

Sri Lanka

Tension in the Indian Ocean

Mansoor Mamoon looks at the situation in Sri Lanka that may well turn the Indian Ocean into a hot bed of rivalry and acrimony of the super and the regional powers

THE government troops and the guerrillas belonging to the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Elam (LTTE) are now locked in a pitched battle for the control of strategically important northeastern Jaffna peninsula. There has been a flurry of diplomatic activities from various international quarters to diffuse the high tension and to bring about a settlement of the long-standing insurgency in the Indian Ocean island republic. Norway, the chief facilitator in the negotiation between the Sri Lanka government and the LTTE, has initiated a shuttle diplomacy simultaneously talking to New Delhi, Colombo and the LTTE as to how to end the ethnic strife that has already cost over 60,000 lives in 17 years, and to restore much-vaunted peace in the war-ravaged country.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government wanted that India should provide military assistance and should join with Norway in facilitating the peace process by using its clout over LTTE to come to the negotiation table. To the utter dismay of the Colombo government, New Delhi flatly denied that it is not in a position to provide any military assistance. But it is ready to give what it called humanitarian assistance for the safe pull out of about 40,000 gov-

ernment troops encircled in Jaffna by LTTE guerrilla bands. Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra spoke out the conditionalities to the journalists for such assistance, which are - let Jaffna fall to the LTTE, let the Colombo government formally propose for Indian mediation and create a climate of enforcing cease-fire. President Chandrika could well understand the Indian motive, which in other words mean that LTTE should recapture Jaffna which will tantamount to meeting its long cherished desire of establishing a de jure, if not a *de facto* separate state. This is why she has ruled out any possibility of troops withdrawal from Jaffna, however, severe the cost may be for her government in the face of what she conceded as "LTTE's determined fight".

It was, in fact, India which had fuelled the ethnic strife in Sri Lanka by way of its long-term geo-political strategy. To quote Chandrika: "The people of Sri Lanka feel that it was an Indian government sometime ago that supported the terrorists on their soil so that they could come back and start the war".

The bone of contention had been Sri Lankan government decision to provide the US ships based in the Indian Ocean Is-

land of Diego Garcia berthing and refuelling facilities at Trincomalee in the late seventies. At that time Delhi was aligned with the now-defunct Soviet Union and did not like the idea of US presence in so near its coasts. Moreover, the central government in India was at that time heavily depending on the support of the people of the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

So to curry favour with the Tamils in India as well as for tactical reasons of creating pressure on the Sri Lanka government for its hobnobbing with Washington, the New Delhi allegedly started training Tamil insurgents and sending them back to the island with arms to trigger the separatist war. They are fighting to carve out a homeland for Sri Lanka's 3.2 million minority Tamils alleging that they are grossly discriminated by the Sinhalese, who make up 14 million of the country's total population of 18.6 million. In 1987 under a treaty India sent its troops to Sri Lanka to disengage LTTE guerrillas.

But the Sinhalese Buddhists opine that Indian troops had, in fact, nullified, in a subtle manner, the all-out offensives, which the Jayewardene government launched at that time against the LTTE guerrillas and were achieving considerable suc-

cesses. At the same time the Indian troops were also containing the LTTE. Very soon both the Sinhalese and the LTTE turned equally opposed to Indian presence for their dual role. Eventually they had to pull out from the island after losing a considerable number of their personnel. Rajiv Gandhi had also to sacrifice his life at the altar of the wrath of LTTE.

India still plays a crucial role in the affairs of Sri Lanka. About 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamils have taken refuge in Tamil Nadu, many of whom are active LTTE cadres as claimed by President Kumaratunga. The ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu is also an important coalition partner in the NDA government at the Centre. All the Tamil regional parties have strong attachment to their Sri Lankan kith and kin. India is also apprehensive of the flow of the Tamil refugees to its coasts in the event of further flare up of the battle for Jaffna, which LTTE lost to government troops in 1995.

India, right now, is keenly, but silently observing as to who are responding to the SOS of the Sri Lanka government. Israel with which Colombo has re-established diplomatic ties at the peak of the present crisis is reported to have shipped the badly needed arms and ammunitions. Pakistan, India's archenemy, is reported to be ac-

tively considering to help Sri Lanka with arms. And the Under Secretary at the US State Department Thomas Pickering dashed first to Delhi, then to Colombo for urgent talks on the Sri Lankan imbroglio. He said his country is strongly opposed to the creation of a separate Tamil state and it expects India to play a role in the peace initiative as a regional power. Chandrika told an Indian daily that India could do many things. "What it could do is to strengthen the hands of our chosen facilitator Norway and try to pursue LTTE to come for talks."

Chandrika government has already agreed to change the unitary nature of the state into a federal arrangement with the provision of autonomy for two Tamil majority provinces in the northeastern region. But Prabhakaran appears to be defiant and will not accept short of establishing a separate Tamil state and to fight to the last for the recapture of Jaffna, which LTTE lost to government troops in 1995.

India's strategy, as earlier stated, seems to weaken the Colombo government by establishing suzerainty of LTTE in Jaffna peninsula. India is not in favour of third party mediation in any dispute in its immediate neighbourhood. Under what Bhabani Sen Gupta, the Indian

analyst, termed as "India or India's doctrine". New Delhi will obviously view it as against its geo-political interests if any neighbouring country seeks any outside assistance. This has prompted India to press for making the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace. Sri Lanka government's precarious position will obviously help India to extend its blue water navy deep into the Indian Ocean.

The US, despite its closer ties with India, would not welcome such a development considering the security of its naval base in the island of Diego Garcia. India's recent agreement with Vietnam for joint naval exercises have not been viewed positively by China. President R.N. Narayanan's current visit to China has been designed to improve two countries relations which nosedived to some extent after the Pokhran nuke testing two years ago as well as its overt and covert attempts towards forging closer cooperation with Vietnam for extending its naval presence further to the Indian ocean. The situation in Sri Lanka might, therefore, well turn the Indian Ocean into hot bed of rivalry and acrimony of the super and the regional powers and which is likely to destabilise the entire South and Southeast Asian region.

Concern for civilians

THE United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has voiced its concern for the safety of civilians in the Jaffna peninsula and appealed to the government and Tamil separatists to ensure their freedom to move to safe areas. UNHCR officials had been at hand on Saturday at four checkpoints to help civilians who were fleeing the Thenmarachchi area where fierce fighting has been raging in recent weeks, the agency said in a statement on May 28. Some of the civilians were injured and had said that there were more people waiting to leave the embattled region. The agency said those fleeing had said that civilians had been killed and injured during military actions over the past two weeks.

The Pakistan card

THE nature of Sino-Pakistani relations will be an important factor in shaping Sino-Indian relations. This is one of the points that President R.N. Narayanan has driven home with his host President Jiang Zemin during his six-day state visit to China. The message that India wants to convey is simple: Sino-Indian and Sino-Pakistani relations are a zero-sum game. The China-Pakistan nexus in nuclear and missile technology transfers, in particular, has had a serious bearing on the strategic balance in the Indian subcontinent. While India has been making sincere efforts lately to mend its strained relations with its larger neighbour, it is nevertheless determined to extract a price on its western front where the threat is far more immediate and diabolical.

Blossoming Kulsoom

KULSOOM Nawaz, wife of deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, leads a march today to the mountains of Chagai in Baluchistan where Pakistan conducted its nuclear tests two years ago on May 28. Kulsoom, now a leader of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML), said she would fly Pakistan's flag on the mountains. "Our (PML) government took the bold stand and responded to India's nuclear tests... We are proud of it and it was a step towards normalisation of relations with India," she said.

Big deal

INDIA signed a \$160 million (Rs. 7.04 billion at Rs. 43 to a dollar) deal with Russia on May 28 to purchase 40 Mi-17 heavy helicopters. The contract for the supply of the 40 helicopters over the next 13 months was signed by senior officials from both sides at the Defence Ministry. The Russian Ambassador to India, Alexander Kadkin, was present at the signing of the contract. The Mi-17 deal is one of the largest defence contracts finalised by India since the purchase of 40 Sukhoi-30 aircraft from Russia in 1996 at a cost of Rs. 63 billion. As in the Sukhoi deal, payments for the Mi-17s will be made in phases.

No compromise on tax issue

PAKISTAN'S cash-strapped military regime on May 27 launched a controversial country-wide survey of business and properties simultaneously in 13 major cities in a bid to expand the tax net and document the economy, an exercise strongly opposed by the trading community. While military ruler, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, has said that his government is not ready to compromise on the tax issue, the traders have threatened to pull down the shutters to protest the tax drive. Initial reports from major cities said a strike call by the traders evoked partial response, with the traders in some places hastily closing down the shops at the approach of the survey teams.

Tributes to Majrooh Sultanpuri

PAKISTANI poets and writers have paid rich tributes to Indian poet-lyricist Majrooh Sultanpuri, who died in Mumbai on Wednesday. "He was popular as a film lyricist, but the real loser because of his death" is Urdu ghazal of which he was a most committed supporter, says litterateur Amjad Islam Amjad. Amjad said Majrooh defended the genre when other eminent literary figures of the subcontinent dismissed it as an outdated mode of poetry.

The sullen aspirants

A minor cabinet expansion effected by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on May 27 left half a dozen aspirants in his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) disappointed as the three ministers inducted all belonged to the BJP's partners in the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Vajpayee said after the expansion that the cabinet was complete for now, adding that there was no particular reason why he had not inducted any member of the BJP. Former Agriculture Minister Nitish Kumar, who had quit the Vajpayee ministry to enter politics in his home state of Bihar and became chief minister of a short-lived government, was sworn in a cabinet minister by President R.N. Narayanan at a ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Rabri Devi wins Bihar seat

THE chief minister of the northern Indian state of Bihar, Rabri Devi, has won the by-election for the Raghunath assembly seat, defeating her nearest rival by more than 60,000 votes. The by-election, Devi's first, was held on Friday last, after her husband and the man widely believed to be the real power in the state, Laloo Prasad Yadav, vacated the seat. He was the chief minister of Bihar but after being accused of corruption and forced to resign was succeeded in the post by his wife, who up to that point had shown no inclination for politics.

'Sudden illness' of Shwe

THE head of Burma's ruling military junta, General Than Shwe, has cancelled a visit to Bangladesh because of illness. Bangladeshi officials said on Sunday he had suffered a "sudden illness" and that a new date would be set for the visit, which was to focus on repatriating Burmese refugees. Government officials had initially said the cancellation was due to a cyclone in the capital, Dhaka.

Forget 1962

THE Indian and Chinese presidents have agreed to speed up talks aimed at resolving a long-running border dispute. The two countries fought a brief war across the Himalayas in 1962 and the issue is regarded as central to relations between them. Chinese President Jiang Zemin put forward proposals for improving ties, including better contacts between the two governments and stronger trade.

The spillover

US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering's warning that Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka could spill over to neighbouring India reflects Washington's desire to see New Delhi playing an effective role to ensure durable regional stability. Pickering, who reiterated Washington's opposition to the carving out of an independent state of Tamil Eelam from Sri Lanka for which the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been waging a bloody campaign, said there was "serious potential" for separatist sentiments flaring up in Tamil Nadu, although it may not happen immediately.

Maoist rebels offer talks

MAOIST rebels in Nepal have indicated they are willing to have talks with the new government if it stops what they describe as repression against them. It is the first time that the rebels have made the offer to the government of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, which assumed office two months ago. But observers say the Maoists are only reiterating their old demands. Koirala had been widely considered more hard line than his predecessor, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, but has recently softened his stance. About 1300 have died in the four-year-old Maoist insurgency aimed at overthrowing the constitutional monarchy and replacing it with a Communist government.

-- Compiled by Ekram Kabir

The Battle for Jaffna

The LTTE victory at Elephant Pass and latest peace initiatives by the Norwegians have substantially enhanced the rebels' bargaining power, says **M Abdul Hafiz**

AMIDST optimism spurred by Norwegian-brokered peace deal for Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers stormed Elephant Pass garrison at the entrance of Jaffna peninsula and pierced through its impregnable security blanket on 19 April last. To outside observers it might have looked sudden and dramatic but Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE chief, always had both honesty and audacity to spell out his designs in advance. Even when the LTTE was ejected out of Jaffna in 1995 after it ran a parallel administration for five years in the peninsula, Prabhakaran vowed that 2000 would be the "decisive year of war". True to his words, from December 11 last year to March 16 this year, the LTTE chief attacked and occupied the eastern coastal belts of Elephant Pass Complex.

After the fall of satellite camps north of Elephant Pass, the military command was sufficiently warned by the intelligence agencies about an impending assault on Elephant Complex itself. Yet the government troops sat there like sitting ducks awaiting the attack to come. Now with the fall of the strategic Elephant Pass the battle for Jaffna is in its final phase.

For Prabhakaran it has been a long war of attrition which he conducted by gradually destroying the nation's power of resistance. He was able to spread terror throughout the country by sending his suicide squads to the heart of Sri Lankan capital. With complete immunity, they played havoc with their objectives all these years, the worst being the Central Bank bombing in 1996 which killed 88 persons and injured more than 1000. Came close in its heel the bombing of World Trade Centre of Colombo in 1997. In order to deprive the nation of a strong leadership, the LTTE also targeted national leaders including those from political opposition. So shocking was its effects that Sri Lankan politicians, of



late, refrained from publicly criticising the LTTE lest they should become the Tigers' target.

The suicide bomb syndrome, a fear that a bomber could strike anywhere, anytime and against any target, irrespective of the level of protection, had adversely affected both civilian and military morale. The suicide attack threat softened the government's stand of the toughest of leaders, compromised the position even of hardline organisations and debilitated the public will that had all along argued in favour of decisive fights against the LTTE. It sapped the courage of political and military elite who no longer wanted to be identified with their high-profile action plan against the LTTE. In the meantime, the Tigers are steadily advancing towards Jaffna bringing the government held Palaly military base and Kankesanthurai (KKS) port also under threat. Both of them are now within striking distance of the Tigers' artillery range. Just now, heavy fighting are raging in the north with both sides claiming and counterclaiming gains. The return of the Tigers to Jaffna, which is a clear possibility now after Elephant Pass disaster, could mean the return of the pre-1995 days, fraught with massive dislocations and revenge killings for the people living there. But then Jaffna has changed hands many times even earlier.

There have been many shifts in the military balance in Sri Lanka's ethnic war even in the past. But neither side gained anything conclusively. If Jaffna does fall in the hands of the Tigers the battle may be over but the war for Eelam will hardly be won. However in the light of the latest peace initiative by the Norwegians, the LTTE victory at Elephant Pass has substantially enhanced the rebels' bargaining power. And if they can wrest back Jaffna as soon as possible by its leader five years ago then the LTTE will hold all the cards at the negotiating table.

The author is a retired Brigadier of Bangladesh Army.

'Awesome Foursome'



THIS is the only time they seem to set aside differences and enjoy. The Asia Cup cricket, seventh of its kind, that started in Dhaka on Monday, May 29, is certainly a treat for all the cricket lovers and players. It is good to see all these players together; these South Asian heartthrobs who have, time again, managed to increase their fans following each time they played in such regional games.

Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and may well be the future 'awesome foursome'! Although the Bangladeshi crowds don't expect the world from their team, the others are viewing them as equal opponents. As Sanath Jayasuria

While Bangladesh would be looking forward to winning a few games against the other three would-be contending for the Cup. Manager of the Indian team, Samiran Chakraborty commented, "The team is in good spirits and we are definitely here to win the Cup." Sri Lankan team captain, Jayasuria at a press conference said that they were trying to reach the position they were in 1996. Winning the Cup would be a good step for that.

"We will try to win every match here and reach the finals and hopefully return home with the trophy," he said.

Pakistan, after the test series with West Indies, too would be vying for the Cup. They have

By Navine Murshid

said, "We cannot take Bangladesh lightly because it is their home ground."

The Bangladeshi players too are quite confident about themselves.

"Gone are the days when we played with the only purpose of containing the opponents from amassing an embarrassing total and than scoring something without getting all out. Things have changed since we played our first one-day match in the second Asia Cup in 1988. We are now mentally prepared to go in the middle and try to win a game," said A. Islam, captain of the Bangladeshi Cricket Team.

Their performance against India may well pave their path towards a better cricket-playing nation.

always maintained a confident image and that is not going to change for a long time to come. One of the reasons that people have been looking forward to this 'South Asian' event is that this is taking place amidst a lot of hub and cry concerning match-fixing, especially Manoj Prabhakar's statement saying it was Kapil Dev who asked him to play badly in a one-day game against Pakistan. However, Samiran Chakraborty said that they have dumped those things at Delhi and have come here to play a good game. The Indian team has been advised to keep their mouth shut, and they are doing a good job at it!

Interesting are the jokes that are being whipped up because of the match-fixing fale. While 'six' is deliberately being pro-

ounced 'fix', the rains that managed to delay games and perhaps taint performance have been the audience. People even went to the extent of joking that the players and umpires know the outcome of the matches, and the players are actually playing against the audiences!

Nevertheless, audiences, especially in South Asian region, have seen some great shots already and would undoubtedly see some more in the days to come. The Bangladeshi crowds will remain glued to the game, as Pakistan takes on Bangladesh today. The whole atmosphere here seems to be cheerful and positive. Although, the India-Bangladesh game

took two days to reach a result, enthusiasm ran strong. Bangladesh may be a new cricketing nation, but in spirit, there is no lacking. This year's Asia Cup proves not only that. It also hints at the possibility of the region becoming the pioneer of world cricket.

Perhaps, it is from this that the notion of settling political differences through cricket arises. There are many well-wishers who believe that India and Pakistan can share a good relationship, if they continue to play like this and enjoy their game. Of course, there are people who contend that such games actually intensify the hatred the two nations have in common, but cricket, over the years, arguably became South Asia's favourite sport.

Nepal

Remoulding Friendly Relations

The changing environment calls for a refashioning of relations between Kathmandu and New Delhi, says **N K Pant**

AT present there are no entry and exit restrictions for Indian nationals and Nepalese subjects travelling between the two countries. As employment opportunities within the kingdom are limited, tens of thousands of Nepalese cross into India in search of jobs as security guards, domestic helps, skilled and unskilled labourers. Thousands also come as students seeking admission to universities, colleges and technical institutes. In addition, due to cultural and religious affinities, there is considerable tourist and pilgrim traffic between the two neighbouring nations. The Himalayan kingdom's high mountain ranges rounds flocks of trekkers and climbers from all over the world mostly transit-

ing through India. Of particular concern is the fact that Nepal is being used as an important route by international drug traffickers especially from of Pakistan-Afghanistan tribal belt. Strangely, the long unguarded Indo-Nepal border offers no hurdles to criminals, smugglers, drug peddlers, gun runners and last but not least Pakistani terrorists in their movement to and from India. India has reportedly complained to Kathmandu about ISI activities in that country from time to time but Nepalese authorities have been unable to curb the same due to the lack of political will and the necessary wherewithal.

Nepal has turned a blind eye to plugging infiltration