

South Asia

# Vajpayee's Vaccine for the North-east

**Mansoor Mamoon examines India's recent concern regarding its north-eastern states**

THE BJP-led NDA government in India, and for that matter, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee are clearly in a quandary as to what to do with secessionist trends and insurgencies in the Delhi administered Kashmir as well as in the north-east. Both the troubled spots are not only costing India heavily, but also calling for urgent attention in view of increased security risks. For both the thorns in its foot, India, as usual, is blaming Pakistan. The trauma of the Millennium eve's airbus skyjack drama is still lingering with its fallout both inside and outside the country.

Pakistan Chief Executive Pervez Musharraf's successful trip to China and Beijing's otherwise firm commitment for continued support to its traditional ally, have increased Vajpayee's concern. This new Sino-Pakistan realignment in the subcontinental plane has seemingly forced India to look towards Washington for moral and logistic support, albeit analysts differing view of a possible US-India axis, leading to Musharraf's seeking closer rapport with China to avoid possible international isolation for giving no timeframe for restoring democracy and for alleged shielding of the Islamic fundamentalists. A strategist of no less calibre, Vajpayee knows rather too well that apart from seeking blessings from Clinton administration in this apparently difficult situation, he needs some effective homework to do of his own. With this intent, he called a grand conference of the chief ministers and governors of eight north-eastern states including Sikkim at Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya on January 21 last. Home Minister L K Advani, Defence Minister George Fernandes and Foreign Minister Jashwanth Singh, among others, were present in the meeting. The meeting was mainly convened to discuss the issue of insurgency in the region.

Strategically important, these eight states have common borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, Bhutan and Nepal. The north-eastern states are geographically far-flung and somewhat isolated. Though rich in oil and tea, these states have not developed at par with the rest of the country. Integration of the region with the country's mainstream has posed to

be a difficult task because of five-decade-long tribal insurgency which so far had allegedly cost at least 25,000 lives. Thirty odd guerrilla groups are reportedly operating allegedly with the covert support and assistance of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan. Islamabad has, however, persistently denied its involvement in fomenting insurgency in the region. But New Delhi insists that it has definite proof of Islamabad's incitement and abatement which the latter is doing as part of its gameplan to destabilise India.

India has also claimed to have discovered Pakistan's hand in the Kashmir imbroglio centring which the two countries fought three wars and had cost India another 25,000 lives since the separatist struggle began in the valley in 1947. The latest incident of plane hijacking after their Kargil encounter has brought their relations to its lowest ebb with the flurry of accusation and counter-accusation against each other alongside pin-prickling by the two sides in their common border.

At Shillong, Prime Minister Vajpayee unveiled an economic development and rehabilitation package amounting to a staggering amount of ten thousand two hundred seventy-one Indian rupees to be spent over a period of three years for infrastructure development in the north-eastern region as well as to generate sufficient employment opportunities. Vajpayee diagnosed that it was endemic unemployment among the youths in the region that is compelling them to join in the bush war. The package includes building of roads, developing agriculture, installing two hydro-power plants for generating electricity etc. Besides three bordering points with Myanmar and two with Bangladesh will also be so equipped as to facilitate cross-border trades with the two neighbouring countries. Sixty battalions of the Indian army will also post battalions of

its reserve force to counter-insurgency and to maintain security in the strife-torn states at its own cost.

The participating chief ministers called for meaningful negotiation with the insurgents so as to gradually help them return to normal life and arrange for proper rehabilitation of those who will surrender arms of their own volition.

That Vajpayee means business in his plan for snuffing out insurgency through initiating development in the long-neglected region has been evidenced by his despatch of his state minister for external affairs Ajit Panja, to convince Bangladesh to provide transshipment of Indian goods through Bangladesh territory to the north-eastern states and multi-modal communication facilities between the two countries. Bangladesh and India reportedly agreed for opening bus service between Dhaka and Agartala and rail link between Benapole in Bangladesh and Petrapole in West Bengal. The proposal for rail movement between Akhaura and Agartala has also been mooted by Ajit Panja. But how transshipment could be possible without reducing the yawning trade gap in favour of India and the latter's reciprocity in providing the same facilities to Bangladesh for linkages with Bhutan and Nepal are to be seen. The opposition in Bangladesh is vehemently opposing what it terms it as bartering the country's independence, sovereignty and security to please Delhi. Being almost at the far end of its five-year term how the present government in Bangladesh will accommodate India's request for opening up to the requirement of its north-eastern states in the face of strong opposition from its political rivals will be difficult to gauge.

Prior to this, the Indian business circle met with their counterparts in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal for subre-

gional economic cooperation grouping in Delhi. Ostensibly called the GMB (Ganges, Meghna and Brahmaputra) growth triangle comprising 11 north-Indian states, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan was first mooted at Kathmandu under the aegis of the Asian Development Bank. The Delhi meeting was a follow-up and a declaration to this effect was adopted calling for working out modalities of cooperation between the littoral states and creating necessary public awareness about the benefits such a subregional grouping will accrue for collective benefit. A meeting of the parliament members belonging to both the ruling and opposition parties, businessmen, planners and others belonging to the proposed GMB is scheduled to be held in Calcutta in March next. But the private sectors of both Bhutan and Nepal raised doubt about its success citing the example of Saar now in limbo due to hostilities between India and Pakistan. On this count also the opposition political parties in Bangladesh are not likely to give their agreement but will rather stand as a stumbling block.

Vajpayee government, in short, is seriously seeking all avenues, both domestic and regional, to bring to an end the long-drawn insurgencies. It thinks that through mitigating economic deprivation of the local people and through a process of planned development the dissenters could be tamed. The formula is that if economic men in the region could be liberated, political men will not lag behind. But how far his economic dosage to cure political ailments would succeed is to be seen in the immediate future. But the cooperation from the neighbouring countries is not likely to be coming in the desired channel unless India changes its big-brotherly attitude to its smaller neighbours. And without their help it will take quite a long time to root out insurgencies in the north-eastern region of India. What India needs most is confidence-building and guaranteeing mutual benefit to the GMB countries. But any attempt to isolate Pakistan by substituting GMB for Saarc is likely to backfire. Smaller South Asian countries will not take the risk of such a situation which is likely to further destabilise South Asia.

# Beijing's Brave Face

**The flight of Karmapa has the possibility to be seen by cynics as the failure of China's policy on religion. Harun ur Rashid writes**



Young Karmapa face the clicks

THE fourteen-year-old 17th Lama's flight (the Lama properly known as the Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu religious order) from Tibet to Dharmasala (India) on 5th January must have embarrassed China. Since then the Karmapa, having met the Dalai Lama, had left Dharmasala for an unknown destination in India.

Both the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa are regarded by their followers as the living presence of Buddha. The Karmapa's Kagyupa sect, known as "Black Hats", once Tibet's most powerful school, was replaced by the Gelugpa school of the Dalai Lamas 350 years ago.

The teenage-Karmapa is the first leading reincarnation of a holy person, to be officially recognised by China. He is also the only Tibetan Lama on whom the Dalai Lama and China have agreed. The Karmapa's monastery was located 70km north of Lhasa, Tibetan capital.

It is reported that the Karmapa was able to elude his Chinese watchful guards at the 800-year old monastery in central Tibet by declaring his intention to go on a retreat. He and a few monks set across the mountains on December 28, trekking more than 2000km for days along rocky paths. A jeep and other modes of transport were used later.

The Karmapa's flight with a few monks is the most significant since the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959 after the Tibetan uprising failed against the Chinese rule in Tibet. When the young exhausted Karmapa with scraped hands and blistered feet reached northern India, his followers in Dharmasala were ecstatic with joy. The Karmapa's predecessor the 16th Lama also fled with the Dalai Lama in 1959.

Those close to the Karmapa said that he was increasingly frustrated at not being allowed to meet his teachers to obtain the instructions necessary for his religious top position. Chinese authorities alleged to have denied repeatedly a visa to his principal teacher, Tai Situ

Ripoché who has a monastery near Dharmasala in India. China's State Council Information office acknowledged that the Karmapa had left his monastery with a small number of followers. The office said the Karmapa went abroad to get musical instruments and a black hat — the symbol of his spiritual power believed to be woven from the hair of female deities. The state-run Xinhua News Agency cited a letter saying he did not mean "to betray the state, the nation, the monastery or the leadership."

The followers in Dharmasala claim that the Karmapa has been groomed as a "patriotic" tool by Beijing in its campaign to suppress Tibetan independence but his escape will increase international pressure on the Chinese to ease their total control over Tibet. They alleged that the Karmapa joined other monks who had been recently pouring over the Himalayas in their hundreds, escaping the latest crackdown on religion in Tibet. It is expected that the five mill on Karma Kagyupa Buddhists worldwide are expected to denounce China publicly for oppressing their sect. China is increasingly facing

problems with organised religion. Recently Catholics aligned with China's Communist Party ordained five bishops not recognised by the Vatican in Rome. The Muslims in northwest in China are reportedly faring no better. It is alleged that religious schools have been closed and last month 11 men in Xinjiang were convicted of "separatism" and two were sentenced to death. Besides, China is being confronted by Falun Gong movement which is related to intangible notions of legitimacy and the rights of individuals. Although Falun Gong combines particular exercises with forms of meditation and spirituality, it is considered a direct threat to Communist Party rule. "The state apparatus has in the past been able to prevent any groups emerging around which opposition could coalesce."

This incident of the Karmapa's daring defection is likely to put China in an uncomfortable position. One of the fall outs could be to develop its strained relations further with India. China always suspects India's motive to provide refuge to the Tibetans in India. India, on the other hand, claims that it is tradition-bound to open its arms to refugees, irrespective of the country and religion.

The flight of the Karmapa could be seen by others as China's failure to implement its policy on religion. Columbia's professor and friend of the Dalai Lama, Robert Thurman, said the Karmapa's flight "reveals the shambles of China's policy of trying to manage religion." The flight is not only an embarrassment to China, but also may cast doubt on its continuing to rule in Tibet. The incident demonstrates that the people in China would continue to demand for religion to infuse their lives with meaning and that could well be a danger in the long term to the Communist Party. The import of the saying in the Bible "Man does not live by bread alone" is not lost.

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# A Deeper Meaning

**What awaiting the former Pakistani prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, may have more to do with his alleged misdoings than any grudge of the present regime, says M Abdul Hafiz**

MIAN Nawaz Sharif the deposed Prime Minister of Pakistan has finally been charged with abduction as well as attempted murder, hijacking and terrorism in an anti-terrorism court ironically instituted earlier by his government. It is alleged that Mr Sharif and his accomplices prevented a PIA flight carrying General Pervez Musharraf, now the country's chief executive and 200 other passengers from landing at Karachi airport with a malafide intention. However the time lag of three months between Sharif's detention and formal chargesheet against him sparked hope that General Musharraf would, after an international wave of sympathy for Sharif, sober down from the strident attack on his victim and refrain from taking an extreme measure against him to the displeasure of world community. But now it seems that General has been moving in a calculated manner to dump Sharif forever. The charge of hijacking alone, if proved, can send Sharif to death row. And Pakistan's political history is not without a precedence of such vendetta.

Sharif's fate is widely considered a product of similar personal revenge by General Musharraf whose coup in October last year was triggered by Prime Minister Sharif's fateful decision to dismiss him as Chief of Army Staff when the latter was away from the country. General Musharraf ably supported by his Chief of General Staff was however able to preempt the Prime Minister and defeat his plan to have an army chief of his choice.

Therefore the grudge of Musharraf against the former prime minister is understandable. But the proceedings against Nawaz Sharif is fuelled by factors more than mere personal. In committing the fatal mistake of fiddling with the Army — dismissing its chief and replacing him with another of his choice — Mr Sharif inadvertently overstepped his authority in the context of Army's place in Pakistani polity. It was already the elastic limit of Army's patience when he dismissed Karamat.

height of his power, forgot the reach of Army power demonstrated many times even earlier.

Mr Sharif had won a landslide victory in the elections in 1997. Using that huge majority he could get the constitution amended to strip the president of his power to dismiss the prime minister. He got rid of an interfering Chief Justice by arranging his overthrow by his fellows. With the Army Chief on his side he had a showdown with the President who was compelled to resign. He got his family lawyer elevated to the presidency. The largest province Punjab was controlled by his brother. He got his arch rival Ms Benazir Bhutto convicted for corruption and ensured her exile from national politics.

The Army did not mind his grabbing the absolute power so long its own constituency remained autonomous and its unwritten writs were not interfered with. In 1988 Ms Bhutto was installed as Prime Minister only on condition that she would not interfere in Army promotions, nuclear and Afghan policies. Compared to that Sharif enjoyed much more freedom of action including influencing even the Kashmir policy. Army in Pakistan which has always been more loyal to its chief than to the elected government also accepted earlier his dismissal of a chief. This time when he attempted it, it was construed as an offence amounting to dividing the Army.

There are few signs that the Army would be in a mood to condone it.

In retrospect, Musharraf had been Sharif's favourite when the latter fired General Jehangir Karamat two years ago. The Prime Minister eagerly picked up the apparently innocuous Mohajir lest sensing that latter would be his nemesis later. With the love's labour lost between the two — the Prime Minister and General Musharraf — since Pakistan's retreat from Kargil a parting of the way loomed for some time. With the Prime Minister drifting away from Kargil commitment and the Chief of the Army Staff at least morally clinging to it also a clash between the two became inevitable on vital security matters. But no one anticipated it to come out in the open and taking an ugly shape. But Sharif's overconfidence duly bolstered by his dismissal of Karamat became a catalyst also in sacking General Musharraf and precipitated the crisis leading to Sharif's overthrow.

To be unceremoniously dismissed from a command slot is considered an insult few generals can stomach. Moreover, if Sharif's alleged conspiracy to murder Musharraf by not letting the aircraft carrying him land at Karachi is proved, it is a case of culpable homicide.

According to available press reports, General Aziz, a Musharraf loyalist, got the inkling of the order dismissing Musharraf on the morning of 12 October. That gave him sufficient time to put in action the contingent plan which must have been readily available in Pakistan Army tradition to topple the government by the time the order was published in the afternoon.

Today, Yadav, who reels off sufi saint Kabir's couplets in his conversations, is at peace with himself. "I have no complaints and no regrets" he says and adds, "my only objective now is to help rehabilitate prisoners. But for Navjivan Mandal's support, I do not think I would have been able to succeed in life." Two other inmates, Shashikant Shinde and Balkrishna Patil, echo his words.

# Dreams of a Life Beyond Bars

V. Radhika writes from Pune

HERE was an unmistakable spring in their step as they walked up to the dais. That their own relatives were not around to cheer did not matter, for their surrogate family — fellow inmates of the Yerawada prison in the western state of Maharashtra — was there to shower the applause. They were the 12 successful candidates from the prison who were being awarded a diploma in computer training. "When we step out of this world (of prisons), I am confident that the world of graphics and designing is waiting to welcome us," says Parsh Singh, one such diploma holder. And his "classmate", Mohammed Salim, a 30-year-old, Sukhvinder Singh (not their real names) couldn't agree more. Each of them has been convicted for a crime, but the prison bars have not shackled their aspirations to discover a new world—the world of computers.

organisation that has been working for the rehabilitation of prisoners since 1956. Established by noted Marathi writer and film director Achyut Ranade, the Mandal provides vocational training and legal aid and sorts out matters of personal finance for prison inmates. "But most importantly," says Shashikant Joglekar, a retired bank officer who is the organisation's secretary, "we provide them shelter when they are released. We found that once they step out of the prison, they have nowhere to go as in most cases the relatives do not want them back. So we provide them temporary shelter and also help them secure jobs." Apprehensions about the stigma trailing them even after they leave prison of course remains. "As another diploma holder Sudhir Kulkarni (not his real name) says, "We may not know people, but people know us." "My profession revolves around my clients and they may hesitate to approach me if they know I have been behind bars. Of course, a lot of my colleagues in the profession know about

me, but I am careful because people are not always willing to give us (ex-prisoners) a chance," he says. But inspiring them are people like Darsinghar Yadav, whose sentence for life imprisonment was reduced to eight years because of good conduct. Yadav, a former horticulture department officer, still visits the Yerawada prison regularly on behalf of Navjivan Mandal even 10 years after his release. Yadav takes pride in the fact that he did not let his years inside the prison go waste. "Fate may have pushed me behind bars, but it could not cow me down," says Yadav, a science graduate from Nainital University. Yadav's voice booms with pride when he says he pioneered the effort to have an annual state level sports meet for prisoners in Maharashtra. He, along with two other inmates, also started yoga classes in the prison. The obstacles Yadav faced once he was freed made him all the more determined "not to let any other prisoner face the problems I have gone through." Since then, Yadav has been tirelessly working for the rehabilitation

of prisoners and his efforts have won him the respect of prison authorities and inmates alike. From taking care of their basic needs like food and shelter to finding them jobs, Yadav helps with everything. Today, Yadav, who reels off sufi saint Kabir's couplets in his conversations, is at peace with himself. "I have no complaints and no regrets" he says and adds, "my only objective now is to help rehabilitate prisoners. But for Navjivan Mandal's support, I do not think I would have been able to succeed in life." Two other inmates, Shashikant Shinde and Balkrishna Patil, echo his words. "Right from inspiring us to stand on our feet, to helping us in actually setting up the workshop by procuring loans, the Mandal has helped us," they say. At the Yerawada prison, many more inmates have lined up for enrolment in the next diploma course. As Amrik Singh, an inmate, says, "the bars may have enclosed us in the prison, but our spirit is free and our dreams are unfettered." — India Abroad News Service

If Sri Lanka needs anything desperately, then it is peace. It seems to end the 16-year ethnic war in the country's north. The war-torn island has been drifting for too long with many failed attempts for peace. Any fresh initiative to break the deadlock with the LTTE has to be considered with prudence. This is precisely the reality that surfaced when President Chandrika Kumaratunga was re-elected for the second time in December 21 election amid hopes to resolve the crisis. But things seem complex in Colombo.

There, however, seemed to have been no chance for dialogue immediately after President Chandrika Kumaratunga's re-election. Evidently, she was the last person whom both the opposition United National Party (UNP) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) wanted as president. Although she had a tough race, yet she won. Securing 51.12 per cent of the popular mandate, she won a handsome lead over Ranil Wickremasinghe — her main challenger and Leader of the Opposition, who got 42.71 per cent of the vote. This, however, was lower than the 62 per cent of votes she received in 1994. Thirteen candidates have joined the presidential race in Sri Lanka, but the contest was only between Kumaratunga and Wickremasinghe. The campaign was marked by the signals the two leaders sent to the masses and the implications of their vote-catching slogans on the island's future political course. The issue that dominated the political agenda of the two main rivals was the resolution of the ethnic conflict. Kumaratunga's anti-incumbency factor — propagated by her rivals — has played the key role in ensuring her victory. Like the Hindu of India editorially stated immediately after the election that "even if a number of Tamils may not have voted for the president in her re-election bid, she remains their best bet to usher in an era of peace offering, as she has, the first non-chauvinist dispensation in Sri Lanka." This, however, leads to her flunked commitments — he had shown following her previous electoral victory in 1991 to find a political solution to the ethnic issue. Actually at that time, very little had been achieved in the way of peace, and there was more chaos than reconciliation. A mega show was also unveiled in 1994-5 when she won a landslide victory in the residential race on peace plank. After several rounds of talks, the official delegation could make no headway with the LTTE and the negotiations never achieved anything. There was an exchange of letters between Kumaratunga and LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran. The talks finally collapsed and another instalment of Eelam war was launched in April 1995.

Confidence, among the people of the island — 74 per cent Sinhalese, 12 per cent Sri Lankan Tamils, 6 per cent Indian Tamils, 7 per cent Muslims and one per cent others. She called upon Wickremasinghe to "join this government" and "honour the commitment" given during the election campaign "to this nation's peace, without compromising in any way with those who attempt to sow terror for narrow political gains." The post-poll reaction of the UNP has been of some comfort. While dismissing the possibility of joining the government as "very unlikely," the UNP said that it would consider providing "outside support" on specific issues in order to end the conflict. Also apparent in the UNP's response was its perception that there was an imminent threat from the LTTE to the island's political leadership. Wickremasinghe told the press that as long as the recent bomb scare continued, the threat would remain. There is, however, a growing realisation among the main political parties that pursuing a line of mutual opposition on national issues would be futile. The future of Sri Lanka's polity largely depends on translating this realisation into policy and action. Kumaratunga would do better if she pays heed to this and renews her call to the opposition political parties. So, any dialogue with the LTTE should be preceded by a Sinhala consensus so that the issues of war and peace are not subjected to the vagaries of competitive Sinhala politics. In the present scenario, consensus means the support of 94 per cent of the Sri Lankan population. Colombo has been contemplating to go further than the devolution proposals, and new ideas such as asymmetrical devolution was being explored. Consequently, the merits of having an international mediator are being seriously considered. The Norwegians are in Colombo to help speed up a dialogue. Certainly no government will extend support to the idea of a separate Eelam. International isolation of the LTTE, except from the Tamils living abroad, is a reality today. The mediator may use his

# Once Beaten, Twice Shy

**Backdrop in Sri Lanka seems moderately set for a likely peace deal between the government and the LTTE. If past experience is any guide, the photo-finish could be defective. Ekram Kabir explains why**

good offices in finalising an agreement; the mediator should also ensure that the agreement is implemented in right earnest. Considering what the LTTE is capable of doing, former director of the Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, who was also a member of the International Observer Group for the Sri Lankan presidential election, is worth quoting: "A major impediment to peace continues to be the intransigence of Prabhakaran. His record makes it clear that he will use the interval between negotiations to build up his strength." According to Sri Lankan Government representatives at earlier negotiations, the LTTE "would drag on and on" and put forward new conditions for the return to normalcy. There were no serious talks about a political settlement. In order to pre-empt such a possibility, the LTTE should be persuaded to spell out the details of a "viable alternative". Will this be embarking on another futile exercise which Colombo can ill afford?

Again the President should realise that any third party mediation is no magic wand to the problem. Sri Lanka had India as a third party mediator doing little to contain the northern terrorism and even militarily intervening in Sri Lanka against the wishes of the Sri Lankan government. And the terrorists soon turned their guns on the latter. If a third party or "facilitator" is brought in, there has to be an agenda for mediation. Past negotiations with the LTTE without a specific agenda has floundered. Kumaratunga government, accompanying the opposition, should ask the LTTE what their basic demands are, if negotiations are to take place at all. If they want a confederation of two states — one step short of a separate state, then any form of negotiation will be futile. The Tigers, on their part, have maintained that they would not insist on Tamil Eelam if a "viable alternative" is offered. The LTTE had been in touch with a number of concerned persons and organisations, such as British parliamentarians, the Commonwealth secretary-general and the

Norwegian government. At the Heroes Day ceremony last year, say the wire agencies, Prabhakaran spelt out the preconditions for peace talks: "Peace talks should be held in a cordial, peaceful atmosphere of mutual trust and goodwill with the assistance of international third party mediation."

Understandably, Prabhakaran was waiting for the outcome of the election and the likely response of the new government. Now with the election behind her and another outbreak of violence, Kumaratunga must have wondered when to call parliamentary elections. However, in her address after assuming office, she gave two clear messages to the LTTE and its supporters one of which sounded like a warning. She appeared more determined than ever to bring peace to the troubled island and she said: "The days of terror are numbered, and that number is small." Simultaneously, she also appealed to the LTTE cadres to exert pressure on their leader, V Prabhakaran, to "renounce violence and join us in establishing peace."

There certainly is an element of determination to end the 16-year ethnic war in the north, yet, say Sri Lanka observers, Kumaratunga needs much more effort than this. In 1994, there was a cross-community backing for Kumaratunga's candidature as there was the island-wide euphoria in favour of peace. Then there was an overall sense of dismay and cynicism — weeks ahead of the 1999 election — over the polity and the approach of the political players to the issues confronting the nation. President Kumaratunga should pay attention to the grievances.

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