scheduled general election.

Not to mince matters many turncoat opportunist politicians who have ensconced themselves solidly in BNP and who are regarded as hardcore elements have least regards for democratic changeover of government. BNP and its allies' programmes of hartals, road marches, street agitations seem to be calculated to throw out of gear the state machinery and the wheels of national economy, and their meetings in every nook and corner of the country are by and large meant for leading the country to the verge of political eruptions and upheavals with possibility of further loss of lives and property. As we know, every hartal and even street programme leaves us with gruesome casualties and colossal damage of both government and private properties. But their clamouring of successful hartals are the results of making the people hostages, and that people regard them as sheer detrimental to the interest of a stable economically viable nation is never taken into consideration is our pity. Although BNP makes no secret of it that they want to go to power through national election to be precipitated by their movements. The Pakistani episode should therefore act as a pointer that we have hawks too and it cannot be ruled out that they would not strike 'when the iron is hot', if the parties in position and in the opposition fail to save the country from brinkmanship. Hence the utmost importance of pay-

ing heed to the call of dialogue made by the PM. One recent survey by one popular vernacular daily revealed that over 62 per cent of the people want to see the BNP in action in the Parliament.

AL's failures and follies are heavier than its successes. Its transparency and accountability still remains a rhetoric. Killings in police custody or lynching by the police buying of other party MPs with blatant disregard for constitutional law and one of the party high-ups armed with goons storming into and brandishing arms before the board meeting in a private bank are few examples of the glaring connivance of the AL government and have tainted the image of AL administration. Despite all this, AL has accomplished few welfare oriented jobs like the introduction of allowances for the aged, old paupers, construction of shelter-house for the homeless, establishment of Youth Bank for unemployed youths, witch-hunt drive for the terrorists apart from the internationally acclaimed Ganges Treaty, and CHT Peace Accord. They have many such other programmes in their hands to add to their achievements. BNP had hardly any such accomplishments and perhaps fear that letting the AL to govern the country until the next election may augment AL's popularity.

Besides, Sheikh Hasina's personal image beefed up by laurels from international organizations is no less a matter of concern for BNP, and I shall not be wrong if I conclude that BNP with all its frequent programmes of hartals and movements being sorely smitten with all those above (besides its tendentious motive to save the killers of Bangabandhu as alleged by the AL). So plunge the nation into the spells of turmoil and confrontations no matter what worse setback our economy, our children's education may suffer and the edifice of democracy may face!

Hutus vs Tutsis: Enough is Enough

'We are the women of Busoro, we are the women of Musaga, give us peace, give us peace, give us peace now!'

The mid-July killing of nine United Nations workers, including the representative of the UN Children's Fund, underscores the way ethnic violence has escalated in Burundi in the last two months. Communities are huddling together. Many are arming. Fear is widespread. Hutu women in the Busoro area of the capital and Tutsi women in the neighbouring district of Musaga can look into each others' burned out neighbourhoods without having to leave their homes. All that separates their shacks is a dirt road and a few bushes. When the shooting starts across the road, they can hear the singing of the attackers, the screaming of the victims, and the firing of automatic weapons. They gather their children, lie on their floors and pray, for reprisals are sure to follow. But not all hope is lost, as this eye-witness Gemini News Service account shows.

Shamil Idriss writes from Bujumbura

As we drove into the small compound, the first shots cracked and echoed in the surrounding hills.

It was a frightening reminder of the ethnic violence that continues to plague Burundi and has killed an estimated 200,000 people since independence.

But the 250 women — elderly, young, frail, strong, Hutu, Tutsi, all poor — were undeterred. Everyone crammed into that room has probably lost a close family member or friend to the violence; most have lost more than one. Many must have felt what one expressed: "I never believed I would sit in the same room with the mothers, wives, and sisters of those who killed my sons."

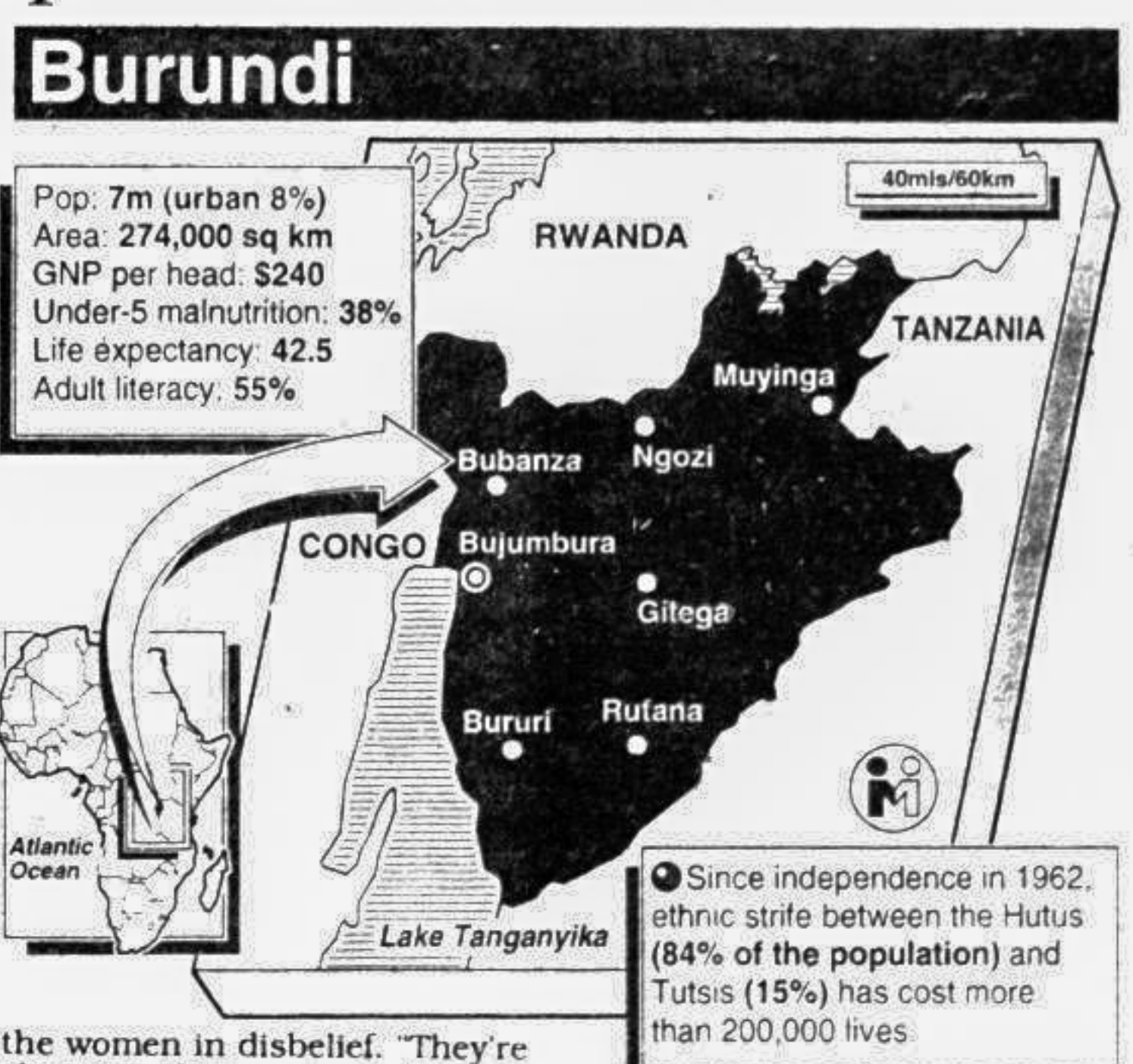
In formal, reserved tones — Hutus and Tutsis taking turns — they all emphasised that now is the time to support one another and maintain contacts between their communities. Now, they

affirmed, when their adjoining neighbourhoods in Bujumbura are beginning to withdraw from one another, is the time to stand together and say, "Enough is enough."

But the shooting outside continued, breaking through the speech of one of the most defiant of the women, a tall elderly Tutsi dressed in a pink flowing wrap and black headscarf, known for her willingness to leave her home in Musaga and cross the dirt path to support her Hutu neighbours in Busoro immediately whenever they were attacked.

The firing continued even after she had finished her speech. So she started a chant that took over the entire room, rising in intensity until it drowned out the shots.

"What are they saying?" I asked my interpreter, a well-educated Tutsi who has worked for cross-ethnic understanding most of her life. She stared at



the women in disbelief. "They're shouting, 'Give us peace!'"

When the singing ended, a downpour started and the shooting stopped. The women crowded even closer together in the one-room building. The rain poured the corrugated metal roof and turned the dirt driveway to mud.

The reason for the event was a symbolic exchange of humanitarian aid between the two communities, and as the truckload of goods arrived, so did the soldiers. Whether they were there to protect the women or to steal the aid, whether they were really soldiers or were rebels disguised in military uniform, no-one knew. For the moment, no-one cared. For the armed men seemed content to glare at the bags of peas, rice, corn, blankets and soap were unloaded from the truck.

A group of women re-gathered in the small room to give speeches of thanks. Soon they began to sing, then dance. Within minutes, not a person was left sitting.

As the soldiers continued to peer into the room, out of shock or anger or both, the women of Musaga and Busoro danced: not a dance for formal occasions, but an urgent, thrusting, desperate dance accompanied by a rising chant in Kirundi. "We are the women of Busoro, we are the women of Musaga, give us peace, give us peace, give us peace now!"

