

The Region This Week

Licence to rule

PAKISTAN'S Supreme Court on May 12 upheld as legal the October 12 coup that ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif but gave the military three years to carry out its reform plans and to hold elections. Chief Justice Irtisad Hassan Khan backed the military ruler General Pervez Musharraf's argument that it had seized control of the country because it was slipping towards chaos under Sharif's second spell in power.

Power of Pokhran

INDIAN Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said on May 12 that India was a stronger nation two years after it carried out a stunning series of nuclear explosions. He said India's nuclear programme was "defensive in nature" and the world had a better appreciation of the imperatives that led to the 1998 atomic tests. "There was much criticism from some global powers at the time but the situation has changed dramatically in two years," he told lawmakers of his coalition government gathered to mark the second anniversary of the tests carried out in the Pokhran desert.

The final assault

SRI LANKA'S Tamil Tiger guerrillas said on May 13 they were preparing a "final assault" on the heart of the key northern town of Jaffna after weeks of intense fighting. Civilians were fleeing the town as the separatists said they were consolidating gains along the coast before making another stab toward Jaffna town.

Pakistan

Survival in the Political Void

The Supreme Court asked General Pervez Musharraf's military-led government to rebuild the country in three years and return to civilian rule, writes

M Abdul Hafiz

ILL Recently the authority of General Pervez Musharraf to rule Pakistan *ad interim* was not challenged from any significant quarter of the country. Now the first such challenge has come from an unexpected source. His hand picked judiciary which took an oath of allegiance to him under Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO) only months ago has in a bizarre move asked the General to rebuild Pakistan in three years and return the country to civilian rule. The 12-judge Supreme Court on May 12 unanimously called upon Pakistan's Chief Executive to complete his clean-up operation within that time limit while however endorsing his coup as necessary expedient to spare Pakistan of the impending chaos and bankruptcy.

In asking the military ruler to abide by the timeframe of three years to complete his mission the Supreme Court of Pakistan has imposed on him something the General persistently avoided since he came to power in October last. Earlier he rejected such calls even by the US and the entire western world. He wriggled out of all pressures to put a time limit to his efforts in bringing Pakistan back on a democratic track.

The government spokesman, while welcoming the judicial ruling appreciated its endorsement of the coup but avoided any comment on what would be its reaction to the timeframe. The media which is rather free in Musharraf's Pakistan termed it as a 'wake up' to the military ruler who has so far failed to deliver on his many promises. The political parties, however, expressed disappointment that the court endorsed the military takeover something they have already challenged in the court. Although it could not be immediately assessed whether the



court's warning constituted any crucial threat to General Musharraf, most observers believe that the threat, if any, could come only from the country's political front which alone was in a position to profitably exploit this judicial ruling.

But there are few signs that Pakistan's political class can pose a threat to Musharraf's regime. It was the government of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz Sharif) which according to Sharif's supporters was usurped by the military which hijacked power from it. As an initial reaction to military takeover all other political parties including the main opposition Pakistan People's Party welcomed the new political dispensation. As a matter of fact some of these parties have already been agitating against the Sharif government. They were happy at the fall of the government hoping that the change would open up some avenues of opportunities for them. Although it did not hold out any such promise they continue to remain as before in the margin of national politics.

Sharif government already clipped the wings of Benazir Bhutto who was tried in absentia a year ago for her corruption and abuse of power. While she was abroad the court in Pakistan convicted Bhutto banning her participation in politics for life apart from other judicial

'Beauty' boom?

A 21-year-old model, Lara Dutta, from India who said beauty pageants give women a platform to "voice our choices and opinions" was named Miss Universe 2000 Saturday. She succeeded Mpule Kwelagobe of Botswana to become the 49th winner of the pageant.

Saarc judges for HR

A two-day preliminary meeting for the proposed South Asia Judicial Colloquy Series was held in Bangladesh capital on May 13 and 14. Special emphasis was given on strengthening the judiciary in the Saarc countries for effective protection of human rights in this region.

Ban on LTTE

AS Sri Lanka's civil war rages, neighbouring India has extended a ban on Tamil Tiger rebels blamed for assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi nine years ago. Under the ban, the LTTE, which in fighting for an independent homeland in Sri Lanka, is forbidden to operate in India. In the '80s the LTTE ran training camps in southern India, where ethnic Tamils live in large numbers. Tamil political parties that are part of India's ruling coalition, however, still support the cause of Tamil Tigers, and have requested lifting of the ban which was imposed in 1992 and renewed in 1996.

on fire to protest Bhutto's conviction, the PML workers are reluctant to even come out in the streets. And while the PPP managed to stay together after the July 1977 military coup, the PML is apparently cracking up and its leaders are blaming Sharif for the military takeover of October last. These are indications enough as to which direction the party would be moving in its post-Sharif phase.

Shocked at the passivity of the party leaders a frustrated Nawaz Sharif asked his wife Kulsoom, who so far avoided entering the fray fearing rifts in the party, to take the plunge regardless of intra-party dissensions. But not only Kulsoom is not even a party member to qualify for the party leadership, the old veterans of the party, known for their opportunistic disposition, will not let it happen without probably a split in the party. Most of them are also averse to the idea of Kulsoom turning the PML into PPP-like family affair — that too on a confrontational line. Under the PML constitution, it is the party chief's prerogative to nominate any of his vice presidents as acting party chief. Kulsoom Sharif does not fall in that category.

But worse still is the PML's pro-regime tilt. It is a party that has too often allowed itself to become the preserve of those in power. Analysts say that it is going to be another replay of the inglorious history of the party. Already certain forces in the party are presenting themselves as willing to be hijacked by those in power. They prefer the lure of being in the government to that of working for the party in its bad days. As a result, the PML is likely to be factionalised, with each faction competing for a share in the government even if it is undemocratic.

Saarc

Impediments to Regional Cooperation

Rahul Arun and Abhishek Srivastava are concerned about the region and point out the political and economic impediments that are derailing the process of progress in South Asia

SOUTH ASIA remains a region divided — divided between the hopes of rich and the despair of the poor. A region where the richest one fifth earns almost 40 per cent of the income and the poorest 10 per cent with less than 10 per cent. It's a region where begins with the struggle of survival for 515 million poverty ridden destitute and tomorrow threatens the future of 395 million illiterate adults. The impediments could be divided into political and economic.

Political Impediments

The South Asian region has some of the most intractable political conflicts of the world. Indo-phobia: India by virtue of its natural endowments and economic infrastructure occupies a predominant role in South Asia. It occupies 72 per cent of the area, is inhabited by 77 per cent of the population and possesses more than ninety percent of resources in coal, crude, petroleum and salt. To India's neighbours, India wants to translate its natural preponderance into political preponderance because of such an erroneous perception some of them (especially Pakistan) suspect regional cooperation as a mask for Indian domination. They seek, to balance the "big brother" by developing close ties with other giants external to the region which hinders regional cooperation.

Strategic dissonance: Mutual apprehensions and suspicions has led to divergence in strategic perceptions in the region. The imperative of jointly protecting the region from outside interference is ignored while governments separately assess the intentions and capa-

bilities of outside powers to harm or benefit them. For instance — India's and Pakistan's strategic perspective vis-a-vis China are totally different. Domestic Conflicts: The domestic and ethno-religious conflicts have also been militating against the process of regionalism in South Asia. These conflicts can be classified under two categories: (a) Systemic and (b) Ethno-religious.

Military takeovers in Pakistan and frequent Political instability in India fall under the rubric of systemic crisis which derail the process of regional cooperation in the region. The huge ethno-religious overlap across border in South Asia (for ex-India-Pakistan /India-Bangladesh) often leads to a situation where purely domestic conflict has regional repercussions.

Bilateral Problems and Defence Expenditure: Chronic bilateral problems in the region has often led to postponement of SAARC summits which is a big setback to regional cooperation. Indo-Pak problem has often stymied the pace of SAARC ever since its inception. The Indo-Pak dispute remains a potentially dangerous flash-point that could disturb not merely the peace of the region but also that of the world. This dispute above all keeps arms spending in India and Pakistan at high levels and has committed both to the development of nuclear weapons and maintenance of massive defense establishments all of which consume resources which could be put to better use in programmes of poverty alleviation in both countries. It also prevents the

development of a common South Asian defence policy. According to Human Development Report in South Asia 1999, for every dollar spent on social sector Pakistan and India spend 4.32 and 1.70 dollars on defence and debt servicing respectively. Military expenditure in Sri Lanka (as a % of total public expenditure) has increased by 150 per cent between the period 1981-97.

External Powers Involvement: A number of extra regional factor shape the nature and direction of regional cooperation. During the Cold War days India found a natural ally in Soviet Union whereas Pakistan was America's trump card against Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The competitive power politics between the two superpowers led to a huge arms race in South Asia which had an adverse affect on development in the region.

Economic Impediments

Economic disparities: Differential development levels and glaring economic inequalities in the region in areas of trade, manufacture and services etc., makes it difficult, if not impossible, to carry out a viable economic system out of the unequals.

Lack of intra-regional trade: Intra regional trade among SAARC countries as a percentage of global trade has been only 1 per cent. Restrictive trade policies of SAARC countries, dominance of foreign capital, competitive behaviour of economies, communication gap and lack of monetary cooperation etc., are the primary reasons for such a low trade among SAARC countries.

SAARC countries compete for the same foreign markets, offering the same products e.g. Bangladesh, India and Nepal compete for export of jute goods to UK, EEC and United States market. Likewise India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh vie with each other for export of tea to EEC, UK, Japan and Australian markets.

The lack of solidarity or common stand at international forums by these member countries has been another noticeable constraint. The SAARC countries differed widely at North-South dialogues and GATT negotiations. South-South negotiations, GATT and NAM because of diverse economic and geopolitical interest. South Asia also faces a unique dilemma of the lack of an appropriate model which might inspire emulation.

Western European cooperation is reinforced, internally by alliances among powerful industrial, agricultural, humanitarian and labour interest across borders. The US model of transnational linkages via giant corporations and military forces in both inappropriate and repugnant to South Asia. Perhaps South Asia could learn from the ASEAN experience where concerted action and a shared vision has made it a dynamic regional grouping. In such a scenario, it becomes imperative to assess the impediments that SAARC faces in the path of regional cooperation in order to lift it out from the morass of poverty and underdevelopment.

Courtesy: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi

Seeking duty concessions

BANGLADESH on May 12 has sought duty concessions from India, especially for its garment exports, called for steps to increase border trade in a bid to lower its trade deficit and urged Indian investors to step up their presence in its industry. "We have discussed a wide range of issues with Indian authorities which includes giving duty-free status to 25 items, expanding the border trade between the two countries and simplifying the customs procedures and technology transfer," Bangladesh Commerce Secretary Ghulam Rahman reported to have said. The 25 items include garments, raw jute and jute products, which are Bangladesh's main export items.

The seven ministers

THE chief ministers of the seven northeastern Indian states on May 14 have resolved to jointly fight the twin problems of separatist insurgency and economic backwardness plaguing the region. "From now on we shall be raising a united voice against the common regional problems like insurgency and economic development and resolve to fight these issues jointly. We shall be coordinating more frequently and sharing reports on matters pertaining to militancy," Meghalaya Chief Minister E.K. Mawlong said. Five of the seven states in the region, barring Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, are reeling under a wave of insurgency, resulting in a depleted economy with investors shying away for fear of extortion by the rebels. The chief ministers agreed that insurgency in the region cannot be wiped out by using military force but needs a more pragmatic approach, like solving the growing unemployment problem, offering incentives to surrendered extremists and the political will from the

Centre to start peace talks with all rebel groups.

Kadirgamar's confession

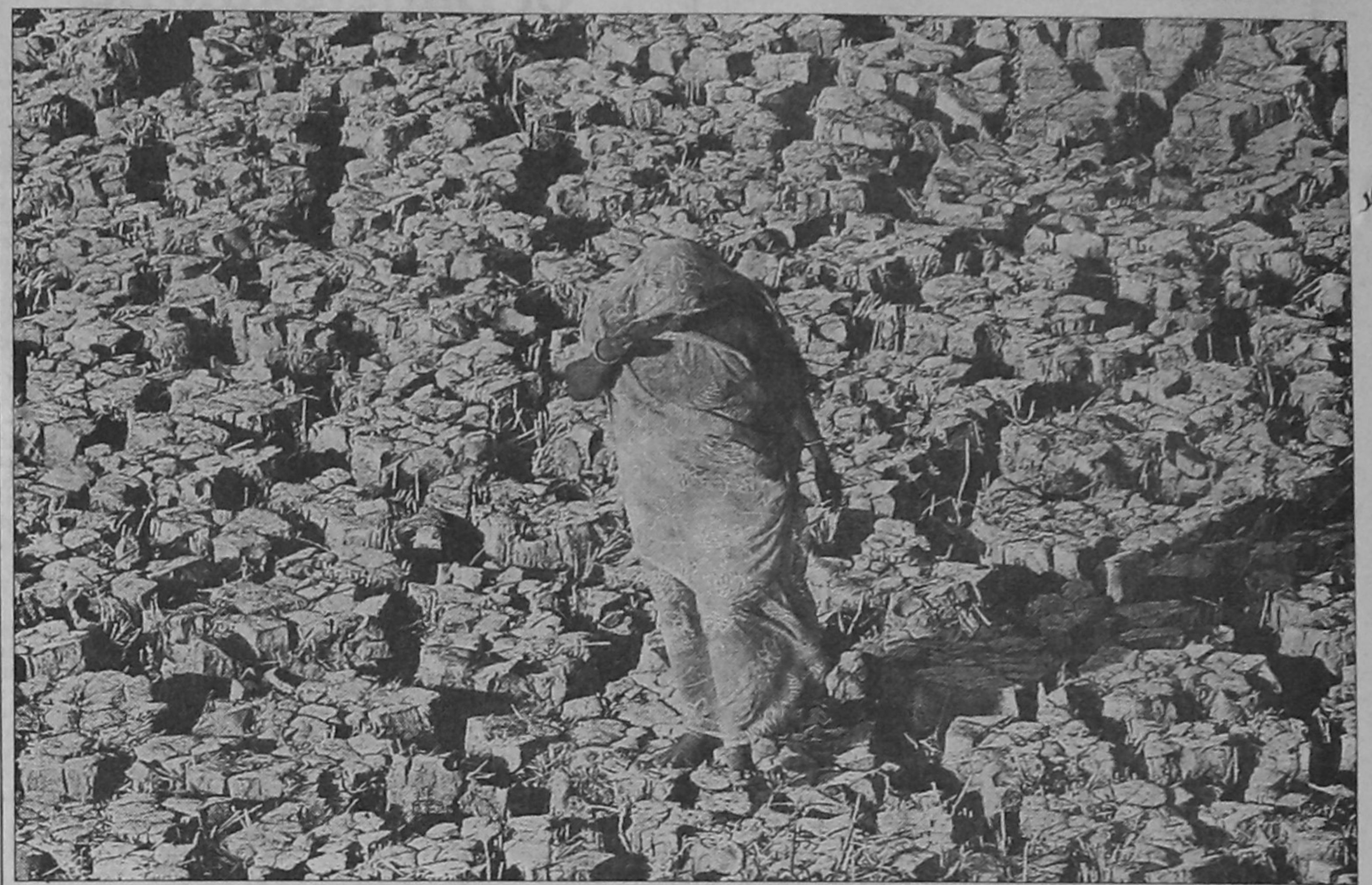
SRI LANKAN Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on May 14 has for the first time admitted that the recent renewal of diplomatic ties with Israel was to get military help and denied that India and the US played a part in the decision. Kadirgamar, who has just returned from India, said he had spoken to the Israeli ambassador in New Delhi last week and "within 48 hours Colombo and Tel Aviv agreed on re-establishing ties which has been under consideration by us ever since we came to office in 1994." "We have asked Israel to help us militarily," he added. The Sri Lankan government announced that links with Israel had been revived after India refused military help and offered humanitarian assistance instead, even as the conflict between government soldiers and Tamil Tiger rebels began heating up.

Monks' rally

AS the Sri Lankan army reels before an onslaught of rebel fighters, the people urging it to fight harder are the men in the saffron robes. Sri Lanka's Buddhist clergy, long an influential force in national politics, are stepping forward to rally the nation in its darkest hour. The string of defeats suffered by the army at the hands of separatist rebels, which has stunned and demoralised this island nation, has also drawn the monks out of their temples to hold the country together. In speeches and sermons, some of the monks are urging the government to spurn negotiations with the Tamil Tiger guerrillas and crush them with military force.

-- Compiled by Ekram Kabir

Chronicle of a Disaster Foretold



Dried up: Regional leaders need to gear up to face disasters...

Sri Lanka

Dual between the Lion and the Tiger

Will there be an end to the fighting in Sri Lanka? Will there be peace in the island in the near future? The hopes are high, but Mansoor Mamoon thinks the prospects appear bleak

THE world in general, and South Asia in particular, are watching with animated suspense the intense dual between the Liberation of Tamil Tiger Elam (LTTE) group, whose symbol is tiger, and the government troops, who holds the banner of lion, in Jaffna in the northeastern region of the Indian ocean republic of Sri Lanka. The tiger appears to be overpowering the lion from whose grip the peninsula appears to be fast slipping out.

Jaffna, according to the latest report, already stands isolated and in the face of ferocious pounding and by the tiger the lion, which mobilised 40,000 troops in its desperate bid to hold control of the strategically important peninsula, has to shift its positions. The guerrilla bands are inching towards Jaffna braving multipronged resistance by the beleaguered Sri Lankan troops and the control of the island, the control of which the LTTE lost in December 1995, seems to be imminent.

The Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar admitted that the situation has indeed posed to be very grave for the government troops as well as for half a million civilians in Jaffna caught in the firing range of the two warring sides. President Chandrika Kumaratunga held an emergency meeting with leaders of all the political parties, declared "war footing", imposed strict censorship and other prohibitory orders and sent SOS to several friendly countries including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, USA, Russia and Israel. So far only Israel responded positively albeit the fact that in the face of Muslim opposition it had to withdraw twice in the '80s. Keeping in mind its 1987 bitter experience and fiasco as well as the strong opposing stand of DMK - a vital coalition partner of Vajpayee government in Delhi - India expressed its reluctance to send troops or despatch arms for the aid of the Colombo government. The Indian Air Force Chief hurriedly undertook flew to the island on an unexplained mission and India said it might consider sending some humanitarian assistance.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government has asked its troops to resist to the last man the waves after waves of the LTTE and assured that within a

couple of weeks arms and armaments would reach them in plenty. It did not, however, divulge the sources of its arms procurement.

Analysts strongly maintain that the battle will be a long-drawn one and might take more bitter and acrimonious forms in the days ahead with heavy tolls on both sides. A peaceful solution to the 17-year ethnic strife is also no where to be seen. Norwegian and Swedish mediation efforts failed to melt the ice. Rather, with every passing day the tangle is being compounded.

The bitter enmity and rivalry between the 74 percent Sinhalese and the 14 percent Tamils are psychological in nature and deeply rooted in history. Sri Lanka with a landmass of about 66,000 square kilometres and a population of about 18 million is a picturesque island in the Indian Ocean, only 30 miles south of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Despite the 17-year-long civil war Sri Lanka's per capita income has steadied to 844 US dollars - the highest among the South Asian countries. With the rate literacy at over ninety percent, it once had all the ingredients to become an emerging economic tiger like Singapore, Malaysia, Korea and Taiwan. When ethnic strife broke out, the island was on the verge of take-off stage. The war seriously impaired its economic prospects abruptly stopping the flow of foreign direct investment and tourists.

The Sinhalese are Buddhists while the Tamils are mainly Hindus. They not only differ in religious beliefs, but also in respect of language and culture. The Sinhalese claim that they landed in the island and colonised it 2,500 years ago from the then India. Sinhalese are said to be the descendants of Tamil Nadu and the Tamils also claim in an equal vein that their ancestors also settled at the same time or even earlier than the Sinhalese. History records that the Tamils had an independent state in the north-eastern part of the island called Yal Palam which existed from the 13 to the 15 century A.D. The advent of Europeans in the 15th century and their formation of one single administrative unit trituted their independent statehood. Both the Sinhalese and the Tamils fought against British domination and won independence for their country in 1948.

After independence the rivalry between the two groups gradually sharpened. Since the Tamils were advanced in education and dominated the job market the majority Sinhalese wanted to reverse the trend. First about a million Tamils were made stateless on the plea of proving their legal status as rightful citizens of the island. Secondly, the Sinhalese made the state language. The 1972 constitution also grossly discriminated against the minorities, particularly the Tamils, who became increasingly concerned about their future and formed their own political party named the Tamil Federal Party in 1950 with the sole objective of securing autonomy for the Tamil majority area in the northeastern region of the country under a federated arrangement. The 1976 general elections were fought by the Tamils under one single banner - the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) - with the pledge for securing Elam or independence for the Tamil majority areas. TULF emerged as the main opposition party. But the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution adopted in 1983 strictly prohibited secessionist politics in all forms which resulted in the banning of TULF and the loss of its representation in Parliament.

These discriminatory attitudes pushed the back of the Tamils in Sri Lanka to the walls forcing them to take up arms. The Colombo government had been under the illusion of a military solution of a highly politically surcharged issue and deployed the army in full gear to curb the insurgency. But it miscalculated the strength of the Tamil guerrillas, who received direct backing and training from India, sanctuary among the 55 million people of Tamil Nadu and the Tamil diaspora living in Singapore, UK, Australia and in other parts of the world. The chief of the LTTE 45-year-old Velupillai Prabhakaran, who at the tender age of 21 took up the leadership of the organisation, successfully established a global network for arms and fund supply as well as intelligence gathering. He also created a dedicated band of ultra-nationalist Tamil guerrillas including women and children brigades. So dare-devil is the women's suicide squad that it cut down the lives of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India and President Premadasa of Sri Lanka besides injuring President Chandrika Kumaratunga before the presidential polls in December, last year. In the unending civil strife over 60,000 people have so far been killed and according to a survey by an NGO twenty-four per cent of the Sri Lankan women have been widowed.

The Sri Lankan government is now ready to grant some kind of self-rule to the Tamil inhabited northeastern region. But the series of victories over the government troops have emboldened the LTTE, which has now hardened its stand and is demanding a separate independent state for the Tamils. In 1984-85 there were talks between the government and the LTTE. The first talk broke out in 1995 the government launched a major offensive and drove out the insurgents from Jaffna, which they made their provisional capital after capturing it in 1985. Indian presence from 1987 to 1989, as already stated, ended in fiasco and was not welcomed either by the majority Sinhalese or by the LTTE whom India out of its own strategic interests trained. Norway was mediating between the two sides and had series of meetings with the London-based LTTE representatives as well as the government functionaries. Sweden also played some role. But the recent tempo in fighting has virtually frustrated the peace efforts. Will there be an end to the fighting in Sri Lanka? Will there be peace in the island in the near future? The prospect appears to be bleak. The government by its prohibition of secessionist politics, open or clandestine, in 1983 and by militarising a political issue had lost the chances of a negotiated peaceful settlement. The Sinhalese leaders both in the government as well as in the opposition are out and out against the partition of the island. Because this will incur the wrath of their own people who think that the island is rightfully theirs. And the Tamils at this stage may not accept anything less than independence. If Prabhakaran capitulates or compromises his fate will be sealed. The battle will, therefore, rage on. While the world will watch with anguish the dual between the tiger and the lion no side is going to have a decisive victory. It is a suicidal duel with its telling effect on the people of all ethnic groups and the future of the island.