


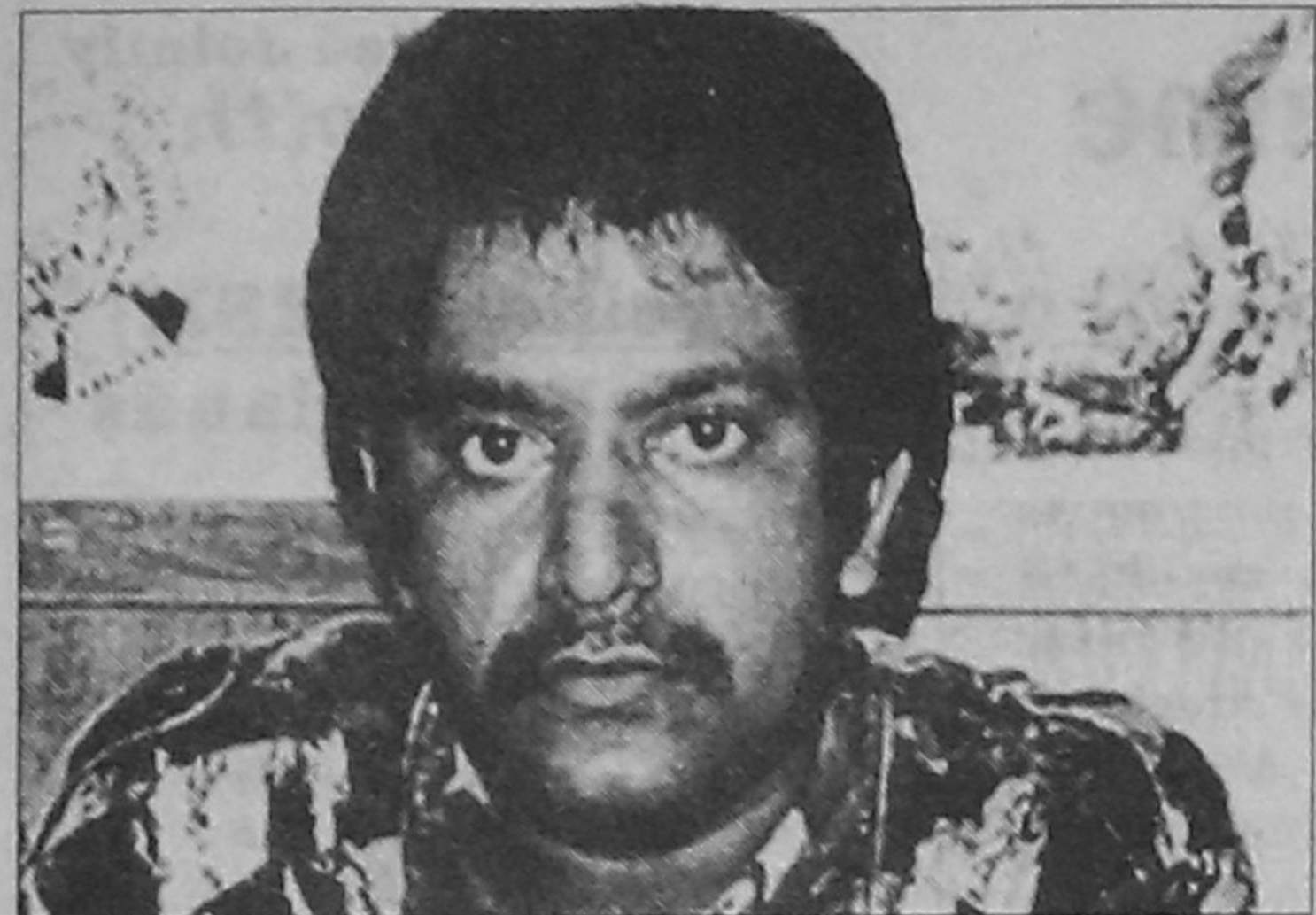
Sri Lanka

Is Colombo Alone?

By Ekram Kabir

 SOUTH ASIA'S longest war in Sri Lanka escalated to a point where the military balance in the island's north has shifted in favour of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Everyone is talking of a negotiated settlement but the LTTE has not shown any willingness to come to the negotiating table so far. Those who are vocal about South Asian "regional co-operation" and "regional peace" are talking about negotiated "peace" while there is no end to the cycle of bloodshed in the island nation. The noticeable silence from the neighbouring countries in Lanka's current crisis is giving the concept of "regional peace" a bad name.

After suffering from continuous attacks of LTTE, Sri Lanka is now more open to seek foreign help. The ongoing civil war



Unwilling to "discuss"...

has forced the Sri Lankan government to devote a good amount of its annual budget to defence, especially in arms-purchasing.

Sri Lanka asked for help from India. This is, however, not the first time that India has been asked to support Sri Lankan government against the Tigers, but there has not been any other instance quite like this when a "South Asian nation" has gone all-out seeking military help from a neighbour. Situations, however, have come close to it. In Nepal, for example, India brokered the deal whereby the Nepali Congress took over from the feudal Ranas in 1950. The Indian armed forces came to the aid of the Mukti-Bahini (Freedom Fighters) in 1971 and helped in Bangladesh's war of independence. Also in 1971, India and Pakistan both sent arms (and India, pilots) to help

Today, questions are being

raised among the learned circles: Should other countries risk getting involved in Sri Lanka's war? Is the situation so serious that foreign intervention is required? Can there be lasting peace in Sri Lanka without giving Tamils their own country? Is the country condemned to a continuing cycle of violence until one side or the other is finally defeated? Now, is not the time for contemplation. It is time for decisions. And in the process of development and progress, perhaps, it is time to get together and find real solutions to the perils that afflict regional political norms.

The concept of peace force, through a political-cum-security concept, aims to promote peace and safeguard against human and economic destruction.

Internal conflicts have proved to be more destructive as compared to interstate conflicts. In these conflicts, government or the ruling elite is not directly affected. It is the "people" who suffer miseries both economically and socially. If peace forces from South Asian countries could work in other countries of the world under the United Nations umbrella, then they also carry the potential to work within their own region — a place more familiar to them; a place where they can work at ease.

Along with this, South Asia Peace Force could also provide a good scope for improving confidence-building measures in the region. If the army personnel from different South Asian countries work together to counter the hostility within the region, it would definitely provide an opportunity to understand each other's problems and would give them an incentive to work jointly for mutual as well as individual problems.

Insurgent war in Sri Lanka is not an isolated problem; it has roots within the region. If Tamil Tigers succeed in achieving their objectives, then the fire would spread throughout the region and India, in particular, would be directly affected, leading from one separatist war in Tamil Nadu state to another war.


One cannot underestimate the importance of a regional peaceful environment. The security issues, even in the post-cold war era, have overshadowed all sorts of development. Peace and development are like two sides of the same coin and one cannot exist without the other.

Therefore, in the contemporary geopolitical world, where regions are dominating global economy and politics, South Asia has to come forward and secure its land from bloody wars.

Pakistan

Vanity in Vain

By Navine Murshid

 THE law in the land seems to be lost. Or, perhaps, it was never there. Pakistan, today, is a country, which is being looked down upon, not only because of its failed democracy, but because of the way they look at their women.

The practice of honour killings in Pakistan has been highlighted and strongly condemned in a report by the human rights group, Amnesty International. Although, Pakistan is under the spotlight for its "misdeeds" now, Bangladeshi women face the wrath for "failing to maintain honour" too. The difference is that in Pakistan, women from influential, political parties are at risk as well while in Bangladesh such "activities", if any, are limited in rural areas.

Bangladesh, being a more secular state, has managed to keep religion at perspective and hence resisted religious extremism to shroud political and social norms. However, hundreds of women die each year in Pakistan as a result of honour killings. Many of the killings go unreported and in almost all cases the perpetrators, who are often close family members, go unpunished. Women also live in fear of torture and violence, their basic human rights ignored.

Women become the victims of honour killings for a variety of reasons. Women, for example, who want to make their own decision regarding their marriage, can be accused of undermining family honour. Women seeking divorce or who have been raped are also at risk, not to mention women who have dared to "stray" from marital bonds.

In some cases, murders are committed for other motives and dressed up as honour killings because the perpetra-

tors believe the courts will take a lenient view. Pakistan jurists insist that, in law, killing someone for reasons of honour is not a mitigating circumstance. But in practice, many judges do view honour killings leniently and few of those responsible for them serve long sentences. Indeed, few are ever prosecuted at all. This practice, more apparent in tribal and conservative parts of Pakistan, is supported by members from the highly conservative tribal region of the North-west Frontier province. It is their pressure that caused the country's upper house, the Senate, to reject a resolution condemning the growing incidence of murder of women in the name of family honour during Nawaz Sharif's regime. The resolution was moved by the main opposition party Pakistan People's Party of former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto.

It became a major issue when a woman who had fled her home in the North-west Fron-

tier to avoid a forced marriage was shot down by a hired killer in the office of a human rights activist. The incident sparked a bitter debate in the country, with human rights groups asking for a new and strict law to discourage the practice. It was against this backdrop that the opposition PPP wanted the Senate to pass a resolution to condemn the so-called "honour" killings. But when it tried to move the resolution, the governing-party members belonging to the conservative tribal region of the North-west Frontier province put up a forceful opposition. Much to the surprise of many, they were fully backed by a left-wing group, Awami National Party, whose members also came from the same province. The notion of 'democracy lost' had begun even before the military takeover.

Chief Executive General Musharraf said the practice of killing women in the name of honour — prevalent among

tribal communities in Pakistan — would be treated as murder. "Killing in the name of honour is murder and will be treated as such," he said. "Such actions do not find any place in our religion or law," he added. More than 1,000 Pakistani women were the victims of honour killings last year, a report by the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said recently. The General said "a permanent and independent commission" would be set up to protect women's rights.

He pledged to curb human rights abuses against women, children and religious minorities, and in this connection he said that he would try to end the abuse of blasphemy laws.

However, he had to make a retreat from his attempt to change the country's controversial blasphemy law in the face of pressure by conservative clerics. In the face of a number of Islamic organisations' protests against his proposed

changes, the General now plans to leave the laws completely unchanged.

Minority religious groups, especially the Christians, and human rights activists in Pakistan have long complained against these abusive laws. Expressing concern over this latest development, rights activists said that the military regime's stated commitment to human rights were hollow. Currently, if an individual goes to the police and simply accuses someone of blasphemy, the police make an immediate arrest before investigation.

General Musharraf was insisting on a procedural change, and did not mean that the law itself was being amended.

The military authorities seem to have bowed to pressure. It perhaps proves even a military-led government in Pakistan is incapable of pushing through a reform package that would curb human rights abuses against women (e.g., "honour killings"), children and religious minorities in the country. To this end, the military strongman himself quoted to have said: "As it was the unanimous demand of the Ulema and of the people, therefore, I have decided to do away with the procedural change in registration of a First Information Report under the blasphemy law."

Amnesty International suggests wide-ranging legal reforms and public awareness campaigns to reduce the number of honour killings. However, with no participation of the people, this remains a far cry. If a military dictator, without having to worry about popularity and votes, cannot enforce such reform, then one may wonder who can. The political and social status quo in Pakistan is rather forlorn. In time, Pakistan would realise that, killing women for honour, actually kills the honour of the whole nation.




Killing with "kindness"...

India

Shock Wave for CPIM in West Bengal

By Mansoor Mamoon

 THE victory of the Trinomul Congress candidate in the by-election for Panchkura Lok Sabha (lower House of Parliament) seat in Midnapur district in the state of West Bengal sent a shock wave in the camp of the ruling Left Front. And its fall out is reverberating throughout India. The seat fell vacant due to the death of CPI leader Geeta Mukherjee, who was continually elected from the parliamentary since 1980. Pain, anguish and frustration in the Left Front could easily be understood at the loss of the seat which CPI — a coalition partner held for two decades.

The Trinomul candidate registered an impressive victory defeating his nearest rival CPI candidate Gurudas Das Gupta by a margin of over 40,000 votes.

It had been a prestige fight for the Left Front as State Chief Minister Jyoti Basu along with former Prime Minister V. P. Singh jointly pleaded for supporting the CPI candidate.

Left Front spokesman Biman Basu said after the result was announced that CMP candidate's defeat was due to fear — psychosis let loose by Trinomul Congress in the constituency for over a year. There had been a series of clashes in the area between the supporters of the rival parties.

According to newspaper reports, on the day of polling the CPI candidate was himself physically assaulted by the supporters of Trinomul candidate. Biman Basu claimed that Trinomul occupied about 80 polling booths at Keshpur and Pingla where CPI candidate polled only marginal votes which seemed incredible, in some booth the highest tally for CPI candidate being two or three votes. He said the Election Commission did not listen to complaints lodged against booth occupation and vote-rigging by Trinomul supporters. Voters from rural areas were not allowed to come to the polling stations for casting their votes. A number of

polling agents were forcibly evicted from the booths. This occurred despite enforcement of tight security for fear of clashes. Trinomul leader Pankaj Banerjee said his party was all along telling that if there is free and fair election, Left Front could not have clung to power for the last 23 years. He said the Left Front candidate was defeated as the people of the State have now become fed up with the rampant corruption and failure to contain and resorting to violence through its armed cadres. About allegation of Trinomul Pankaj quipped that this indicated the failure of the Left Front government to maintain law and order. "If they admit their failure, we have no objection.

We would rather welcome it," he said in a jocular vein. After the results were announced, the Trinomul took out a victory celebration which resulted in renewed clashes between the supporters of the two parties.

The Panchkura Lok Sabha seat has under it eight Bidhan Sabha (State Assembly) seats. Through capturing the seat, the Trinomul expects to spread its sway in the area.

The result is going to have some effect on the Calcutta municipal corporation polls scheduled for later this month. In the municipal polls the Left Front fared quite well. It not only retained its hold but also increased its tally. The Congress (Sonla) did better than

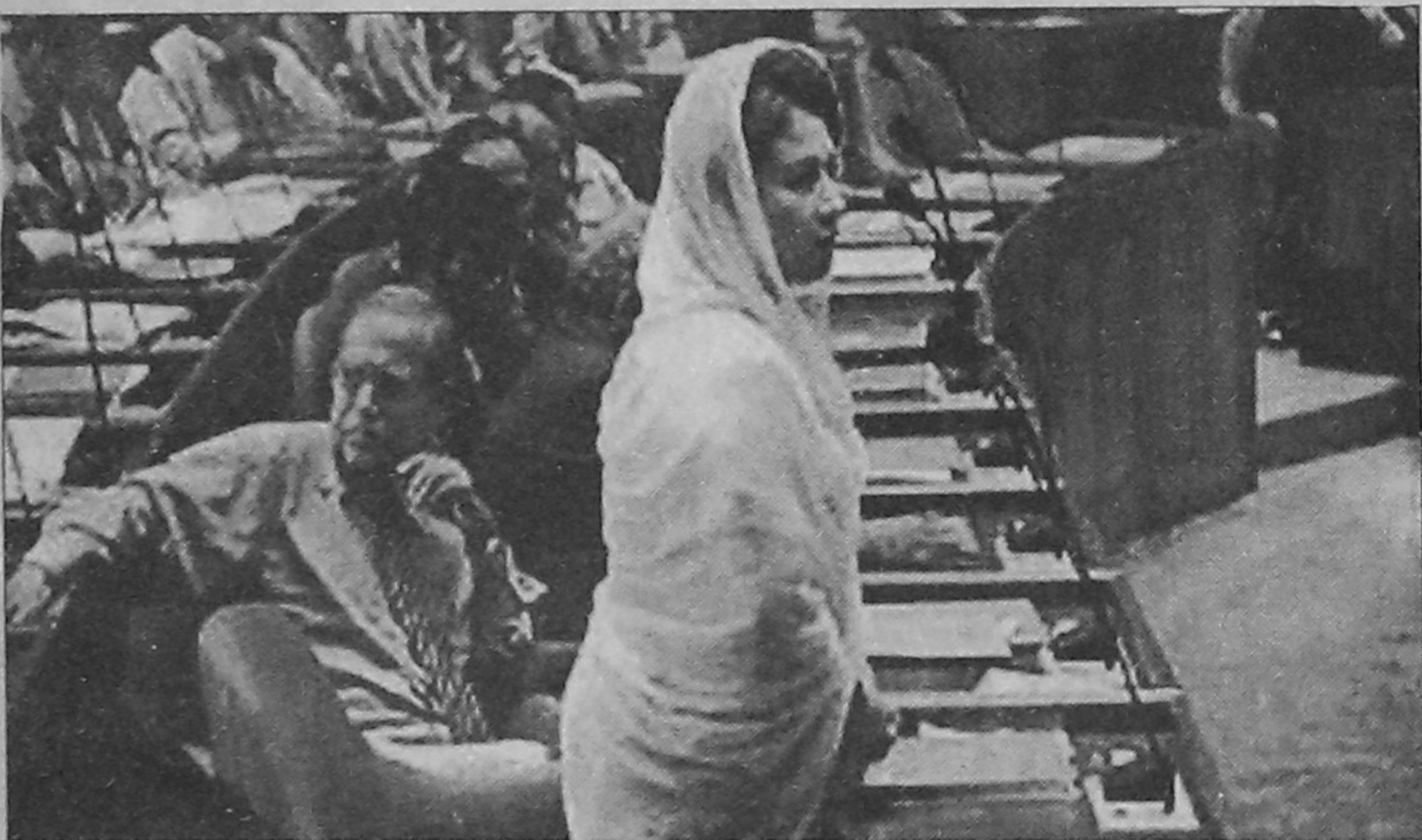
the Trinomul. The Trinomul wanted to have electoral alliance with the BJP, but on the issue of seat distribution they fell apart.

Trinomul supreme central rail minister Momota Banerjee was extra-jubilant. Her earlier attempt to form a Grand Electoral Alliance with Congress and BJP fizzled out when Sonia Gandhi herself sternly told West Bengal Congress Chief A. B. Ghani Khan Chowdhury that Congress cannot enter into any type of alliance with the BJP. The Pradesh Congress was trying to woo Momota and wedge a rift between her party and the BJP. But Momota there cannot be any electoral alliance without BJP. If Congress wants to join with her then it will have to accept BJP. This shows that Momota would not alienate herself from BJP.

If the much-vaunted election results in the Calcutta city corporation polls tilt towards Trinomul, it might severely tell upon the prospects of the Left Front in the state elections early next year. The print media appears to have waged a crusade against the Left Front. The urban middle-class because of their opportunist character is critical of Left Front rule. They want a change. This is why they have made Momota their idol. But will Momota be able to dislodge the Left Front from the seat of power in West Bengal? Only time can say.

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Walk in to walk out



BNP in Bangladesh return to Parliament on June 20 after a one-year absence, only to walk out again.

The Region this Week

Debating autonomy

THE legislative assembly in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir on June 20 has begun a key debate on a government-sponsored report on autonomy. The report recommends the restoration of partial autonomy in the state as it existed before 1953. If it is approved, Delhi would only have control over Jammu and Kashmir's defence, foreign affairs and communication sectors. The move is backed by the state's ruling National Conference party, which could sour its relations with the federal government.

Lankan rupee devalued

THE Sri Lankan government has announced it will let the rupee fall in value against the US dollar in a bid to boost the country's exports. The effective devaluation comes in the wake of increased defence spending as the government seeks to bolster the armed forces in their war against Tamil Tiger rebels.

Azhar's apology

FORMER Indian captain Mohammad Azharuddin has apologised for a statement in which he alleged he was being victimised because he was from the Muslim minority community. He came under attack from a number of quarters for making the statement. Azharuddin made the remarks after sacked South African captain Hansie Cronje told a match-fixing enquiry that the Indian player had introduced him to a bookie in 1996.

Laloo blames

THE Bihar Government on June 18 announced fresh administrative measures to cope with the growing incidents of massacre in the State, while the RJD blamed the BJP-RSS. Ranvir Sena nexus to destabilise the Rabri Devi Government. At a high-level meeting with senior officers, the Chief Minister, Rabri Devi, decided to set up a special court for the speedy trial of those responsible for Friday's massacre, in which 34 people were killed in Mianpur village in Aurangabad district. The Government also placed under suspension the Daroga and all the constables of the Saharsa police picket which had been set up after the Senari massacre in March 1999 when 34 Bhumihars were killed by the MCC.

LTTE cannot join

SRI Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga on Sunday ruled out a role for Tamil Tigers in an interim council aimed at ending decades of ethnic bloodshed in the island. Kumaratunga said she was vehemently opposed to allowing the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) a place in an administrative council for the island's embattled northern and eastern regions. "The president strongly rejected involving the murderous LTTE in an interim board," the government's Special Media Information Centre said in a statement issued on Sunday.

Duty blues

PAKISTAN has further reduced on June 18 the duty on import of goods and materials, equipment and machinery from India. In the federal budget 1999-2000, the rates were reduced by 10 per cent on 325 items. Of these, the import duty has further been slashed on 100 items. The items and the cut in duty are as follows: A reduction of 20 per cent has been allowed on needle looms and their spares; circular knitting machines and spares; doddy jacquard punching machines and spares; rubber and plastic moulding machines with optoelectronic display only; other such machines, including those with automatic winding and electrically operated, and six other items under this head; circular knitting milk powder, granule, solid form with fat content up to 15 per cent, or that milk which does not contain added sweetening matter; potatoes fresh or chilled; other potatoes, onion and shallots.

Tackling caste killings

PRIME Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, on June 18 expressed the Centre's willingness to assist the Bihar Government in its bid to put an end to caste-related killings in the State. The offer of assistance came after a review meeting summoned Sunday afternoon by the Prime Minister. The offer mainly pertains to making available more para-military personnel in addition to the BSF battalion sent a week ago. Vajpayee has also directed the Union Agriculture Minister, Nitish Kumar, who is already present in the State, to contact "leaders of various groups to calm down the situation".

Two killed in Delhi blasts

At least two people have been killed and 12 others injured in two explosions near a major tourist site in the Indian capital Delhi on June 18. Police said the first blast occurred at around 2010 (1440 GMT) in a Delhi Transport Corporation

bus stop, opposite the Red Fort, in the centre of Old Delhi. The second blast went off seven minutes later nearby under a hawkers' table, nearer to the Jama Masjid mosque. An eight-year-old girl and an adult were reported killed. Most of the injured were passengers inside a bus, whose windows shattered with the force of the first blast.

Pakistan seeks cash for F16s

PAKISTAN has refused to import wheat from the United States and sought cash in lieu of the outstanding amount of F-16 aircraft. The US government has been asked to pay the remaining amount of \$80 million in cash during the financial year 2000-2001, disclosed Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz while replying to a question at a post-budget press conference on Sunday.

Leading to victory

PAKISTAN'S Wasim Akram inspired his side to a brilliant five-wicket victory over Sri Lanka in the first Test in Colombo. The former captain starred with both bat and ball, claiming five wickets and then scoring an unbeaten 20 to see his side home, this following a 78 in the first innings. Sri Lanka had set the visitors a modest target of 131, but Pakistan found the going difficult, slipping to 89 for five.

Bollywood stars on hunting charge

FIVE leading Indian film stars have been charged with shooting endangered wildlife while taking time off from shooting their film. Salman Khan, Saif Ali Khan and actresses Sonali Bendre, Taboo and Neelam are accused of shooting an endangered species of antelope, the Black Buck, and Chinkara gazelle, nearly two years ago in Rajasthan.

Saving the seats

OPPOSITION parties in Bangladesh ended their one-year boycott of parliament. But opposition leaders say they will only attend one or two sessions in order to avoid losing their seats. The four main opposition parties which have formed an alliance against the government two years ago announced when their parliamentary committees are to meet.

Hostage release

THE families of the 31 hostages being held at gunpoint in Fiji's parliament have met military commanders to discuss efforts being made to secure their release. It is more than a

month since an armed gang deposed the government of Mahendra Chaudhry, taking him and members of his administration captive. Negotiations between the army, traditional indigenous leaders and the rebels are scheduled to continue later. A military spokesman said there are major obstacles to overcome before the marathon standoff could be resolved.

Ancient gold

INDIAN archaeologists say that gold treasure found early this month in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh could be highly significant. The treasure belongs to the Indus Valley civilisation and may be about 5,000 years old. A farmer in the village of Mandi in Muzaffarnagar district found the treasure while levelling his field. Archaeologists are now planning a proper excavation of the site, in the hope of finding more about the lost civilisation of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro.

Tigers killed

OFFICIALS in Sri Lanka say that government troops have killed at least sixteen Tamil Tiger rebels in fresh attacks in the north-east of the country. Ten rebels were killed when soldiers fired on their truck in the Jaffna peninsula. Six others were killed in separate incidents in the northern and eastern regions. Meanwhile a moderate group representing Tamils - the Tamil United Liberation Front - has called on the President, Chandrika Kumaratunga, to reconsider her decision to exclude the Tamil Tiger rebels from an interim peace bid.

Indians slam Bacher's claim

INDIAN cricket authorities have officially protested to the International Cricket Council over match-fixing claims alleged by South African cricket captain Hansie Bacher. Bacher, during a testimony to the King Commission investigating the disgraced former South African cricket captain Hansie Cronje, claimed that India's 1999 World Cup win against Pakistan was fixed. The president of the cricket board of control in India, A C Muthiah, said he had notified the ICC about seeking action against Bacher. Bacher told the inquiry that two World Cup matches in England last year - India v Pakistan and Pakistan v Bangladesh - were fixed.