

South Asia

Drought, Mini Revolt and New Security Strategy

With a famine looming in the drought hit areas, the NDA government in India is further beefing up its defence capability through a new defence policy and spending billions of increased amount on armaments. Mansoor Mamoon writes

THE Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in Delhi is seemingly facing a litmus test in the face of the century's worst drought, affecting nearly 50 million people in five northeastern states namely Rajasthan, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. The drought with its telling effect on crops and cattle on a wide stretch of territory from the southern to the northern region of the country, has come as a stark reminder of India's stubborn development problems amid its vibrant economic growth and software boom. The government is in a fix as to how to tackle this huge problem of providing water and food for such a vast multitude of people. The drought which is continuing for three consecutive years is likely to be felt more severely in the coming months when temperature is likely to reach 50 degree Celsius. Even parts of the capital city of Delhi is reported to have already been affected. Rajasthan and Gujarat are the worst hit states. The authority is finding it difficult to provide immediate relief and to stem the tide of large-scale exodus of people to urban areas for their survival.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee addressing the nation over radio and television declared the drought-hit areas as calamity zones and appealed for generous public charities and donations to supplement the government efforts. He also convened an all-party emergency crisis management meeting and sought help of all political parties for concerted actions to meet the exigencies. The opposition Congress led by Sonia Gandhi accused the Vajpayee government of apathy. It claimed that the government was warned beforehand of the impending danger but it did not act seriously. The BJP, in its turn, made the counter-allegation that in the face of drought, almost a regular feature in the region during the last 50 years or so, the Congress did not take any short- or long-term contingency water management plans for the area while in power for pretty long years. But despite accusations and counter-accusations, all the political parties have joined hands in mitigating the sufferings of the drought-affected people.

Here lies the strength of Indian democracy. During national crisis or emergency situation the political parties bury their hatchets and put in their shoulders unitedly to lift the country out of the morass of the crisis. The drought has also affected parts of Pakistan, particularly Baluchistan, and the neighbouring Afghanistan. Governments of both of the countries have already appealed for international help to meet the situation. All the three countries as well as parts of Iran are in the same Thar desert range. Notwithstanding the havoc wrought by drought, India has not in any way stop grinding its huge wehr makht (war machine). A new defence policy of the country is reported to be on the anvil. The Chiefs of three services are meeting shortly to spell out the strategies in view of what has been described as increasing threats from Pakistan and internal security problems posed by insurgent groups which, of late, have become restive in the northeastern region. The meeting of the three Chiefs of services were to be held in camera and secretly. But since the secrecy has been divulged and came to light fresh decision has been taken to hold it formally and openly. Senior service personnel are to submit their suggestions on security measures at the meeting. After

weighing various suggestions and options India's new defence policy will be prepared. It is indeed an irony that while famine stares the face of millions of Indians in the drought hit areas, the NDA government is further beefing up its defence capability through a new defence policy and spending billions of increased amount on armaments. According to the latest statistics, 100 million of Indian families are without water at home, 150 million homes are without electricity, 2.8 million people waiting for telephone connections, 40 per cent villages without road connectivity, clogged ports and crammed urban roads. Interestingly enough, the severity of drought is now squarely felt in the state of Rajasthan (at Pokhran) which was the site of India's nuclear testing. The government that spent billions on arms race now finds it difficult to come to the aid of the hapless afflicted people.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee also faced a mini-revolt from one of the stalwarts of his own party - former Chief Minister of Delhi and VJP Vice President Madan Lal Khurana. Only three years ago he lost his ministry for praising Vajpayee. This time he lost his party position of Vice-President for criticising and describing the Prime Minister as an American stooge. Khurana publicly made the allegations that NDA government is serving the purposes of Washington at the cost of national interests. He alleged that the US Secretary of Commerce has dictated what should be the trade policy of India. To please Washington the government has withdrawn import taxes from as many as over 430 items and withdrawn subsidy for the farmers. Khurana wrote an open letter addressed to the PM. When the contents of the letter came in the press he was relieved from his party position. He later had a brief meeting with the Prime Minister but that did not cut much ice. Khurana has let it be known that he would seek a debate on these charges in the Lok Sabha shortly. The debate initiated by one his staunch party supporter will, no doubt, greatly embarrass Atal Behari Vajpayee and

his NDA government. Political analysts maintain that recent changes in the leadership of Sangh (RSS Paribar) has its outbursts in the mutiny of Khurana. New Sangh leadership do not see eye to eye with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's hobnobbing with and overtures to the United States. What Khurana is now telling was previously believed against BJP by the CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(ML). The NDA government is also facing scathing criticism from the media and the middle-class for price spiral, mishandling of the drought situation, toeing blindly the US line and the diktat of the world bank and the IMF in the opening up of the economy and withdrawal of subsidy from agriculture. Though BJP leadership claims that Khurana is doing all this for his induction in the ministry, there is no reason to take the matter so lightly. Problems, one after another, are fast snowballing. Coalition partners are becoming disillusioned and the RSS - the core of BJP - is also not happy for the failure of the government to carry forward the policy of *Hindutva*. With 182 seats in Parliament the BJP does not have enough strength to alone decide the course of action for the government. Twenty-one other parties in the coalition are to be equally consulted. Vajpayee is literally in a fix as to what to do and what might await his lot in future. Will he be able to complete his term or will there be yet another snap poll?

The Region This Week

Mujib-Indira Agreement

BANGLADESH has impressed upon the need, on April 27, for an early ratification by India of the Mujib-Indira agreement on land boundary between the two countries. This message was conveyed to India during the two-day Home Secretary-level talks in Delhi.

NDFB Offers Peace Talks

A separatist tribal guerilla group National Democratic Front of Bodoland in India's far eastern state of Assam has approached the military with an offer of peace talks to end a 20-year armed insurgency. More than 10,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in Assam during the past 20 years. The army authorities in India said they would provide safe passage to NDFB leaders willing to attend any meeting with government representatives. While the door for peace talks has been kept open, army operations have been further intensified to put pressure on the rebels.

'No' to Oslo Initiative

TAMIL Tigers in Sri Lanka on Saturday last have rejected all peace overtures, leaving the government with no option but to try to defeat them in the battle field. The government soldiers have suffered humiliating losses in a month-long battle in which at least 370 government soldiers were killed and nearly 2,000 others were injured. Lanka defence ministry has, however, claimed over 1,000 rebel fatalities.

Blame It on Pokhran

VILLAGERS living close to India's nuclear test site have blamed the atomic blasts of two years ago for the drought now crippling the northern desert state of Rajasthan. Some 220,000 people living in villages surrounding the Pokhran site - 530 kilometre west of New Delhi - are in one of the areas worst affected by the most severe drought to strike the state in 40 years.

Lanka's SOS

SRI Lanka has sought on Sunday urgent supplies of arms from at least seven countries, as President Kumaratunga vowed to 'protractedly and relentlessly' pursue advancing Tamil Tigers. Officials have begun meeting manufacturers' representatives from Russia, Britain, Pakistan, Iran, the Czech Republic, Israel and Singapore.

Bharatpur Blaze

THE fire in the Bharatpur ammunition depot in India, which destroyed between 8,000 to 10,000 tonnes of ammunition, has been put out, with no random explosions taking place since Saturday evening. The situation is under control and the fire has been put out. The last explosion as a result of bursting of shells took place at 5.30 p.m. on Saturday, a Defence Ministry spokesman said, quoting Lt. Gen. S.K Bhatnagar, who heads the ordnance services.

Pak 'Peace Bus'

A delegation of women from Pakistan will be visiting India early next month in a 'bus of peace' mission to build the pressure of public opinion on the two countries to make peace. The 64-member delegation, led by Pakistan Human Rights Commission chief Asma Jahangir, will comprise social activists, lawyers, writers, journalists, academicians, students, entrepreneurs and film personalities.

Koirala's Confession

PRIME Minister Girija Prasad Koirala while addressing his party cadres and economists on April 30 confessed that the major reason behind lack-lustre development in the post-democracy decade was selfishness among the political parties. He said all the political parties, including Nepali Congress of which he is the President, just concentrated on the interest of the party and cadres, and has not cared about the country.

Caught in Cameras

A team of researchers led by Nepali expert Dr Prahlad Yonzon has successfully caught a tiger in their cameras at an elevation of 3,000 meters in central Bhutan's Thrumshingla National Park. The tiger was photographed on April 11. This is the first photographic evidence supporting the presence of a Royal Bengal Tiger at such a high altitude. Dr Yonzon, a wildlife expert at Resources Himalaya in Kathmandu said. The team also found evidences of the endangered big cat's movements above 4,000-meter elevation.

LTTE Claims Pallai

TAKING Sri Lanka's northern offensive closer to Jaffna, the LTTE on Sunday claimed control over Pallai, a crucial town north of Elephant Pass. The rebels, in a statement, said the well-fortified garrison town fell Sunday evening around 6 p.m. after 12 hours of fighting. The special commando units of the LTTE, backed by heavy artillery and mortar bombardments, launched a multi-pronged attack on the central military base at Pallai in the early hours of the morning. After intense fighting, the commandos stormed into the military base.

Uzbek President's in Delhi

UZBEK President Islam Karimov's two-day state visit to India took place in the backdrop of mounting concern in the Central Asian region over religious extremism and terrorism that is posing a serious challenge to the governments there. Like India, most countries in the Central Asian region, including Uzbekistan, are in agreement that the radical forces seeking to destabilise established governments have to be isolated and there is need to build a broad international coalition, including India, to combat the twin menace. Uzbekistan, which is playing a leading role in this regard, wants Russia, China and the US also, besides India, to be part of such a coalition. The presidents of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan met in Tashkent on April 21 and signed a security pact to jointly combat terrorism, political and religious extremism and organised trans-border crimes. The meeting took place in the wake of a series of extremist attacks in the region in recent months.

Girija in Trouble

The main opposition in Nepal - Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist - has threatened to disrupt the next session of parliament unless a government minister allegedly involved in the kidnapping of a party activist is removed. The Nepali Congress has assured the NCP-UML high command that those involved in the kidnapping will be severely punished. Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala has constituted a high level committee to deal with the dispute, but the opposition has refused any negotiation until the minister is sacked.

For a Harsher Destiny?

THOUSANDS of villagers in northern India are leaving their homes in the face of a terrible drought that has brought the threat of famine in the region. Even the toughened Rajasthan herders, used to a harsh life in Thar desert, are abandoning their homes. Most of them are heading towards Punjab.

Never Again

PAKISTAN said on last Friday that New Delhi and Islamabad should work towards reducing tensions along the Line of Control. It also warned that otherwise there may be a full fledged war between the two countries. Pakistani Foreign Minister, Abdul Sattar, said in an interview with the CNN: 'We have had experiences in the past where disproportionate reactions started a cycle of escalation ending in war neither side wanted.'

UN Withdraws from Jaffna

AFTER more intense fighting between Sri Lankan government forces and Tamil Tigers in the northern Jaffna peninsula, the UN on Friday last decided to pull out its mine clearing team from the war-torn region. Over two hundred government soldiers were killed while withdrawing from the Elephant Pass, now in the hands of LTTE. The Tamils have vowed to retake Jaffna. However, UNHCR - which has 65 staffs based in Jaffna - said it was not sure of withdrawing its workers as well.

-- Compiled by Ekram Kabir

The General's Dilemma

Can Chief Executive Parvez Musharraf ignore President Clinton's sermon and continue a low intensity conflict in Kashmir? M Abdul Hafiz writes

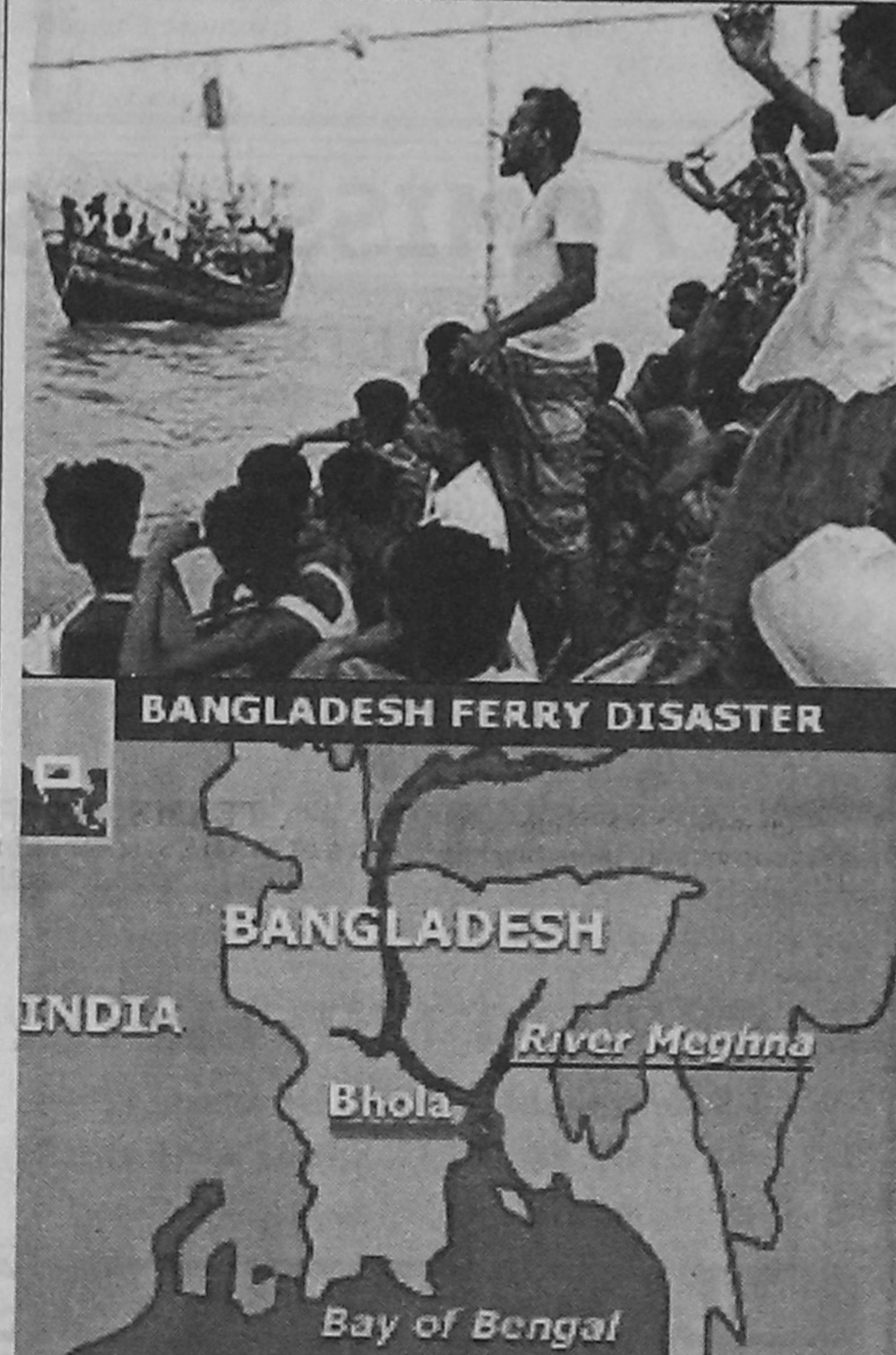
HIS liberal credentials has so far, been prodigious. Not only his own people are fairly impressed by the persona of his profound civility, even the women's group from India who recently visited Pakistan on a 'parallel track' was moved by him. He caresses his puppies, dons well cut attire befitting the occasions and absorbingly enjoys Iqbal Bano's rendering of Faiz Ahmad's ghazal - features least expected from a crack commando of General Pervez Musharraf's backgrounds. He carefully maintains these images and uses his personal charm to give a human face to his military regime. It comes handy in facing bolt domestic and international critics of harsh military rule. Unlike his military predecessors he refrains from imposing martial law in the country although they would have detected it in Pakistan so much used to it and rules in more of a free-wheel style. He let his civil courts to function as usual and the country's civil code to prevail. The court proceedings are also relatively open as evident from the trial of Nawaz Sharif, where unlike in Bhutto's trial twenty-one years ago the defence could be fairly vocal. In a sharp departure from the usual practices of military dictators in the past, he gives full freedom to the press and encourages free academic discussions of the issues confronting the nation. The only point on which the general does not relent is that of the return of democracy in the country. He did not budge even during his Malaysian visit where he was pressed to agree to a two-year framework for the purpose. He routinely refused to give any specific plan for democratisation in the country. While the common people in his country are not in a hurry for its restoration, Musharraf is deflected also by the members of the enlightened class. Says Atiya Hayatullah, the

member, Pakistan's National Security Council, 'He has got a silent mandate on 12 October, 1999. I don't understand what is there to be restored. The General does not want sham democracy, he wants to reconstruct democracy. There shouldn't be pre-occupation with the timeframe.' It is not surprising that even after the General's six months of mixed performance at the helm, his countrymen seem prepared to give him an indefinite grace period for national recovery. Yet the General has already started to bump into difficult ground. None of the images built up around him worked to impress the visiting US president who served rather unceremoniously the toughest ever warning to Pakistan, the US ally during the cold war years. The American warning centres mainly round two of its demands. The US wants to see democracy restored in Pakistan, although by all indications General Musharraf does not seem much pushed in this regard. He can afford to ignore President Clinton's prescription of democracy for Pakistan as long as he is able to manage the domestic front. Now with Nawaz Sharif shackled for life and Benazir Bhutto in exile under conviction, Musharraf anticipates no immediate challenge to his authority. Sharif's PML is at the moment in tatter and will take long, if at all, to pose any problem for Musharraf's regime. Also in Pakistani tradition, the political forces can come up as an entity in the polity only with the military's blessing and patronisation. Therefore, in all likelihood Musharraf would keep flouting

the West's dictate for a return to democracy with, of course, some cosmetic steps like local bodies election and all that. General Musharraf, however, faces acute problem with regard to another demand of the US President in which the latter categorically wanted Pakistan to rein in the religious militant groups operations across the border from Pakistan. Unless Pakistan obliges President Clinton and comply with his agenda on Pakistan, the country would be at the risk of total isolation. Because it is not just the US has condemned the military take-over in Pakistan and its alleged complicity in sponsoring terrorism. Since Musharraf's take-over in October last year, there has not even been a ministerial level visits between Pakistan and European Union countries while Pakistan's Commonwealth membership still remains suspended. The countries the General visited in a whirlwind tour of Southeast Asia were, at the best, lukewarm to Pakistan. He also visited several countries in the Arab world desperately in search of friends. Much to Pakistan's disappointment the Prime Minister of Turkey, Bulent Ecevit, and the President of Indonesia Abdurrahman Wahid - both Muslim countries - visited India without including Pakistan in their itinerary. General Musharraf could ignore this spectre of isolation and resort to strengthen its ties with China, Iran and Afghanistan in a major showdown with the West. But it would be difficult for him to gold-shoulder the West because of Pakistan's worst ever

economic woes. Pakistan has to reshuffle its loan with the IMF and only America can influence its outcome. Pakistan also has to bargain shortly another IMF-funded package of \$3 bn for poverty reduction and growth project to replace the current \$1.6 bn enhanced structural adjustment facility suspended since the nuclear test. Pakistan is already facing an account deficit of \$1.2 bn on its import and foreign payment. Pakistan's disregard of American pressure at least to end the country's support to Islamic religious groups under these circumstances is going to be disastrous for the monetary resuscitation that the country so desperately needs. Musharraf's future hinges to his tough line on the issue of Kashmir. As in the past even now that line can be sustained by the religious militant groups who have been, for years, motivated and primed for Jihad. It will now be extremely difficult to hold back those militant groups who have already made their views clear. While the Harkatul Mujahideen says that it will end its Jihad only when the Indian Army withdraws from Kashmir, the Lashkare Toiba, who provides suicide squads for Kashmir's liberation now wants Islamic countries to form their own Security Council in the meantime, Pakistan's military brass is also fairly Talibanised and known for its sympathy for the military groups. So much so that his government officials look baffled when the militants openly preach Jihad and often contradict government's policies. As a result, Musharraf's control over the armed militants is restricted and fraught with danger of violent backlash. He is indeed in the mesh of military's ranks who have been pressing him to ignore Clinton's sermon and continue with the low intensity conflict in Kashmir. Either way the general goes, he is indeed in trouble.

The Capsize...



More than 96 people have died and at least 100 are missing after two ferries sank in a river in eastern Bangladesh. The accident happened during an overnight storm on the River Meghna, about 80 km from the capital, Dhaka. The picture depicts a bid by villagers to find their friends and relatives who might have been on board. The magnitude of the disaster still remains to be seen.

Bloodbath in the Emerald Isle

The fall of Elephant Pass signifies a drastic shift in the military balance in favour of the LTTE... V. S. Sambandan takes a look at the evolving scenario.

SMOKING GUNS seem set to scorch slender olive branches in Sri Lanka. The April 22 fall of Elephant Pass, the garrison which guards the northern Jaffna Peninsula, signifies a drastic shift in the military balance in favour of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the decades of fighting against Sri Lankan security forces. It also raises serious questions about the direction the proposed peace talks between the rebels and the Government will take. The guns' and roses strategy of the Sri Lankan Government which followed the war for peace approach to conflict-resolution has come under its most serious challenge. Cutting off the well-fortified military complex which sits imposingly on a narrow causeway linking the northern Jaffna Peninsula to the mainland, the LTTE forced a pullout by Government troops from the base - for the first time in 17 years of the conflict. From the hit-and-run guerilla tactics of the '80s and early '90s, the Tigers moved on to the use of suicide-cadres to bust defence lines and overrun military camps as in the Mullaitivu (1996) and Kilinochchi (1999) takeovers. With the conflict gradually escalating during the last few years, the warfare of the Tigers is now based on long-range artillery fire. Especially since late last year's Vanni debacle. In November 1999, for instance, when the Vanni offensive commenced, the LTTE moved from the eastern sector of the four Tamil majority districts and, cutting away supply lines, brought Government defence positions within LTTE artillery range. 'We pulled out the soldiers to minimise casualties,' an army officer had

reasoned. Consequently, the Tigers gained considerable territory which took them to Paranthan, just south of the Elephant Pass garrison, in the second phase of their operations. The fall of Elephant Pass was always on the cards. Military officers were 'prepared for the worst', though there was some scope for optimism that the most-fortified Government position in the entire island would hold through a rebel onslaught. But, in a changed tactic, the Tigers gained control over Elephant Pass without launching a direct attack on it but by cutting supply lines to the camp from Government-held territory. Isolated from the mainland, the sprawling Elephant Pass complex depended on an eastern sea route and a northern land route for supplies. Since December 11, the Tigers have been gaining vital positions in Jaffna's southeastern theatre. Rather than taking Elephant Pass head on, the LTTE entered the Jaffna Peninsula through a side-gate - an eastern coastal stretch which would, ultimately, take the Tigers to a position from which they could choke Sri Lanka's strongest military base. Hovering about on the southeastern theatre and consolidating the arm which links the Peninsula to eastern Mullaitivu district in a string of operations since March 27, the direction in which the Tigers would move was anyone's guess. A direct move into Jaffna, leaving behind Elephant Pass, or a direct thrust on Elephant Pass were among the possibilities. The

Tigers did neither, but cut across a narrow lagoon and took control of a patch of the road between Elephant Pass and Government-held Jaffna territories. Uncertainty prevailed over the Tigers' next moves: to the north was Jaffna and to the south, Elephant Pass. The siege of Elephant Pass had well and truly begun. Following the Vanni debacle last year, Sri Lankan security forces had relocated the well-trained 53 Division. Comprising four brigades, this division, which is the main fighting force of the army, was supported by the 54 Division as well as a brigade of the 55 Division. While a direct attack by the Tigers on Elephant Pass was the most considered scenario, the LTTE clearly had different ideas. Deploying their conventional strength to the north of the garrison, the Tigers lay in wait. Gaining control over Vettiakerni - a key naval supply route for the Army - the Tigers were choking off supply lines to the Elephant Pass complex. Any direct attack on the Elephant Pass by the Tigers could have been repulsed effectively given the terrain and manpower situation. While intense fighting took place around Elephant Pass, the Tigers did not attempt an incursion into the Government stronghold. Rather, they trained the focus on the Vettiakerni, the northern segment of the Elephant Pass complex, which was also a vital logistics base. The Tigers lay in wait north of Elephant Pass giving their prey the option to either vacate or face a mas-

sacre. Fighting along the road linking the military complex to Government territory further north had severed the army's main supply route. An alternate supply route was opened, but that too was considered more temporary and seen as a passage through which troopers could pull out. The LTTE claimed to have seized a haul of military hardware including five artillery guns - three 152mm guns and two 122 mm guns. The Army boss, however, said that 'only one gun was lost to the Tigers' as the other guns were 'disabled' by withdrawing troops. The Army has not ruled out retaking the Elephant Pass complex. A cross-over point for civilians from the Sri Lankan mainland to northern Jaffna, Elephant Pass gets its name from its pre-colonial days when elephants were used to carry goods across the shallow waters, which have since been bridged by a narrow causeway. This bridge has passed into LTTE control and changed the military balance. This also raises several imponderables about the fledging peace process, which recommenced with an international effort at brokering talks between the Government and the LTTE in February. With the Norwegians accepting the challenge of initiating direct talks between the rebels and the Government, attempts are on within Sri Lanka to forge a bipartisan consensus between the sharply opposed political formations - the ruling People's Alliance (PA) and the Opposition United National Party (UNP). The differences between the two parties have been the biggest hurdle to peace, and the polarised opinions expressed by the southern parties had, in substantial measure, contributed to the escalation of Tamil demands for greater provincial powers in the 1950s to a full-fledged secessionist aggression during the past two decades. In this backdrop of a history of settled opportunities, the President, Chandrika Kumaratunga, offered a set of comprehensive constitutional reforms to Parliament in October 1997. The draft proposals aimed at providing greater devolution of powers to the regions and attempted to move away from the unitary nature of the Constitution. Differences between the PA and the UNP on the nature of devolution, however, scuttled the effort and the reforms were, for all purposes, unimplementable as the Government could not go ahead without the required support from the UNP for a two-thirds majority in Parliament. Bipartisan bickering continued for the past two years, while the LTTE maintained its pressure on the security forces. Commencing with the bombing of the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy - considered to be the most sacred to Buddhists - in January 1998, the Tigers stepped up their attacks on both civilian and Government targets. The assassinations of two Jaffna Mayors, Sarojini Yogeswaran (May), who was elected in the Mayoral elections January, and Pon Sivapalan (September), effectively took

the bottom out of the Government's attempts to restore a semblance of civilian authority in the Peninsula. In 1999, the assassination of the renowned Constitutional expert, Neelan Tiruchelvam, dealt a significant blow to the path of peace taken by the Government. The unresolved killing of a Tamil political leader and vocal supporter of the Tigers, Kumar Ponnambalam, in Colombo this January also comes as a matter of concern for Tamils. Then the two political formations started bilateral talks on narrowing differences. The thinking behind these talks, which are centering around broadbasing powers in the regions, is to present the Tigers a set of proposals accepted by the two major Sinhala parties. The next round of bipartisan talks is set to resume on May 5. The UNP leader, Paul Wickremesinghe, while confident of continuing talks with the ruling party, sees the latest LTTE gain as giving it considerable 'clout' at the bargaining table - if and when talks are held. Calls for cessation of hostilities, from those who have been pushing the line of talks, to those for a further escalation of the military efforts, from hardliners, mark the immediate aftermath of the Elephant Pass debacle. A larger question also arises: would the Tigers be keen on talking at all and, if they do, what would their demands be? Now, more than ever before, as the separatist conflict enters a defining moment, with the Tigers knocking at the doors of Jaffna with military might, is the time for Sri Lanka to address in full measure, more politically than militarily, its decades-long battle for identities. Courtesy: The Hindu of India