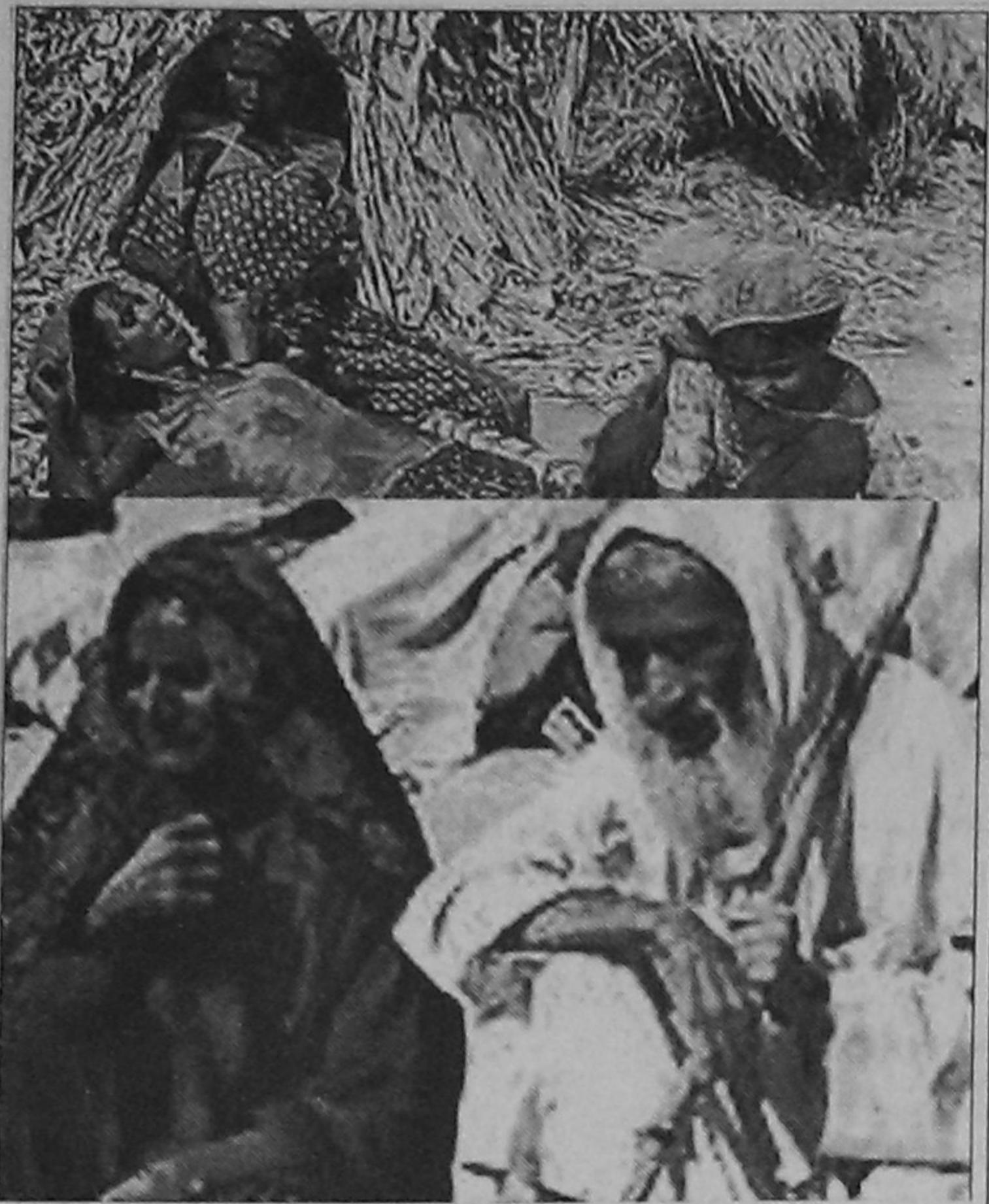


NoWater ...



The authorities in the Pakistani province of Balochistan say most of the province's 26 districts are suffering from famine as a result of drought. There is concern that relief efforts are still failing to reach many people trapped in remote areas. Balochistan's governor, Amirul Mulk Mengal, said the famine situation in 22 provincial districts had reached crisis point. The picture shows an elderly woman being helped by others and drought-stricken people waiting to immigrate.

India

Reviving the Third Force

The initiatives of four former prime ministers in India are only exploratory and, as **M Abdul Hafiz** writes it would take a long time to give it a concrete shape

THE former prime ministers usually go into oblivion and refrain from making public appearance and issuing public statements. The extraordinary ones, say like Jawaharlal Nehru, would have preferred to reflect and absorb themselves in writing their autobiographies. There was a stark departure from this norm when the four out of five former prime ministers of India chose to meet twice in March last in an attempt to address comprehensively the issues 'confronting the nation'. The leaders also issued statement in which they expressed their views 'regarding various issues and anxieties' that 'concern the polity'. It is not immediately known if there are takers of their views.

But the leaders did not seem much bothered on this count. On the contrary their initiative was an attempt to attract public attention not only to the content of the document but also to the possibilities of future politicking on the basis of it. In the process the leaders are prepared to take challenges from any quarter. In an oblique reference to the press which has rather been caustic in its comments about the awkward quadruplet and their seemingly awkward venture, Gujral and Deve Gowda said that they did not mind wild media remarks, as they were merely fulfilling their obligations as former prime ministers and responsible politicians. Earlier the media called them 'the gang of four' and their step 'a desperate attempt to get out of their marginalised political existence'.

The statement issued recently by the four leaders broadly dealt with political, economic and social issues. It highlighted the manner in which the constitutional institutions were undermined by the agencies and organisations close to the ruling coalition at the Centre. The statement stressed the need to temper economic liberalisations process with policies that would help provide succour to the poor. The leaders also covered in the statement the issues of national security as well as development.

weak in appealing to opinion makers in media and other public forum. As regards others in the quadruplet, people do not think much about their capabilities as organisers of mass movement during the twilight years of their life.

It is reported that V.P. Singh is in touch with Chandra Babu Naidu and Karunanidhi, the chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu respectively and the discussions are under way so that the latter two could withdraw from the NDA at an appropriate time. They all became prime ministers with the grace and favour of Congress(I) under certain circumstances. Yet both before and after their empowerment they were stridently anti-Congress(I) and even now they harbour the same feelings. Two of the former prime ministers — Gujral and V.P. Singh — do not belong to any party while Chandra Shekhar and Deve Gowda head Samajwadi Janata Party (SJP) and Janata Dal (Secular) respectively. Both parties have very limited strength and are considered non-starter. In spite of this bleak picture, they assume some importance in present political vacuum when Congress(I), the main opposition has been consistently dipping low as a party and there are few to articulate the issues of the opposition either in parliament or outside.

But can their ideas ultimately take the form of a mass political movement or a consolidation of existing political entities? Although the former prime ministers are non-committal on the question there is general appreciation of the ability of at least one of them — V.P. Singh — to launch a mass-movement and convert it into a political organisation.

In 1988, that was his strategy when he launched the *Jan Morcha* movement against the corruption in the high places of Congress government. However in terms of emotional appeal there is a world of difference between the issues in 1988 and ones that can be raised now. For example, the issues of secularism and composite culture now under threat by BJP are genuine and important but

to prevent that.

At the moment, intelligence reports have it that if the Sri Lankan Army can hold on to Jaffna for another week or 10 days, it might be difficult for the LTTE to make further inroads.

The view in the island is that no government with any self-respect could accept such an offer from a 'terrorist organisation'. The military establishment seems to feel 'the worst is over' and it would not be easy for the LTTE to dislodge the armed forces from Jaffna and its environs.

If the LTTE is extending the olive branch, it is to take over Jaffna without any more bloodshed. And if the Sri Lankan government can accept a ceasefire, it would be on the condition that it could hold on to Jaffna till a deal is struck with the LTTE.

Basically, it is 'oneupmanship', or wanting to talk from a position of strength.

Of course, it may still be possible for the Tigers to damage the run-way in the Palaly air base, but the armed forces are taking all possible precautions

to favour of Colombo. The burden of every statement appears to be for a political settlement, but the Governments are coming out strongly in support of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka.

Distancing himself and the Government from the views of some of his allies, the Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpeyi, has ruled out any recognition of Eelam as a separate state. While conceding that New Delhi was prepared to play a mediator's role if all sides to the conflict ask for it, New Delhi has ruled out military intervention and assured Colombo of all possible humanitarian help.

The question that has arisen now is what shape 'humanitarian help' take in the Jaffna context? Political leaders like Mr. Vaiko of the DMK, want India to deny any help to the Sri Lankan armed forces in their fight against the LTTE, including possible evacuation of troops, if necessary.

But officials in the know of things, do not rule out anything. Humanitarian help could be to the Sri Lankan Tamils in Jaffna Peninsula, the refugees

who might flee the island, or even to the troops if they do need emergency supplies.

They believe that the situation could worsen if the government troops leave Jaffna and the LTTE takes control. That could spark an exodus of refugees and cut off all government supplies to the Peninsula till an alternative arrangement is worked out.

The impression here is that there might be a period of lull and consolidation by both sides to the conflict. That could provide an opportunity for the Norwegian delegate to liaise with both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government, besides briefing New Delhi on the emerging scenario. Only then

will the situation be known to the world. The Indian government has sent a memorandum to the Sri Lankan government, asking for a political settlement, and the Indian government has accepted the memorandum.

Courtesy: The Hindu of India

The Gang of Four

Will the revival of the Third Front in India be an alternative to the two dominant political parties?

Ekram Kabir writes



Former Indian prime ministers Chandrashekhar (L), V P Singh (C) and Deve Gowda (R) share the dias during a convention 4 May 2000 in Calcutta.

THEY have been described as 'The Gang of Four' by the Indian media, which criticised their initiative to revive the Third Front as a desperate attempt to get out of their marginalised political existence and collectively gun for power. Despite the media reaction, the four former prime ministers of India have been successful, to a certain extent, in their efforts to revive a third force in India.

After two meetings, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, Chandra Shekhar, H. D. Deve Gowda and Inder Kumar Gujral have issued a joint statement last month expressing their views on the state of affairs in the country. They want to work with the issues confronting India.

According to a Delhi-based newsmagazine *Frontline*, their statement of March 28 dealt with political, economic and social issues. It highlighted the manner in which the constitutional institutions were undermined by agencies and organisations that are close to the ruling dispensation at the centre and the need to temper the economic liberalisation process with policies that would help provide succour to the poor. Issues of national security and development as well as the deficiencies in the appreciation of problems such as unemployment were also emphasised.

But, by and large, this move by these top leaders, having individual contributions in the

Indian society and polity, has been described as a bid to revive the alternative to the Congress party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). And now, the West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu has added strength to the prospective Third Front of four former Indian prime ministers.

Another former prime minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao who does not have much of a role in his party, the Congress(I), is also expected to join this combination at the 'right time'. In their next endeavour, three of the four ex-prime ministers met CPI-M Chief Jyoti Basu over dinner in Calcutta on May 5 to try and revive the Third Front, emphasising the need to save India from the clutches of the BJP-led 'communal' government. I.K. Gujral was also scheduled to attend the dinner, but could not make it eventually as he was indisposed.

If the third force should come together again, as reported in the Indian media, it is likely to get a new name. In 1996-97, it was called the United Front and in 1998 the Third Front. And in the past the CPI-M had been instrumental in resurrecting the Third Front.

However, the Calcutta meeting of the leaders seems to have run into troubled waters at its very inception. The West Bengal Chief Minister and V.P. Singh didn't agree on a point. Basu wants the Congress party as an integral part of Third Front,

but, a few associates and allies of the CPI-M and VP Singh are not ready to accept the Congress. Singh reportedly had raised objections stating that he was averse to accepting the Congress, as, according to him, they had led India to its political instability. He had also made it clear that he was not ready to accept a party that had a foreign at its helm.

Basu asked him to re-think. More than V.P. Singh, according to Indian analysts, it has been the attitude of the CPI-M, RSP and the Forward Bloc that has been worrying Basu regarding the Third Front. The RSP secretary Debabrata Sarkar and his counterpart Forward Bloc, Ashok Ghosh are completely against accepting the Congress in the Front. On May 6, both said, 'The Congress has been our main enemy for the last 53 years. So to get rid of the BJP, how can we accept another political foe within ourselves? The Congress is ideologically different to that of the Left parties. So we will never accept them in the Third Front.'

The involvement of the Congress party seems troublesome. The CPI secretary Manju Kumar Majumdar, however, put forward a couple of conditions before accepting the Congress within the Front. The Congress will first have to admit that it does not have the necessary power to tackle the BJP and secondly they will have to do away with communalism. These days, we are observing the development of a communal attitude within the Congress. They have to get over it at all costs," he told journalists in Calcutta.

India observers foresee another important twist to this tale. The CPI-M is ready to go ahead and say that they are even ready to lead a government should the necessity arise. They are ready to accept Basu as the leader of the Third Front and work towards pulling the BJP-led government down. This means that, should the Third Front be formed and is successful in its political aspirations, then one can expect to see Basu as the prime minister of India.

The Region This Week

Dallying Sharif's case

A N accountability court on May 3, adjourned for May 17 hearing of a loan default case against the family of deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The court noted that NAB's application for permission to transfer the case to Attock was pending in the Lahore High Court. An undertaking was submitted on behalf of Sharif authorising Advocate Mashhood Hussain to appear as his pleader in the case representing him at different stages of the trial. The prosecution said it had no objection to the application and that the undertaking was satisfactory.

Futile fury?

A ZAD Jammu and Kashmir Prime Minister Barrister Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry said on May 3 that India is fighting a lost war in occupied Kashmir and can no more prevent Kashmiris from achieving their goal. 'In fact, India has no claim over Kashmir but has enforced its unjust authority over the innocent Kashmiris through the deployment of over 700,000 troops in the Valley,' he said. Barrister Sultan said that India, despite accepting the Kashmiris' right to self-determination at the United Nations, was renegeing on its pledge to hold a plebiscite, and wanted to resolve the issue through use of force.

Sign of hope?

T HE biannual India-Pakistan border talks between the Pak Rangers and the Indian Border Security Force began on May 3 at Jalandhar, India. Talking to newsmen before departure, head of the Pakistan delegation Major-General Abdul Qadir, who is also the director general of the Pakistan Rangers, said discussion on escalation of tension along the borders went out of the purview of talks which were held in accordance with an agreed code of conduct.

Duty troubles

I NDIA's decision to impose additional duty on Nepali exports has sent alarm bells ringing in the Himalayan kingdom's industrial circles. From April 1, India started imposing a special additional duty, an average of 4.5 per cent, on Nepali goods. Nepali exporters are concerned that the duty will further slash their already low profit margins and observers say it may also affect the flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) into this country. The Nepali government has lodged a protest over the SAD with New Delhi.

Sattar and Mc Kinnon

T HE Commonwealth has decided to invite Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar to attend a meeting of the grouping to explain the military government's position on the restoration of democracy. The Commonwealth has also decided to send its Secretary General, Donald Mc Kinnon, to Pakistan to express the 52-member organisation's concerns on the delay in restoration of democracy.

Lanka-Israel ties

E VEN as India ruled out military assistance to the beleaguered Sri Lankan government, New Delhi provided the unlikely setting for the negotiations that led to the announcement that Colombo and Tel Aviv will establish full diplomatic relations. Whether India played a 'facilitator's role' to bring the two countries together is not known, but informed diplomatic sources said this could not be ruled out in the face of the dilemma New Delhi found itself in after the recent developments in the island that has witnessed a drastic shift in the military balance in the northern Jaffna peninsula.

India to export bamboo to Bangladesh

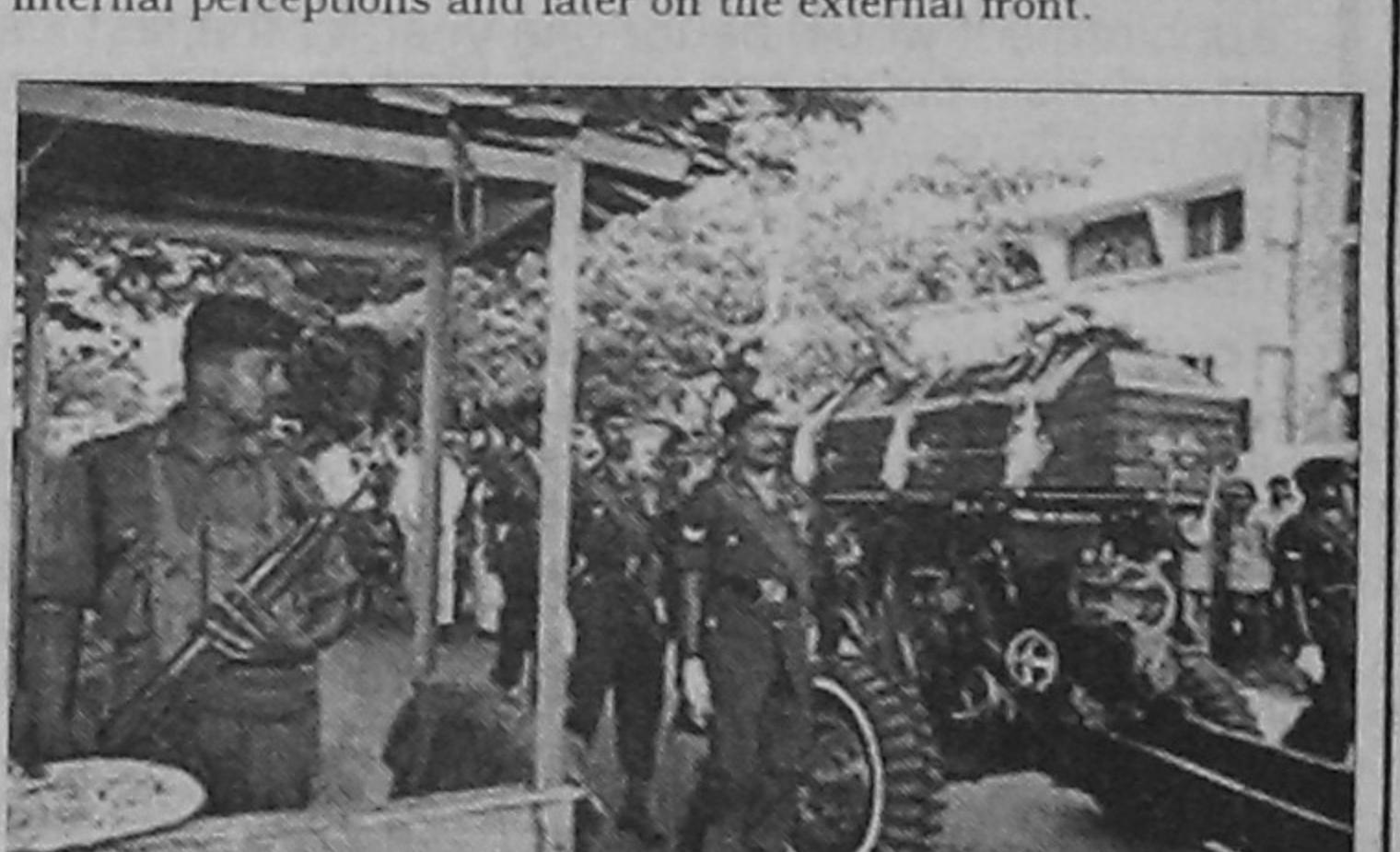
T HE Indian Environment and Forest Ministry, on May 6, cleared the export of bamboo from the northeastern states to neighbouring Bangladesh. Environment and Forest Minister T.R. Baalai told Meghalaya Chief Minister E.K. Mawlong on May 6 that the government had cleared the export of five million pieces of mulli bamboo from the northeast to Bangladesh. Mawlong met Baalai to seek Central assistance for the development of timber-based industries in Meghalaya. Meghalaya, along with some other tribal-inhabited states of the northeast, has been hit hard by a ban on indiscriminate felling of trees imposed by the Supreme Court four years ago. While the apex court's directive has helped in arresting the depletion of the region's forests, people running timber-based industries have been adversely affected.

Tipnis in Colombo

T HE Indian Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal A.Y. Tipnis, arrived in Colombo on the evening of May 7 on a 'goodwill visit'. The visit, at a time when Sri Lanka is facing a serious challenge from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has generated interest especially given the past Indian experience in attempting to bring about peace in the strife-torn nation.

Indian assistance again?

T EN years after Indian troops left Sri Lanka on May 7, resulting in the adoption of a hands-off policy by New Delhi, expectations have escalated in the island-nation of a possible Indian assistance to ward off the latest advances by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the northern Jaffna Peninsula. Faced with successive rebel advances since December, the foreign policy line of the Sri Lankan Government, which had steadfastly maintained that the conflict was 'internal' in nature, underwent subtle changes with the involvement of a Norwegian initiative to commence direct talks between the Government and the LTTE. But, it was in April, when the Tigers overran the crucial Elephant Pass gateway garrison to the Jaffna Peninsula, that the overall mode changed - initially on internal perceptions and later on the external front.



Security forces carrying dead bodies for burial

Quest for free-press

S RI LANKAN media groups declare war on censorship by Christine Jayasinghe. Local and international media rights groups have declared war against censorship regulations imposed by the Sri Lankan government on May 8 even as the army's battle with Tamil rebels in the north entered a lull. The Editor's Guild called the muzzling by censors a 'flagrant violation of the freedom of expression of the people' and said it would take legal action if the regulations were not amended. The Paris-based journalists' organisation, Reporters without Borders, issued a statement calling on the government to ensure the security of journalists working in Sri Lanka. The Newspaper Society of Sri Lanka, urging the lifting of censorship, said the media was mature enough to conduct itself with responsibility at a time of national crisis. On Sunday, newspapers carried blank spaces splashed with the word 'Censored'.

Gas for sale?

INDIAN Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpeyi told Lok Sabha on May 4 that India is in advance stage of talks with Bangladesh on importing its natural gas. He said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is very keen on the proposal and there could be some agreement with Bangladesh. State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury in Dhaka, however, apparently disagreeing with Indian PM's claim said: 'Our prime minister clearly articulated that a decision on this matter would be taken after careful consideration of national interests, one of which is at least 50 years' reserves to meet the needs of future generation.'

-- Compiled by Navine Murshid

Nepal-Bhutan

The Refugees in Himalayan Shangri-La

Mansoor Mamoon looks at the recent initiatives to solve the refugee problem between Nepal and Bhutan

Namely the Sherpas, the earliest known inhabitants of the country, the Nagas -- the descendants of Tibetan immigrants who came in the ninth century and the third group is the Nepalese, who started settling in the south towards the end of the last century.

All the three communities were, more or less, living in harmony for over one hundred years despite their differences in social customs, languages, religions and costumes. Though the official religion of the country is Mahayana Buddhism of the Drukpa Kagyupa sect, the vast majority of the Nepalese are Hindus. In the late eighties and early nineties of the last century the inter-community and ethnic relations in Bhutan, which so long was peaceful and harmonious, were rudely jolted. About two hundred thousand Nepalese were made the victims

of discrimination. At the core of the trouble was the fear that the Nepalese might gradually become dominant with the influx of their members from the neighbouring Hindu kingdom of Nepal. Under the influence of the Buddhist monks and clerics, who wielded tremendous influence in the state affairs and in the running of the statecraft, the Nepalese were asked to adapt to Dzongkha -- the official language. Teaching of their language in the Nepalese schools and other educational institutions were prohibited. The Nepalese were also asked to put on the Bhutanese national dress instead of their own and practice the social customs and way of life of the Bhutanese.

Side by side, the Bhutanese government started hounding out what it termed as the illegal

state apparatus.

IBFS rightly pointed out that this issue of this great human magnitude could not be peacefully and amicably resolved through Thimpu-Kathmandu bilateral talks. Such talks were routinely held between Nepal and Bhutan for umpteen number of times without yielding any tangible results so far.

IBFS, therefore, called for Indian intervention in this regard. India, on its part, tries to prevent the infiltration of these refugees when they venture to trek into Indian territory for their livelihood. Had India been serious it could have prevailed upon Bhutan to take back the refugees and stop aggression against its Nepalese ethnic group. Both Nepal and Bhutan heavily depend on India for many matters. In fact, both the countries are India-oriented. Had India been sincere the refugee tangle between Bhutan and Nepal would have been long resolved.