

Grand Alliance in West Bengal

Will the grand alliance be able to end the prolonged rule by the Left Front? Well, it largely depends upon how far the Front can maintain its unity. **Mansoor Mamoon** writes

A GRAND alliance comprising the Trinamul Congress, the Congress led by Sonia Gandhi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is reported to be in the offing with a bid to end the 22-year-long uninterrupted rule of the Left Front in the Indian state of West Bengal. Between April 7 and 16 this year the Trinamul Congress held a series of meetings with West Bengal Congress Chief A B Gani Khan Chowdhury and his close associates Soumen Mitra. On April 16 it was a full dress meeting between the Trinamul Congress and the faction of Congress led by Gani Khan Chowdhury where other leaders of the two parties were present. After the meeting a beaming and apparently happy Chowdhury told newsmen that broad consensus has been reached for the formation of the proposed Grand Alliance against the Left Front government led by the legendary Jyoti Basu. By May when polls in 82 municipal bodies are scheduled to be held in the state, Monota immediately left for Delhi for talks with Sonia Gandhi about the formation of the alliance she is currently spearheading.

Insiders in the Congress informed that Gani and Soumen could not hold talks with Monota without green signal from the party high command, particularly Sonia Gandhi. L K Advani, the BJP leader, has also welcomed the move for alliance saying that West Bengal should be saved from the clutches of the communists and Marxists and that with this end in view the state elections scheduled to be held early next year (March 2001) should be fought from one platform by putting a common

candidate. Jyoti Basu, the longest serving Marxist leader, has already made known his intention of retiring from politics due to old age and failing health. This has greatly boosted the morale of Monota, who is long vying for the post of Chief Minister thinking that minus Jyoti Basu the Left Front will not be able to attract the voters and the front itself will totter in the absence of an acceptable leader.

The Left Front, on its part, appears to be not so much concerned at this development. Its unexpected victory in the by-elections for three Lok Sabha seats and easy win in three Rajya Sabha seats have made it confident that large chunk of the electorate of the state are still with it. The Left Front's support base is in the rural areas where pro-poor land reforms have brought about salutary changes in the agrarian economy. For the last several years state agriculture registered a growth rate of six per cent, the highest in India followed by the state of Kerala where also a Marxist government is in power. Before the Left Front assumed power the growth rate in agriculture was only one per cent. But in respect of industrial development the state is lagging far behind other Indian states. It is the lowest in India. As it has failed to attract investment there has not been much success in this sector with the result that unemployment has burgeoned and the vacillating urban middle class has consequently shifted its support from the left front. This was reflected in the last Lok Sabha polls when Trinamul and BJP candidates fared much better

though the tally of total votes of the left front remained almost intact.

The Trinamul has joined NDA coalition government in Delhi after the October 1999 general elections. Monota and her General Secretary Ajit Panja have been inducted in the cabinet of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. After joining the cabinet Monota has vowed to oust the Left Front government in the next polls. An all-out vilification campaign has been launched against the government alleging deterioration in the state's law and order, violence allegedly perpetrated by the Marxist cadres, high-handedness of the Panchayets, the overwhelming majority of whom belong to CPIM, corruption and neglect of the development needs of the state etc.

Monota enjoys large popularity in the state but organisationally her party the Trinamul is not strong enough to encounter the Left Front. This has prompted Monota to forge alliance with BJP and Congress. As already stated, Monota aspires to replace Jyoti Basu as the state Chief Minister. Gani Khan Chowdhury said that it has not as yet been decided as to who will lead the alliance. He, however, hastened to add that the Trinamul has turned to be the meeting point of both the BJP and the Congress as Monota is equally acceptable to both. The state BJP Chief has a cold relation with Monota while the Congress faction led by Sidhanta Shankar Roy and Priya Ranjan Das Munshi are opposed to any alliance with Trinamul and the BJP.

In the event of such an alliance the state Congress party

is likely to face a possible split. The defeat of its candidate in the Rajya Sabha polls at the hands of Trinamul was due to the liberal by its own Bidhan Sabha members and its surprise defeat severely jolted the central leadership of the party. The Left Front has termed the proposed grand alliance as the gang of highly opportunistic political groups. It appears baffling to many observers as to how the Congress which is opposed to BJP could enter into the tripartite alliance of Trinamul and the BJP. What is, in fact, the strategy of Sonia Gandhi? Vehement anti-communism is not the only common factor for the hitherto unforeseen unity of various opposing forces.

Sonia Gandhi might be moving with the objective of winning over Monota and distancing her from the BJP. She has also lent her party's support to Lalit Prasad and Rabi Devi in Bihar where with Congress support the later has been able to form the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) government by unseating the short-lived BJP administration. Sonia is currently vying for the support of the regional parties to forge a united front against the BJP-led 18-party NDA. The new budget has caused price spiral and the withdrawal of subsidy has caused widespread discontent, particularly among the peasantry.

Many are of the opinion that the alliance will not be able to complete its full term. Atal Behari Vajpayee has himself complained of lack of co-ordination in NDA. The RSS dominance in BJP might tear away the NDA in not-too-distant future. Will the grand alliance in West Ben-

gal be able to end the prolonged rule by the Left Front? It largely depends upon how far the front can maintain its unity. It could not as decide as to who will wear the mantle of Jyoti Basu. The deputy chief minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee is not liked by the components of the Left Front other than his own party CPI(M). The second largest partner CPI is trying to install its chief Indrajit Chatterjee as the front leader. Indrajit is more acceptable to other front partners because of his democratic posture while Buddhadev is abrasive and arrogant. Yet another contender is the veteran Marxist leader Sonnat Chatterjee.

The Left Front will have to find an alternate compromise leader in order to face the onslaught of Monota's grand alliance. Monota's personal popularity largely among the middle class will be the main capital for the alliance while the left front has a strong support base in the rural areas. Though Jyoti Basu will not himself contest the polls he will, however, be in the forefront of the campaign and the appeal of a highly venerated leader like him is likely to have impact upon the electorate.

The gathering of the vast multitude of people at the Left Front grand convention in the Calcutta parade ground on March 25 last and the winning spree it maintained in all by-elections held so far indicate that it will pose to be an uphill task on the part of Monota-organised grand alliance to unseat the present coalition government in West Bengal. But the hustings, however, are going to be rough and tough.

Bhutanese Foreign Minister in India

P. Jayaram writes from New Delhi

BHUTANESE Foreign Minister Jigme Yoeser Thinley arrived in New Delhi Monday on his first official visit to India.

During the nine-day visit, Thinley, an alumnus of Delhi University, will hold talks with his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh on matters of mutual interest. Singh is expected to take up with him the issue of extremists from Assam taking sanctuaries across the state's border with the Himalayan kingdom and steps to prevent it, official sources said. Thinley will also call on President K.R. Narayanan and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. He will also visit places of historic, cultural, technological and environmental interest in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Thinley's visit is part of the close interaction and high-level exchanges between the two countries, a senior Indian official said. He noted that Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansingh had visited Thimphu in March and Jaswant Singh has accepted an invitation to visit the kingdom. Thinley is also chairman of the council of ministers and the head of government, a position to which he was elevated under the constitutional reforms introduced by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Landlocked Bhutan has close historic, cultural and economic relations

with India that have expanded and deepened over the years. Though multilateral and bilateral assistance for the kingdom have increased over the years, New Delhi remains the kingdom's most important and biggest development partner. One of the major potential areas of bilateral co-operation is the hydro-power sector. Though Bhutan has an estimated hydro-electric potential of 30,000 megawatts (MW), only two per cent of it has been harnessed, mainly with Indian assistance.

Two Indian-assisted projects, which are under construction, are expected to bring considerable economic benefits to Bhutan while easing considerably the power supply position in the chronically-short states of Assam, West Bengal and Orissa.

Indo-Bhutanese co-operation also covers other areas of the economy, besides meeting the requirements of trained and skilled manpower in Bhutan's education, health, agriculture, transport and communication spheres. The first Indo-Bhutan Trade and Commerce Agreement was signed in 1972 and 90 per cent of Bhutan's exports are to India, which also accounts for 85 per cent of the kingdom's imports.

—India Abroad News Service

Another LTTE Offensive

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam launches a multi-pronged attack on Sri Lankan military installations in the Jaffna peninsula. **D.B.S. Jeyaraj** reports

LARGE-SCALE fighting has erupted again in the predominantly Tamil Jaffna peninsula in the north of Sri Lanka. The latest confrontation began around midnight on March 26 when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) launched a multi-pronged offensive on military installations in the peninsula. For the people of Sri Lanka, factual news about the situation is hard to come by owing to the censorship in force. On the other hand, news reports in the print, electronic, audio and visual Tamil media outlets a broad, along with information gained over the telephone from informed sources in Jaffna, provide an insight into the LTTE's war strategy in the peninsula and related developments.

The LTTE is adopting a different military strategy in the peninsula. The prize targets are Jaffna town and the Elephant Pass military complex. There are four underlying principles beneath the current strategy.

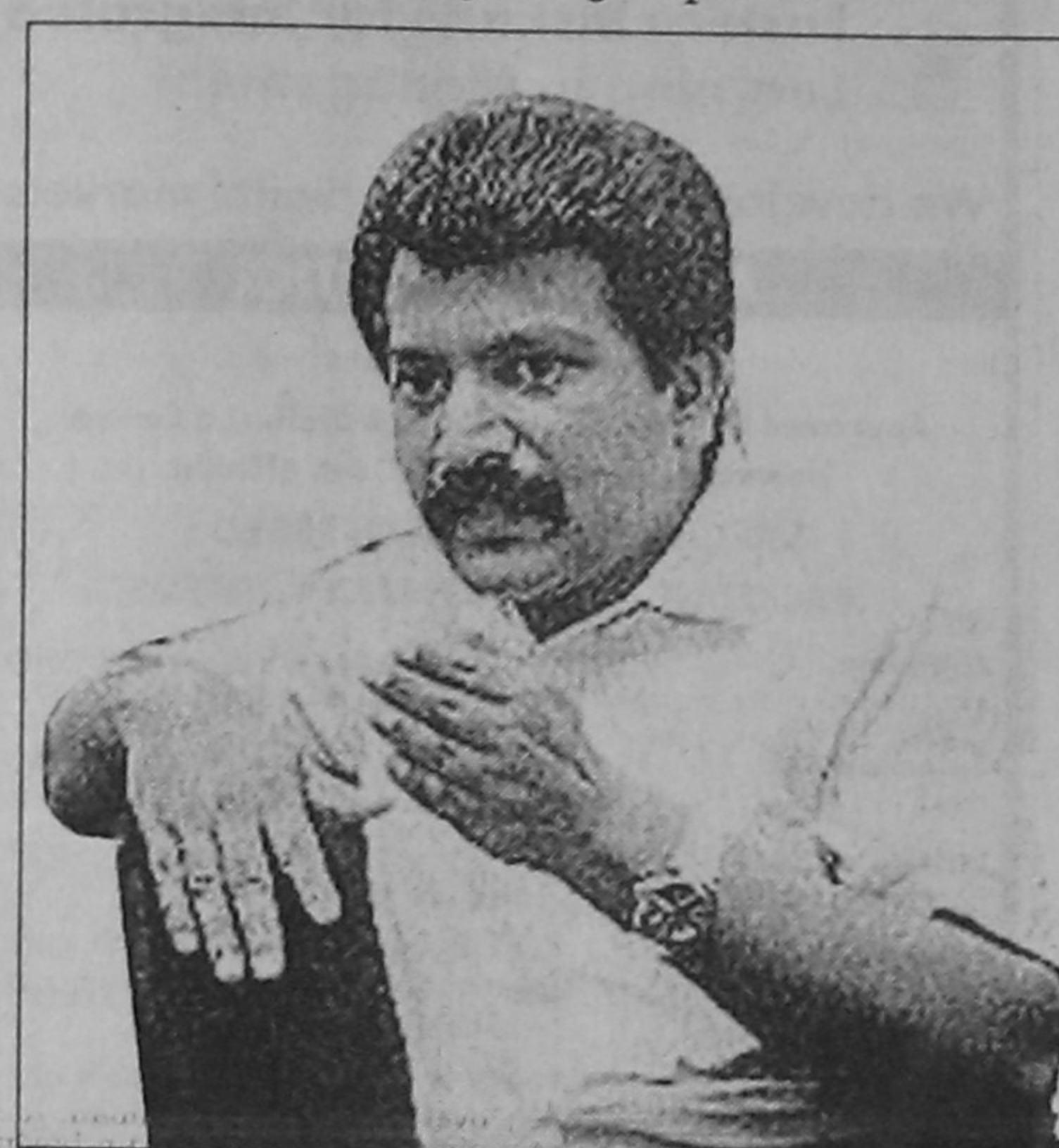
First, the LTTE does not want a repeat of the fiasco of 1991 when it attacked the Elephant Pass camp directly, and is avoiding an all-out onslaught. Second, the Tigers are looking to cut off all access and supply routes to the Elephant Pass isthmus and strangle the forces stationed there. Third, the LTTE had already entered the peninsula through points in the eastern and southern coasts and established entrenched positions that the Army has been unable to demolish. It now seeks to extend these positions further. Fourth, the Tigers are keeping in reserve a large contingent on the northern mainland, which could be deployed to capture Jaffna town.

What is unfolding in the peninsula is stage four of the third phase of "Operation Oyathala Alala" (Unceasing Waves). The first phase was in Mullaitheevu in July 1996, and the second in Kilinochchi in September 1998. In the third phase, the first stage was played out in the eastern sector of the northern mainland of the Wanni and the second stage in the western sector; both happened in November 1999. The third stage was launched in December 1999 and was aimed at the southern, southeastern and eastern flanks of the peninsula.

The LTTE began occupying the coastal areas of Vettikallai, Kattakkadu, Aaliyawaal, Uduthurai, Mulliyar, Thattuvankoddi and Nallathannithuduvai in the southeastern sector of the peninsula. It also seized Pullavai to the north of Elephant Pass and Kurinchevui to the west of the Pass. It had earlier taken Paranthan and Umaiaipuran to the south of the Pass, on the northern mainland.

Consequently, Elephant Pass was encircled on almost all sides and all access and supply routes were cut off — except for Ivakkachi to its north. The LTTE siege of Elephant Pass in 1991 was broken only by establishing a beachhead in the Vettikallai-Kattakkadu region. Subsequently, permanent camps were set up to ensure smooth supplies by the sea route. Prior to the current round of fighting, the Ivakkachi camp, along a beach on the strategic A 9 Highway, served as the gateway to Elephant Pass. Supplies came by road from Jaffna via the Kandy road.

The LTTE has also established fixed positions on the southwestern sectors of the peninsula — in East Arivalai, Kollakkandy, Thanankilappu and Keratheevu. Boats plying the Jaffna lagoon from the Pooneryn, Nagathevanthurai and Sanguppiyavan of the main and serve a logistical purpose. A battery of long-range artillery guns maintained on the Pooneryn coast fire intermittently across the lagoon into the Thennamaratchi sector of the peninsula. A key focus is Kilaly on the southwestern coast of the peninsula. Between 1990 and 1995, when the LTTE was in control of Jaffna, the Kilaly ferry was for long the transit point for persons entering



LTTE Supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran

and exiting from the peninsula. In response to the "creeping advantage" that the Tigers were gaining in the peninsula, Colombo stationed the entire 34th Division in the Elephant Pass sector. More important, the elite 53 Division, which consists of crack commando forces trained in Pakistan and in the United States and the special air brigade, was deployed on the east coast of the peninsula. This division was in the vanguard of successful military operations in Jaffna during 1995-96 and in the Wanni in 1997-98. Further, Colombo newspapers quoting military intelligence sources warned of a heavy build-up by the LTTE in the mainland areas south of the peninsula. Apparently, the armed forces were planning a major operation aimed at recapturing LTTE-held areas in the peninsula and the mainland when the LTTE struck. News reports indicate that the LTTE pre-empted an attack by the armed forces by some 48 hours.

AROUND midnight on March 26, LTTE cadres infiltrated military lines and launched a commando-type raid on an artillery installation and ammunition dump in the general area of Pallai, which is a key junction to the north of Elephant Pass on the Jaffna-Kandy road. At least 11 pieces of artillery were decommissioned. The artillery points, installed in a fan-like formation, controlled the roadway beyond Pallai on the A 9 Highway. This operation was conducted by squads of the LTTE commando division known as "Siruthal" (Leopard).

About the same time, LTTE cadres also seized strategic points on the Jaffna-Kandy road. LTTE pickets were established to the north of Pallai in Muhamalai, Indrapuram and Thuvai. The LTTE has taken over a broad area of 4.5 km long and 1.5 km wide, and reached itself in this swathe and fortified its positions. If the Tigers are able to hold on to this position, no road transport is possible along this road from Jaffna to the Elephant Pass.

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The Sri Lankan armed forces are trying hard to dislodge the LTTE from this position. There have been frequent exchanges of artillery fire. At least two offensives led by the armoured and mechanical divisions have been conducted and the LTTE has withstood both.

The Tigers also claim to have captured two South African-made "Buffel" tanks and three armoured cars and destroyed two tanks and five armoured cars. The LTTE has established an artillery division named after former Jaffna commander Kittu and is putting together an armoured division named Victor after the former

"commander" of Mannar, Bhanu, former commander of Jaffna and Mannar, is in charge of both of these and assists Balraj.

The armed forces have been forced to take a circuitous route — turning west from Pallai, and passing through Puloappalai and Kilaly and proceeding by the southwestern coast to Kachai and then heading east to the Jaffna-Kandy road at Kodikamam. However, there are reports that LTTE artillery is pounding the Kilaly-Kachai-Kodikamam area. All passenger traffic has been stopped along the Jaffna-Kandy road from the south of Chavakachcheri. One can conclude from this that the Army's land route to Elephant Pass is now under pressure.

Owing to the ban on civilian traffic, more than 15,000 displaced persons who wish to flee the battle zone are trapped. In addition, all governmental work and activities by non-governmental organisations have come to a standstill. A serious humanitarian crisis is brewing: the displaced persons do not have access to adequate food, shelter and medicines. The Catholic Church meets some of these needs, but it does not have enough resources. Meanwhile, Tiger propagandists are accusing the troops of deliberately restricting civilian movement in the war zone so as to utilise them as human shields or buffers.

THE Ivakkachi camp and the Elephant Pass complex too are under attack. LTTE cadres have kept up an artillery barrage and have both the camps under virtual siege from points to the north and northeast of Ivakkachi in Sangathar Vayal and Kovil Vayal and points in the southeast of Elephant Pass at Thattuvankotti and to the west at Kurinchevui. Consequently, although the LTTE has not conducted a direct assault, Elephant Pass and Ivakkachi are marooned, and will remain so unless the military balance in these areas changes dramatically.

Even as the attacks in the Pallai-Muhamalai area were launched on March 26, LTTE cadres initiated a number of attacks on points along the east coast. The east coast, known as the Vadamaratchi East division, extends about 30 km from Point Pedro to Thalady, bounded on one side by the sea and on the other by the Jaffna lagoon. It is sparsely populated, and fishing is the primary means of livelihood.

As a result, the LTTE is now in control of the eastern coast up to Kudarappu to the south of Nagarkovil. It has taken new territory stretching to about 14 km. There are, however, three other camps — in Nagarkovil, Manalkadu and Vallipuram — along this coast between the LTTE positions and Point Pedro, the northernmost point of the peninsula.

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The Valley of Discontent

M Abdul Hafiz follows up the event in which 35 Kashmiri Sikhs were killed on March 20

FOR each event in Kashmir there are at least two different interpretations — one by India and another by Pakistan. The outside observers, as a result, are obliged to make their own intelligent guess from the medley of a confused mass of informations for the truth. Even that was rendered impossible when on 20 March last 35 Kashmiri Sikhs were brutally killed in a village called Chhatisinghpura near Srinagar and both India and Pakistan came up with their respective versions of the motives and plausible causes behind the tragedy. As expected, India touted it as handwork of foreign mercenaries coming from across the border while Pakistan pointed its accusing finger to Indian security forces. The enigma persisted because few believed it to be an incident inspired by Pakistan with whom the Sikh community developed extremely cordial relations over Khalistan movement since mid eighties. As regard Indian forces' involvement what, it was asked, could be their grudge against the community, irrelevant in Kashmir conflict?

Amidst widespread indignation among India's influential Sikh community an exasperated authority was obviously in search of scapegoats. Only five days later the army gunned

down five 'mercenaries' in an 'encounter' in Anantnag claiming that they were behind the massacre in Chhatisinghpura. It could have assuaged the anger of the Sikhs to an extent but it sparked off one of the bloodiest backlash in the strife-torn state. Early this month 2000 people took to the street in Anantnag to protest the killing of five people who, they said, were innocent civilians and not the so-called mercenaries. Even as the protesters walked towards the District Magistrate's office in Anantnag the Special Operation Group (SOG) opened fire killing 7 more civilians to further exacerbate the situation.

Not only did both the episodes, the fake encounter on 25 March and killing of the protesters on 3 April, touch off a wave of violent outrage, the public forced the administration to exhumate the bodies of the victims of encounter for identification. Because the army had no convincing answers about the actual identity of the five people killed in the encounter. Earlier the bodies were hurriedly buried without post mortem and calling the locals

to identify the bodies. When exhumed, at least two were identified to be the locals of Patribal village where the encounter took place. Others were too disfigured to be recognised.

Never before the demand was made to exhumate the bodies of the victims during a decade of insurgency in Kashmir when, even in government estimate 25,000 people were killed in variety of circumstances including so-called encounter. Neither did such a large number of people take part so spontaneously to protest a single incident of the security forces high-handedness. It had an immediate partent of a resurgence in pro militant sympathies. Thanks to the detention of most of the top leaders of Huriyat such protests marches were unknown to Kashmir for quite some time although the guns kept ringing across the valley.

With public anger seething at the cruelty of security forces who were apparently under pressure to 'show results', Faruq Abdullah the Chief Minister of Kashmir was prompt to take some damage control measures by ordering a high level judicial probe and transfer of some strict-officials. The Kashmiris

were hardly impressed. Even as the Sikhs' tragedy evoked mixed reaction among the Kashmiris, the Patribal encounter killing ostensibly to trash up the massacre in Chhatisinghpura — further exposed the designs of the authority stoking anew the fire of secessionist movements in the valley. In last ten years the Kashmiris were so well familiar with the 'encounter', where the suspected Kashmiri militants had usually been taken care of, that they were not prepared to accord any credibility to any of the claims of the security forces with regard to Patribal incident. Whatever the outcome of the DNA tests of the exhumed bodies, the unprecedented public outcry over Patribal encounter — termed fake by the locals — has already given further legitimacy to Huriyat movement the chairman of which was blunt in rebuffing Advani's offers for talks.

Yet the mood on the part of both the state and union authorities were initially celebratory. Faruq Abdullah interrupted the Assembly session to break the 'news' which the secu-

rity forces termed 'big breakthrough'. The union Home Ministry was quick to disseminate the news of the great success — taking care of the killers of Chhatidighpura — obviously to placate the outcries of Sikh leaders particularly of Akali Dal. On 26 March when Advani himself arrived at Chhatisinghpura he was briskly given a special briefing on anti-militant operation aptly code named 'operation kirpan'. Although in private the security officials admit that Patribal encounter was more the result of a tremendous pressure in the wake of Chhatisinghpura massacre.

In the meantime, despite a high kill rate against the militants, the public mood remains unyielding and defiant — particularly after Anantnag incident. The authorities are also worried over the release of some of the Huriyat leaders who were recently set free presumably as a result of Washington's plain-speak on the issue during Clinton's visit. The Huriyat is expected to whip up its secessionist propaganda once its leaders arrive in Srinagar. Also a new surge of militancy is expected in the summer months when Pakistan may try to push in fresh batches of Mujahidins into the valley. India would certainly dread the havoc of the valley would then assume.

Pity

Just six months ago there was hope for the Pakistani people. Now Ayaz Amir doesn't find any

THE people of Pakistan — not ones to be put down by repeated assaults on their intelligence — braced themselves for the start of a grand national awakening after the tumultuous events of October 12. What they have received instead is a lesson in confusion and drift they will long remember.

They were looking for heroes. They have been given a cast of characters, from those in the national security council and the federal cabinet down to the provincial governments, about as exciting as a collection of sleeping pills.

Forgetting past experience and putting their badly-bruised faith in the vows of their latest saviours, they expected a dramatic form of house-cleaning that would make the future safe for effective and sustainable democracy. They have been rewarded with the legal nightmare of General Anwar's attritional accountability.

They expected the Mians and the Zardaris to be knocked out of the political arena. They are seeing instead that the leaden-footed march of the new regime is helping keep these discredited figures politically alive.

Pity the English-speaking middle classes who saw hope in the two puppets that General Musharraf held in his arms for the benefit of foreign photographers. They are learning the hard way that vision and a broad mental horizon entail more than puppies and well-cut suits.

on inconsequential things without leaving larger issues untouched.

It is easy, and tempting, to exaggerate Pakistan's misfortunes. But this is no exaggerating matter. If there were an instrument to check the national pulse all it would show would be deception and despair. If in six months this is where the country has been brought, where will it be in a year and a half when General Nawaz finishes, or so at least he assures us, with his district devotion plan?

Fierce partisans apart, there is no longer any fervid popular interest in the fate of Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto or the future prospects of Begum Kalsoom Nawaz or Punjab's little Hitler, Mian Shahbaz Sharif. But there is also no great appetite for seeing the army make, for the fourth time in historical succession, a hash of things.

The national predicament is indeed baffling. In war college what are budding Montgomeries and Rommels taught? I suppose one of the lessons for higher commanders would be to concentrate on the larger picture. General Musharraf's reforming government has been doing just the opposite: instead of concentrating on strategy (the larger picture) it has been chasing every rabbit that runs across its path. For every problem, from canal-cleaning to economy documentation, the Generalissimo's answer is simple: send in the troops.

Nothing is achieved because half the time officers and men do not even understand the problems they are asked to solve. But the army, as the source of power, attracts the blame reserved earlier for the mandarin and the politician.

Not having an eye for the larger picture also means that there is no sense of priorities.

The primary and the secondary, the important and the unimportant, get mixed together. This can have fatal consequences for a country with limited resources and an infinity of problems.

Having seized power in 1917, Lenin was faced with a stark choice: prosecute the war against Germany (Russia being a part of the anti-German alliance) or consolidate the Bolshevik Revolution. Over the objections of his colleagues, Lenin opted for peace even though it came in a humiliating package. But Lenin was clear in his mind. Safeguarding the revolution was more important than riding the horse of misplaced nationalism.

Mao did much the same thing during the Long March. He traded territory for survival. The Red Army escaped encirclement in order to fight another day.

What are our priorities? Settling our house in order or emulating the feats of Genghis Khan? We have to make up our minds because we cannot have it both ways. Courting regional isolation because of our identification with the Taliban and encouraging a strange mix of extremist factions to keep alive the fires of insurrection in occupied Kashmir are aims at odds with the task of national reconstruction. This scarcely means Kashmir be abandoned. Only this that the Kashmiris themselves should lead their fight for independence.

As for our nuclear capability, it fits in with nothing. It does not enhance our security and only gives us a false sense of self-importance.

All the same, if the army was the natural party of government our quest for political stability would come to an end. The army could set up a General Political Department and politi-

cal parties could be required to register with it. The more eligible politicians could then jockey for position under the army's umbrella.

But if Pakistan's history makes anything clear it is that although politicians can ignore the army's point of view only at their peril, the army cannot lead politics from the front. Influencing events from the sidelines is a different thing altogether. Accordingly, despite illicits to the contrary, the army is not the natural party of government.

But what is to be done when politicians left to their own devices also turn out to be unqualified sharers? It is not only Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto who are to blame. Without delving too much into the past, suffice it to say that any one in a position of power in the last 20 years has contributed to the national mess: Ishaq Khan, General Aslam Beg, the late General Asif Nawaz, Farooq Leghari, Justice Sajjad Ali Shah. Power went to the heads of all of them. Besides, to a man, they were bereft of any thing approaching vision. It is thus not the failure of individuals which is the issue but the bankruptcy, intellectual and moral, of an entire class.

What then should a new beginning (that people were expecting after October 12) have consisted of? Nothing more radical than a quick round of house-cleaning — swift, visible and, if such was the need, arbitrary — followed by a quick restoration of a hopefully chastened democracy. One caveat, however. The completion of this agenda would have required, for a brief period, a military-political partnership in order to take Pakistan out of the woods.

There is of course no shortage of democratic purists who

will scoff at the notion of any such partnership. Such people will never stick out their necks for anything but to hear them talk in the safety of their homes or through the anonymity of the Internet (the internet having spawned more heroes than any recent invention) is to marvel at their bravery. In politics, however, what is workable is more relevant than the ideal.

Even so, how can a military-political partnership come about? Its first condition is a sense of urgency that Pakistan is at a cross-roads and cannot afford a wrong turning. Its second condition is a measure of wisdom and understanding. These conditions have to be met before we can think of scaling the mountains.

But where is the sense of urgency? The Chief Executive should be at his desk trying to work out the causes of things. Instead, like all Pakistani saviours, he is acquiring a taste for foreign travel. And where is the sense of any wisdom? Where the army should be concentrating on a few select problems, it is spreading itself thin.

Six months ago there was a sense of hope in the country. Far from being mourned, Nawaz Sharif's departure was greeted with a sigh of relief. Everything seemed possible in that hour. That euphoria has vanished. The corrosive cynicism which is the hallmark of the Pakistani middle class has risen to the surface once again.

Can a rescue operation be mounted? Can some of that hope be rekindled? Can the strands of a military-political partnership be put together? The signs are not promising. While the challenges facing Pakistan are great, the national response to them is pathetic. Adding to the prevailing gloom is the thought that the golden moment of opportunity which General Musharraf had is lost forever.

Courtesy: The DAWN of Pakistan.