

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 Trinomul Congress of Momota Banerjee, the Congress led by Sonia Gandhi and the Bharatya 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 Trinomul Chief held a series of meetings with West Bengal Congress Chief A Gani Khan Chowdhury and his close associates Soumen Mitra. On April 16 it was a full dress meeting between the Trinomul Congress and the faction of Congress led by Gani Khan Chowdhury where other leaders of the two parties were present.

After the meeting 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, Momota 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 Momota 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

though the tally of total votes of the left front remained almost in tact.

The Trinomul has joined NDA coalition government in Delhi after the October 1999 general elections. Momota and her General Secretary Ajit Panja have been inducted in the cabinet of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. After joining the cabinet Momota 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 *Panchayats*, the overwhelming majority of whom belong to CPI(M), corruption and neglect of the development needs of the state etc.

Momota enjoys large popularity in the state but organisationally her party the Trinomul is not strong enough to encounter the Left Front. This has prompted Momota to forge alliance with BJP and Congress. As already stated, Momota 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 Trinomul has turned to be the meeting point of both the BJP and the Congress as Momota is equally acceptable to the both. The state BJP Chief has a cold relation with Momota while the Congress faction led by Siddhanta Shankar Roy and Priya Ranjan Das Munshi are opposed to any alliance with Trinomul 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 Trinomul was due to the betrayal by its own Bidhan Sabha members and this surprise defeat severely jolted the central leadership of the party. The Left Front has termed the proposed grand alliance as the gang of highly opportunist 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 Trinomul 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 Momota and distancing her from the BJP. She has also lent her party's support to Lal Prasad and Rabri 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 peasants.

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 Bengal be rough and tough.

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 Budhadev Bhattacharjee is not liked by the components of the Left Front other than his own party CPI(M). The second largest party 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 Budhadev is abrasive and arrogant. Yet another contender is the veteran Marxist leader Somnath Chatterjee.

The Left Front will have to find an alternate compromise leader in order to face the onslaught of Momota's grand alliance. Momota'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 electorates.

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 spread it maintained in all by-elections held so far indicate that it will pose to be an uphill task on the part of Momota-organised grand alliance to unseat the present coalition government in West Bengal. But the hustings, however, are going to be rough and tough.

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 Chhatasinghpura 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 Chhatasinghpura. 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 exhume 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 Patral village where the encounter took place. Others were too disfigured to be recognised.

Never before the demand was made to exhume the bodies of the victims during a decade of insurgency in Kashmir when, even in government estimate 25000 people were killed in variety of circumstances including so-called encounter. Neither did such a large number of people take part so spontaneously of the security forces high-handedness. It had an immediate precedent of a resurgence in pro-militant sympathy. Thanks to the detention of most of the top leaders of Hurayat 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 district-officials. The Kashmiris

were hardly impressed. Even as the Sikhs' tragedy evoked mixed reaction among the Kashmiris, the Patral encounter killing—ostensibly to trash up the massacre in Chhatasinghpura—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 Patral incident. Whatever the outcome of the DNA tests of the exhumed bodies, the unprecedented public outcry over Patral encounter—termed fake by the locals—has already given further legitimacy to Hurayat movement the chairman of which was blunt in rebuffing Advani's offers for a breakthrough.

Yet the mood on the part of both the state and union authorities were initially celebratory. Faruq Abdullah interupted 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 Chhatasinghpura—obviously to placate the outcries of Sikh leaders particularly of Akali Dal. On 26 March when Advani himself arrived at Chhatasinghpura he was briskly given a special briefing on anti-militant operation aptly code named 'Operation Kirpan'. Although in private the security officials admit that Patral encounter was more the result of a tremendous pressure in the wake of Chhatasinghpura 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 Hurayat leaders who were recently set free presumably as a result of Washington's plain-speak on the issue during Clinton's visit. The Hurayat 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 Mujahidin into the valley. India would certainly detest the shape of thugs the valley would then assume.

What is unfolding in the peninsula is stage four of the third phase of 'Operation Oyatha Alagai' (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 focussed on the southern, southeastern and eastern flanks of the peninsula.

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 to the west of the Pass. It had earlier taken Paranthan and Maunaipuram 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 Iyakkachi to its north. The LTTE siege of Elephant Pass in 1991 was broken only by establishing a beachhead in the Vellaiyankerni-Kattaiakadu region. Subsequently, permanent camps were set up to ensure smooth supplies by the sea route. Prior to the current round of fighting, the Iyakkachi camp along a bend 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 Ariyalai, Kollakandy, Thanankalappu and Kerathavu. Boats plying the Jaffna lagoon from the Pooneryn, Nagathaventhan and Sangupidu areas 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 Thenmaratchy sector of the peninsula. A key focus is Kilai on the southwestern coast of the peninsula. Between 1990 and 1995, when the LTTE was in control of Jaffna, the Kilai ferry was for long the transit point for persons entering

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.

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 who

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

on inconsequential things while leaving larger issues untouched.

It is easy, and tempting, to exaggerate Pakistan's misfortunes. But this is no exaggeration matter. If there were an instrument to check the national pulse all it would show would be dejection 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 Naqvi finishes, or so at least he assures us, with his district deviation 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 Kalsom 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 Montgommerys 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 economic documentation, the Generalissimo's answer is simple: send in the troops.

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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 pervading gloom is the thought that the golden moment of opportunity which General Musharraf had is lost forever.

There is of course no shortage of democratic purists who

Bhutanese Foreign Minister in India

P. Jayaram writes from New Delhi

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

During the nine-day visit, Thinyel 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 sanctuary across the state's border with the Himalayan kingdom and steps to prevent it, official sources said. Thinyel 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.

Thinyel'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 has accepted an invitation to visit the kingdom. Thinyel 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

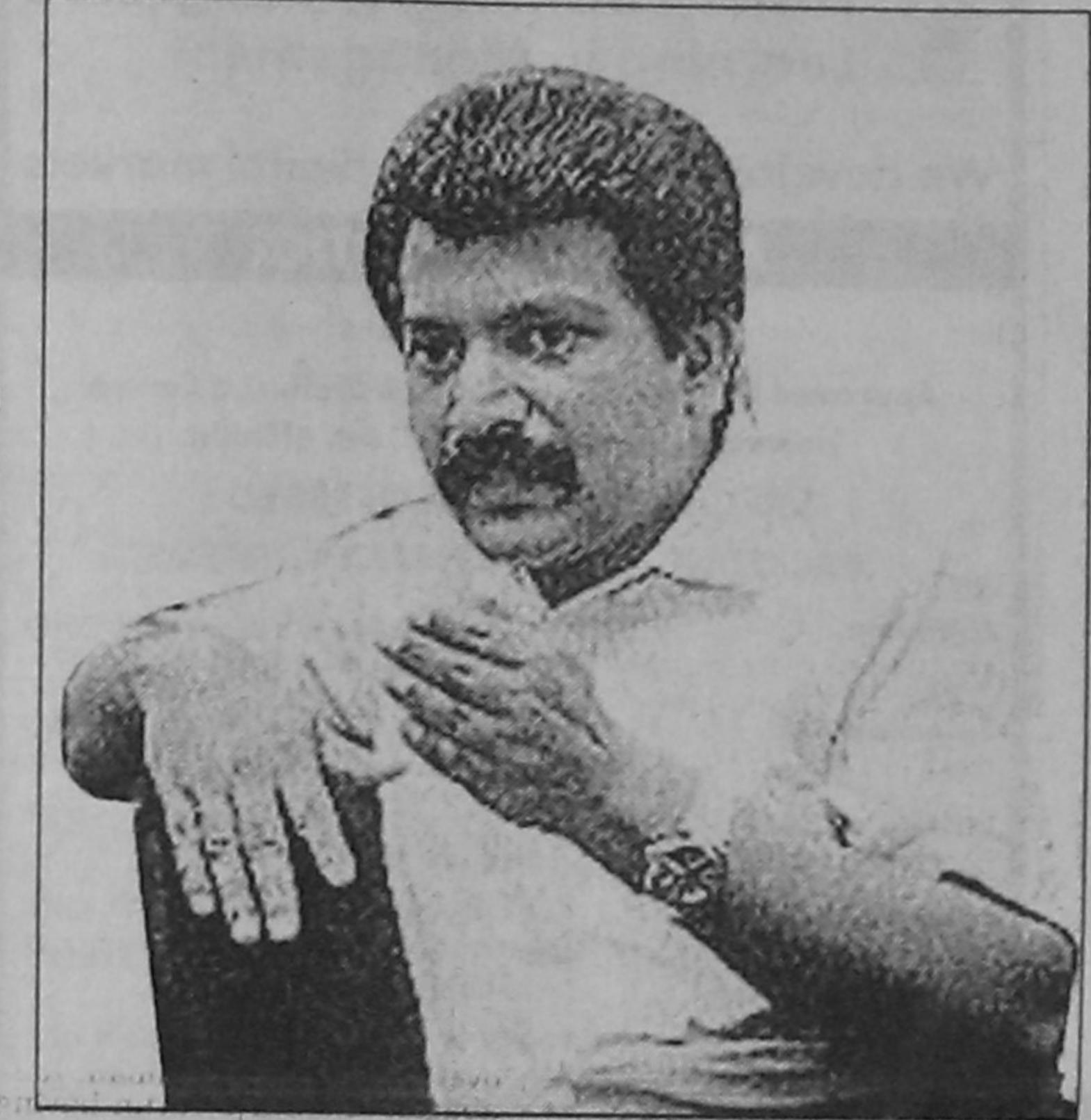
with India that have expanded and deepened over the years. Though multilateral and bilateral assistance for the kingdom have increased over the years, New Delhi remains the kingdom's most important and biggest development partner. One of the major potential areas of bilateral co-operation is the hydro-power 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. Jayaraj** reports



LTTE Supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran

and exiting from the peninsula. Commander of Mannar Bhanu, former commander of Jaffna and Mannar, is in charge of both of these and assistants Balraj.

The armed forces have been forced to take a circuitous route—turning west from Pallai, and passing through Pulpallai and Kilay and proceeding by the southwestern coast to Kachal and then heading east to the Jaffna-Kandy road at Kodikamam. However, there are reports that LTTE artillery is pounding the Kilay-Kachal-Kodikamam area. All passenger traffic has 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 Iyakkachi camp and the Elephant Pass complex too are under attack. LTTE cadres have kept up an artillery barrage and under virtual siege from points to the north and northeast of Iyakkachi in Sangathai Vayal and the south southeast of Elephant Pass at Thattuvankottai and to the west at Kurinchipetuvai. Consequently, although the LTTE has not conducted a direct assault, Elephant Pass and Iyakkachi are marooned, and will remain so—unless the military balance in these areas changes dramatically.

As the attacks in the Pallai-Muhumalai 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 Vadamarachchi East division, extends about 30 km from Point Pedro to Thalaiyad. 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—Vallipuram—along this coast between the LTTE positions and Point Pedro, the northernmost point of the peninsula.

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