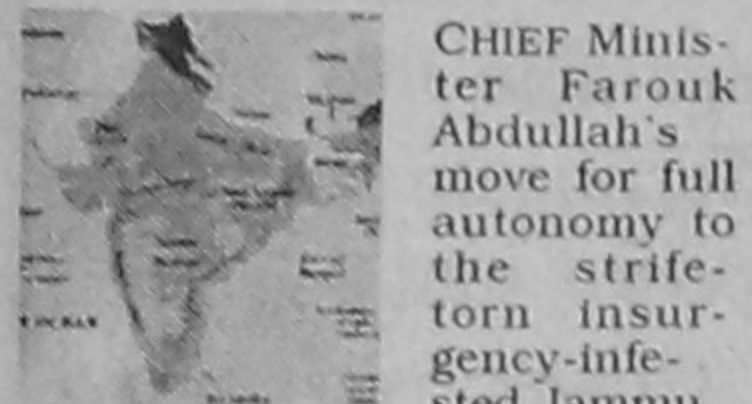


Kashmir

Proposal for Autonomy Opens Pandora's Box

By Mansoor Mamoon



CHIEF Minister Farouk Abdullah's move for full autonomy to the strife-torn insurgency-infested Jammu and Kashmir state has raised much hullabaloo in Kashmir not only among divergent political and religious groups and parties, but also in media and among common people in India. Farouk Abdullah with over two-thirds majority of his National Conference successfully in the State legislature passed the greater autonomy for J&K in June this year providing for centre's control over only three subjects - finance (currency), defence and foreign affairs. Over rest of the matters the state government of J&K will have absolute authority. The state will have its own judiciary, own election commissioner and the Chief Minister is to be addressed as the *Uzi-e-Azam* (Prime Minister). The state chapters of both the BJP and the Congress sharply reacted against the move saying the resolution is fraught with the danger of eventual secession from the Federal Structure of India. Farouk Abdullah's National Conference is BJP's coalition partner at the centre. Even then BJP members in the state legislature took a strong

stand against the proposed autonomy for J&K boycotting the session in which the autonomy resolution was unanimously approved. In Ladakh area the Buddhists in the largely Muslim-majority state, in fact now the only Muslim-majority state in India, observed shutdowns in protest against the autonomy. The BJP and the Congress both supported the aggrieved Buddhists in Ladakh. When the resolution was adopted Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was touring Lisbon and Italy. On his return he extended his firm support to Farouk Abdullah saying that the autonomy resolution in the Kashmir state assembly is not in any way against the spirit of India's constitution. He said his cabinet will discuss the issue first and then it will be placed before Lok Sabha. Meanwhile Vajpayee, who thought that the issue will settle down after what he said on his return home from foreign trip, had to meet the top leaders of BJP and failed to convince them. Abdullah maintains that the autonomy has been proposed in the light of history - the conditionalities that were agreed upon when the King of the State Hari Singh accepted his Kingdom with India about fifty years ago. He said the time has now come to revise the past history. When the State Assembly passed the resolution a constitutional expert

opined that the central government has no obligation about a resolution taken by the state assembly. But Farouk Abdullah's administration strongly maintained that the state assembly has resolved will not so easy to dismiss or whisk away as the ruling National Conference enjoys overwhelming majority in the state legislature. Different militant insurgent groups like who are fighting for the liberation of Kashmir dismissed the resolution saying that they would not accept any resolution within the structure of India and short of UN resolution of 1948 which provided for referendum for the people of Kashmir to decide their own future with three options - to join with India, to be a part of Pakistan or to remain independent. They said that it would not help resolve the long-drawn Kashmir imbroglio. Pakistan, which fought two bloody wars with India over Kashmir and a short encounter at Kargil equally rejected the autonomy proposal suggesting the only acceptable solution lies in giving the Kashmiris their right of self determination. Pakistan has accepted the UN resolution but India is strongly opposed to it apprehending that the Muslim majority people of the state might overwhelmingly vote for Pakistan. Analysts strongly maintain

that the autonomy in Kashmir might trigger the raising of similar demands by the states in the country's north-eastern region known as the seven sisters who are clamouring for greater rights where as many as 18 guerrilla groups are active against Delhi's central rule. Already Chief Minister Profulla Mohanta of Assam welcomed the resolution for autonomy for Kashmir. The time has now come for giving the people and the states their own rights, he said. Hence both Farouk Abdullah and the NDA government in Delhi, particularly Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee find themselves in tight positions. It did not get anybody's support neither that of Pakistan or the militant groups. Opposition is coming from all corners. Newer issues are taking shapes in the form of new problems. One thing has, however, become clear that Kashmir has become a deep-rooted problem and without the participation of Pakistan there cannot be any lasting solution to the Kashmir issue. Despite Vajpayee's assurance that the autonomy resolution adopted by the state assembly at the initiative of Farouk Abdullah will be duly considered, his cabinet colleagues have summarily rejected it apprehending that it might trigger other states to

make similar demands which will eventually lead to the break up of India. BJP which is vehemently against the special status accorded to Kashmir since the integration of the state cannot naturally accept the autonomy of the strife torn state. It is clearly against the party's Hindutva philosophy and ideology. The conclusion was, therefore, foregone. L. K. Advani, the Home Minister said: "the cabinet feels that acceptance of the resolution would set the clock back." He made it clear that the central government is not opposed to giving more power to the states but would never agree to give autonomy. Advani felt that acceptance of the resolution would set in motion certain trends which are not in favour of national unity and integration. This premature death of the highly ambitious autonomy move by Farouk Abdullah, albeit the fact that it was rejected by the extremist elements and Pakistan, is likely to not only strain relations between the ruling National Conference and the NDA government, but may also aggravate the volatile and murky situation in the state. The extremists in the state are likely to garner further support from the general masses whose attention Farouk Abdullah tried to divert to some extent through the subtle move of autonomy.

Neighbour

Taleban Troubles

By Navine Murshid



TIME could not erase the hope from the hearts of ordinary Afghans. Even after twenty years of war and strife, their lives have not improved; their struggles have not ended. Four years after the Taleban militia took control of the capital, Kabul, there are warring factions preparing for a major offensive. The Taleban, which controls 90 per cent of Afghanistan, still harbours hopes of a military victory. Opposition groups who control parts of the north also believe they can "redress the balance of power through gains on the ground." According to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Kabul resembles a "bombed-out city" after World War II in an impoverished country that squanders its resources on weapons. "No reconstruction is in sight and its people have little hope for improvement," he was quoted to have said. Billions of dollars have been spent on fighting since 1979, leaving Afghanistan with its assets depleted, "its intelligentsia in exile, its people disenfranchised, its traditional political structures shattered," Annan added. Afghanistan is undergoing a "process of pau-

regulations forbidding girls from going to school and women from working quickly brought them into conflict with the international community. Such issues, along with restrictions on women's access to healthcare, have also caused some resentment among ordinary Afghans. Taleban rule is recognised only by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Besides, a lot is heard about the worldwide network. Their rigid form of Islam has antagonised most of their neighbours and Islamic states who believe they are giving Islam a bad name. Iran has described the Taleban as "medieval" while Russia and former Communist Central Asian states fear they may try to spread their form of militant Islam across the region. Not surprisingly, these states are said to be supporting the anti-Taleban opposition coalition. They will be watching the latest Taleban victories with increasing anxiety. Bangladesh's majority population consists of Sunni Muslims. With Taleban gaining momentum, Bangladesh's future seems unpredictable. The existence of religious fundamentalists is quite clear. Whether any political party has any connection with the Taleban forces is not known.



perisation," made worse by the country's most severe drought in 30 years. Children are dying from easily preventable disease and women and girls continue to face serious restrictions on any participation in public life. The dismissal of female civil servants from government service is yet another sad example of the brazen violations of their rights. The Taleban is under UN Security Council air and financial sanctions aimed at forcing it to hand over Saudi militant Osama bin Laden. He is wanted for trial by the US on charges of masterminding the 1998 bombings of its embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The Taleban's popularity with many Afghans initially surprised the country's warring *mujaheddin* factions. As ethnic Pashtoons, a large part of their support came from Afghanistan's Pashtoon community, disillusioned with existing ethnic Tajik and Uzbek leaders. But it was not purely a question of ethnicity. Ordinary Afghans, weary of the prevailing lawlessness in many parts of the country, were often delighted by Taleban successes in stamping out corruption, restoring peace and allowing commerce to flourish again. Their refusal to deal with the existing warlords whose rivalries had caused so much killing and destruction also earned them respect. The Taleban say their aim is to set up the world's most pure Islamic state, banning frivolities like television, music and cinema. Their attempts to eradicate crime have been reinforced by the introduction of Islamic law including public executions and amputations. A flurry of

However, the Taleban issue came up in Bangladeshi affairs quite a few times over the past few years. Attempt on the life of poet Shamsur Rahman was allegedly by a group affiliated with the Taleban. Preceding the incident, different training camps were identified were Bangladeshi nationals were trained by the Taleban. Also, during President Clinton's visit, he refused to visit the villages he was supposed to visit because of the presence of Taleban forces in Bangladesh. More recently, the *Daily Janakantha*, a Bengali daily, featured an article, which dealt with Taleban forces planning to overthrow the government and taking control of the country. If the allegations are even partially true, then Bangladesh has something to really worry about. And, the country does not need a Taleban-influenced society. We need to fight against the spirit that tarnishes religion and devalues humanity. For this, we need the support of our political leaders. They cannot waste time in petty feuds. They need to come together to form a strong parliament. They need to be together for Bangladesh to stay away from external pressures. The Taleban today crave international recognition. They would certainly like to spread their wings. And Bangladesh, for them, may be an easy target. Our ignorance and lack of foresight may prove them right. If Russia feels threatened, Bangladesh has no reason not to.

Sri Lanka

Censorship Goes, But...

By Ekram Kabir



IN Sri Lankan print media, the white spaces in the news columns have disappeared, and Sunday newspapers have been published freely on Monday last for the first time in three months, after the Supreme Court ruled last week that censorship was illegal. English, Sinhala and Tamil newspapers all sold briskly, say wire agencies, as people rushed to buy papers containing news, features and cartoons previously deleted by the censor. The pro-opposition *Sunday Leader*, which was closed down by the government, reappeared with articles highly critical of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has applauded Sri Lanka's Supreme Court ruling. However, the court did not rule against censorship itself. On the next day, it was learnt that the government brought in new regulations that permit the appointment of a censor. In its editorial, the *Sunday Times* said: "The government must come to terms with the reality that we are in the new information age. Relying on archaic precedents and old-fashioned repression of the press will get them nowhere." However, this ongoing civil war is costing the country a lot. The government introduced censorship after the army suffered big setbacks against Tamil Tiger rebels in the separatist conflict in the north. It seems the government was compelled to institute draconian legislation to curb the freedom of press citing the urgency of the military situation prevailing

there. The legislation included harsh censorship laws promulgated under the Public Security Ordinance. Limited censorship, however, was already in existence before this new legislation was promulgated. Censorship was introduced about two years ago on military news by the government in the wake of military successes of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and bomb explosions in Lankan cities. The ruling Peoples' Alliance (PA) party has had a rough ride with the media over the five years it has been in power. Though it promised full media freedom in its election manifesto, with the war against the LTTE resuming and its electoral battles with the opposition United National Party (UNP), things began to change. The resumption of the war, say the regional analysts, had the media exposing corruption in the military, inept government leadership and nepotism. The government responded by tightening screws on the media. It accused the privately owned media of being hand-in-glove with the UNP and even of conspiring with the LTTE. It reportedly hounded editors of prominent national newspapers with criminal defamation laws and used state-owned media organs as vehicles for propagating party propaganda. In mid-April this year, Elephant Pass military base, an extensive and highly fortified military complex at the gateway to Jaffna fell to the rebels. The LTTE recognises Jaffna as the cultural capital of the Tamil homeland it is fighting for. Inspired no doubt by patriotic fires, sections of mainstream media played a major

part in painting Elephant Pass as an impenetrable fortification. The public that had been lulled into a sense of complacency realised the awful truth only when Elephant Pass fell. Public anger soared and the media, which was already critical of the government's handling of the war, stepped in, accusing it of sacrificing soldiers' lives needlessly, of corruption in munitions purchases and a military campaign that was linked to achieving political targets and not military ones. At the same time, the political opposition began attacking the government on the same charges. The political mobilisation that was taking place occurred on two fronts. On the one hand opposition parties such as the UNP and the Janath Vimukthi Peramuna (which was involved in two armed insurrections against the state, but is today a radical parliamentary party), criticised the government on the issue of inept handling of the war. Again, extreme right-wing Sinhala elements, both within the political mainstream and the fringe groups, found a cause around which to coalesce. While their main platform was that LTTE terrorism should be wiped out, they also took few pains to conceal the fact that they considered all Tamils a threat to Sinhala nationhood and therefore be targeted and wiped out. Furthermore, they were critical of both the PA and the UNP for mishandling the war and being too soft on 'terrorism'. The PA realising that it was being attacked on several fronts simultaneously panicked. It was worried that extreme Sinhala racism could target Tamil civilians outside the battle areas of the northeast at a time when

Sri Lanka was in the international media spotlight. Second, and more important, with all manner of forces mobilising against the government, it felt that if it had to keep itself from being politically outflanked, harsh measures had to be introduced. And it turned to the Public Security Ordinance that had helped other governments too, previously, in times of adversity, to survive slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. The ordinance was accompanied by a number of other measures promulgated by the President under the Public Security Ordinance's chapter 40. Under the Sri Lanka's Constitution the President can promulgate emergency regulations without asking parliament. However the extension of the emergency has to be debated in parliament every month. Censorship gives the competent authority appointed by the government, power to prevent or restrict publication/broadcast in Sri Lanka, or to transmit outside Sri Lanka, matters prejudicial to the interests of national security, preservation of public order and maintenance of essential services. The competent authority can also restrict the publication of material inciting civil commotion, riot or mutiny. What is more, bringing the President and the Judiciary into disrepute are also punishable offences. The media on whom restrictions are imposed include press, television, cinema etc. The President, under the new laws, can enforce the will of the government by arresting editors and publishers, or by sealing media institutions. An advisory board was appointed to which media institutions that feel they have been unfairly

treated could appeal. Most journalists, however, doubt that these bodies could function free of government interference. Except for defiance by one or two publications, the media houses have gone along with the censorship. There are basically two reasons. One is that most of the media houses are part of celebrated commercial empires, whose proprietors are worried that any transgression would mean sustained targeting of their commercial enterprises by the government. Secondly, there is still a sense of patriotism where certain media institutions believe that speaking the truth about the war could be demoralising to the forces that prop up Sinhala hegemony over the minorities. While most media houses remain timid in the face of the censorship, there is almost consensus that the restrictions on the media, political parties and political activity, is not for the preservation of national security and public order, but to stifle all opposition to the regime. While all these restrictions operate, informs a Colombo-based journalist Jayaprakash Tissanayagam, one medium that the government has been unable to censor is the Internet. Being yet an expensive mode of communication in Sri Lanka, only a relatively small fraction of people have access to it. However, they are the decision-making, commercial and professional elite. Even if the government feels they are not the 'trouble-making types', rumour cannot easily be stifled, which means an exaggerated and distorted version of what is gleaned from the Net often reaches the streets.

A Region of Conflicts?



Maoinsts in Nepal

With Pakistan being taken over by the military; with Sri Lanka struggling against the LTTE; with India and Pakistan in constant war; with BJP refusing autonomy in Kashmir; with Afghanistan under the Taleban; with Fiji reeling under a coup; with Bangladesh failing to bring in political stability; the South Asian region looks like a mess. What toll all this would take on the state of affairs in this part of the world is still to see. Let's hope the present chaotic situation is not an indication of what lies ahead.



Kashmir



The Region this Week

- The arrest of a 'RAW'**
The district police claimed to have arrested two RAW agents Ashfaq Bhatti and Adil in the border areas in Sialkot. They carried Rs 500,000 each as head money. Sialkot SSP Ghalib Ali told on Monday that these RAW agents had confessed to their involvement in various bomb blasts. He said they had also busted five inter-district gangs of dacoits and robbers last month and recovered 16 motorcycles, one car, four colour TVs, nine buffaloes and gold ornaments and other valuables worth Rs 400,000 from their possession.
- Gun battle**
There has been a 15-minute exchange of gunfire at the Fijian parliament where rebel leader George Speight has been holding Mahendra Chaudhry - the country's first ethnic Indian prime minister - and 26 others hostage. The exchange of fire began when a group of the rebels supporting George Speight rushed out to attack soldiers they had seen close to the compound.
- 'Akash' goes up**
India says it's successfully tested a surface-to-air missile off the coast of the eastern state of Orissa. The weapon, the Akash missile, has a range of about twenty-five kilometres and can carry both nuclear and conventional warheads. The missile is able to hit several targets simultaneously.
- Bullish on nuclear treaty**
Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar has given a strong indication that his country favours signing the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty. At a news conference in Islamabad Sattar said that historically Pakistan had supported the test ban treaty, and that it considered the treaty a good one.
- Musharraf meets Sharif's aide**
Pakistani military leader General Pervez Musharraf has met a senior politician from the Pakistani Muslim League (PML), the party led by ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif. The meeting between the PML's Raja Zaffar ul Haq and General Musharraf lasted about two hours. It is the first time since the October 1999 military coup that General Musharraf has met one of those he removed from power.
- Burmese leader to Pakistan**
A high-level Burmese delegation was in Pakistan for talks with the country's military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf. The delegation led by a senior military officer, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, and the visit will last for five days. Pakistan is one of the few countries willing to sell arms to Rangoon and also trains Burmese military officers. In Burma itself, the government has met an Indian military delegation, headed by the army chief of staff, General Ved Prakash Malik.
- Naga peace process**
A leading separatist group in the north-east Indian state of Nagaland has made fresh demands in return for a ceasefire deal with the Indian Government. The group - the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) - has waged an armed campaign for two decades before agreeing to a ceasefire three years ago. But the agreement is due to expire at the end of the month and the NSCN has now set pre-conditions to continue with the ceasefire.
- Anger**
Kashmiri political groups have criticised a decision by the Indian cabinet to reject a demand for greater autonomy in the state. The cabinet turned down a controversial proposal which would have seen the state of Jammu and Kashmir return to its pre-1953 status, when it had its own constitution, flag and prime minister. The main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, has said the decision reflected India's colonial attitude towards the state.
- China rejects Pak weapons charge**
China has resumed exports of missile technology China has rejected as "totally groundless" suggestions that it is assisting Pakistan in the development of a long-range nuclear missile programme.
- Sharif denies party rift**
The ousted Pakistani prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, has said that his party colleagues did not consult him before they held a meeting with the Pakistani military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf. On Monday, the general met with two senior members of the Pakistani Muslim League (PML).
- New laws on censorship**
The government in Sri Lanka has finalised a new set of regulations, including guidelines and criteria, in respect of Press Censorship. The new laws will replace the existing Regulation 14 of the Emergency Regulations. In a landmark judgement the Supreme Court last Friday held that the appointment of a Competent Authority to censor news was illegal.
- Talks on militants**
The Indian home secretary, Kamal Pandey, is in Nepal for talks with his Nepalese counterpart, Padam Prasad Pokharel. The talks in the capital Kathmandu are expected to focus on both countries' concern about possible cross-border militant activities. Delhi has accused the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI, of using Nepal as a base for subversive activities against India.