

South Asia

Neighbour

The Lady

By Navine Murshid



SHE was going to meet her supporters on August 24. The police stopped her and her group at Dala, the outskirts of Rangoon (Yangon). This was Aung San Suu Kyi's first attempt in two years to travel outside the city. She, along with her supporters, had to spend nights in car, locked in a tense standoff with government officials. Then she was forcefully taken back to Rangoon and was detained again. The West, particularly the US and EU, have reacted angrily to the detention of Burmese pro-democracy leader Suu Kyi. Not only that, the government in Myanmar was deplored globally at the UN Millennium Summit for detaining Suu Kyi and putting obstacles on her freedom of movement. They called for travel restrictions on Suu Kyi to be lifted and urged the Burmese government to begin talks with opposition parties.

Two years ago, Suu Kyi spent 13 days in her car being prevented from leaving Rangoon. She had to give up her protest suffering from dehydration.

Burmese government, this time, cited security reasons, saying that Suu Kyi and the other National League for Democracy (NLD) members have been stopped for not having 'proper security arrangements'.

Britain, European Union, Amnesty International and the US have protested about her treatment and expressed concern about her well being. But Myanmar's ruling military insisted that Suu Kyi was safe and sound. Authorities in Myanmar told the outside world that it might allow diplomatic access to her within two weeks. Myanmar's treatment of Suu Kyi has sparked a war of words between the government and its international critics. State-run newspapers quoted Myanmar's powerful head of military intelligence, Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, as saying 'two big western countries' were meddling in Myanmar's affairs.

To her supporters she is known simply as 'The Lady'. As a symbol of heroic and peaceful resistance in the face of oppression, Suu Kyi has come to be regarded in Burma and around the world as the 'Mandela' of Southeast Asia. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 when she was under house arrest for two years. It would be another four years before she was finally allowed to leave her home, although she is restricted to the capital and her movements are closely monitored.

Suu Kyi, 55, is the daughter of the assassinated Burmese nationalist leader, General Aung San. His resistance to British colonial rule resulted in Burma's independence in 1948 and her relationship to him has given her a unique position in Burmese society as the daughter of a national hero.

After receiving her initial education in Burma and India, Suu Kyi went to UK where she studied at Oxford University. It was there that she met and married her husband, Michael Aris, an Oxford academic. Dr Aris knew his wife's destiny might ultimately lie with her returning to Burma. 'Before we were married I promised my wife that I would never stand between her and her country,' he was quoted to have said. But it was not until 1988 however that Suu Kyi first came to prominence in her country when she returned to Burma leaving her husband and their two sons in Britain.

She quickly became the leader of a growing pro-democracy movement following the brutal repression of a pro-democratic uprising. It was a mission she called 'Burma's second struggle for independence'. The movement quickly grew into a political party that went on to win an overwhelming 82 per cent of the vote in national elections in 1990 - despite the fact that by that time she had already been under house arrest for more than a year. The military regime, however, refused to relinquish power and stepped up repression on her party.

The Maldives

At the Millennium Town



President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and First Lady Nasreena Ibrahim have attended a reception on September 9, 2000 hosted by US President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton in the honour of the participants of the United Nations Millennium Summit. The President also attended a lunch hosted by the Prime Minister of Japan, in honour of the leaders of small island-states and landlocked states, attending the Millennium Summit.

Saarc

The Missing Activism

By Ekram Kabir

IT'S time to let the leaders of the region understand that its peoples want the countries of South Asia to come closer and work together so that through economic co-operation, greater political stability and human security are ensured. This is the message Centre for Policy Dialogue-organised dialogue, Recent Trends in South Asia, tried to impart on September 12, 2000.

South Asia is still divided between the hopes of the rich and the despair of the poor in which the richest one-fifth earned almost 40 per cent of the region's income and the poorest one-fifth makes do with less than 10 per cent. Still, people's expectations are high. But leaders are failing to bring about any substantial change in inter- and intra-state relations in South Asia. Rather political instability, problem of governance, illiteracy, gender inequality, environmental degradation, military issues (coupled with insurgencies), refugee influx, bilateral trade gaps, absence of multi-lateralism etc., are marginalising the region from the rest of the world.

South Asia now is the world's biggest trouble spot. According to an estimate, out of 2.4 million dead from four wars and several sporadic violence in South Asia in the past, only 0.54 million had been war dead and the rest 1.86 million were massacred during ethnic-political violence between 1947-1989. Among the third

world countries this region is the largest arms importer. The region, mainly India and Pakistan, spends over 20 billion US dollars a year on arms build-up. The defence budgets of both the countries are continuously registering upward swing. This huge spending on stockpiling of arsenals is occurring at a time when 300 million people of the region have no access to fresh drinking water and about 500 million are mired in absolute poverty.

For improving this situation in South Asia there is no alternative to re-start of South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (Saarc). But the process of Saarc has become a casualty of the developments in South Asia in the wake of rising wave of tension between India and Pakistan. This is primarily because of the stand taken by India against political-level contacts within the Saarc framework, involving participation of representatives of the military regime in Islamabad.

An interesting aspect, however, is that member-states of Saarc now unanimously agree that economic co-operation must take precedence over political issues in the region. More importantly, they also emphasise the importance of settling the Kashmir problem within any agreed framework between Pakistan and India.

India unfortunately wants to give a message to other members, especially the smaller ones, of the

Saarc that it is India which only matters! It wants to maintain its hegemony on others. The progress with regard to the South Asian Preferential Trade Area (Sapta) has been maintained but the advance towards the next and ambitious programme - creation of the free trade area - has slowed down, even halted. New Delhi justifies its stand on the plea that the participation of coup leader or his representative would give respectability to the military regime, and the dismissal of a democratically elected government may look less appalling. If India continues this attitude, the agreement for a free trade zone in the Saarc countries will certainly run into rough weather.

While explaining India's stance against the regional body, Prof. Rehman Sobhan, 'The Indian factor has always been there right from the beginning. The very size of India says everything. The whole process of Saarc will be meaningless without India. What we need to do now is find ways to convince India to play its part.'

So, the pessimism turns into optimism. As there are strong entrepreneurial forces in all the member-states, it's time to get going without waiting for India to respond at the political level. For integration of relevant markets such as commodities, labour and capital has to be made with or without the help of the respective governments. The private sector

can go a long way in making regional co-operation stronger. If private sector entrepreneurs can maximise their business without the help of their governments then mere holding of a summit may not be any obstacle on the way of strengthening the organisation. Therefore, market forces have to be the real stimulus for the regional body's progress.

But like chronic bilateral problems in the region that have often led to postponement of summits - which is a big setback to regional cooperation, lack of intra-regional trade among Saarc countries as a percentage of global trade has been very low: 4 per cent actually. Restrictive trade policies of Saarc countries, dominance of foreign capital, competitive behaviour of economies, communication gap and lack of monetary cooperation etc., are mainly the reasons for such a low trade among member-countries.

Even if bilateralism is coming in, business people in the private sector do agree that they are working to overcome the problems that are obstructing regional cooperation. But what seems to lack among the entrepreneurs is to find the right kind of activism to enhance trade in a multilateral way. The South Asian organisation badly needs some activists to work in this respect.

Internal Dynamics of Security

For a Better Tomorrow

By Mansoor Mamoon

CONTRARY to general expectations, the end of the cold war could not bring about any substantial positive change in inter- and intra-state relations in South Asia. Rather revival and resurgence of religious extremism, racial, ethnic and sectarian strife and violence, cross-border terrorism, menace of drug trafficking, looming shadow of nuclear of possible holocaust and renewed arms race between India and Pakistan, and wanton callousness in dealing with abject human misery on a wide scale have grown intense with a destabilising effect on the regional scale.

South Asia as a whole now tragically presents the look of a veritable inferno, a simmering cauldron and the world's biggest trouble spot. In almost all countries - India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan - civil and ethnic strife are raging for years together with no signs and possibility of their immediate solution. In India outlawed guerrilla groups are active in the north-eastern region including the state of Tripura. They are fighting for what they call their independent homelands in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. Islamic militants are creating havoc in Kashmir through what India claims as direct support from Pakistan. Underground Naxalites together with various other insurgent groups are active in some other states as well, particularly in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. The rise of the Hindutva and waning of the influence of secular forces have already caused spine-chilling sense of insecurity among the minority religious groups, who are under increasing threats.

In Sri Lanka, ethnic strife between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, now in Indo-Pak

its 17th year, have reached new heights. In Nepal, the Maoist guerrillas are gradually spreading their tentacles and posing to be a threat for the government within barely four years of their launching of the People's War. In Bhutan, the Nepalese settlers are becoming restive due to discriminatory treatment being meted by the authority and indigenous ruling elite.

In Pakistan, strife between different Muslim sects (Sunni-Shia-Quadiani) as well as between MQM - a largely Karachi based Indian origin Muslim refugee organisation and the government agencies coupled with the revival of Islamic fundamentalism of Iran and Taleban brand, are causing consternation.

Bangladesh could peacefully resolve the 22-year old tribal insurgency in Chittagong Hill Tracts through a peace accord signed on December 2, 1997 and take back the Chakma refugees from their camp life in Tripura. But things are yet to settle down in the area. There is also the existence of some underground terrorist groups, who are creating fear and order problems but have not as yet posed to be an internal security threat of the magnitude of Maoists in Nepal.

These are the present-day realities along with the spill-over effect in the neighbouring countries in South Asia who very often offer logistic and other support to incite and fuel such terrorist activities. Neither military nor attempts at negotiated settlement of these critical issues have so far failed to make any headway. This is also causing further draining of the scarce resources of the South Asian countries, together regarded as the biggest poverty pocket in the world with about half of over one billion of their people living below the breadline.

Indo-Pak

The Core Issue

By A B M S Zahur

KARGIL crisis is apparently over. However, many incidents have occurred in its aftermath. Major powers of the world including the US are watching the scene with uneasiness. The retreat of the Pakistan-inspired Mujahideen from Kargil, under pressure from the US, brought down of Nawaz government, Gen. Pervez Musharraf had a golden opportunity to capture power. Atal Behari Vajpayee got the prize for his diplomatic success, the premiership of India again.

Pakistan military took the power in Pakistan by throwing out a democratic government. The Indian military succeeded to draw sympathy and respect from ordinary Indians. With an increase of more than 3 billion US dollars in defence budget may seem a better prospect for them. In the political front, a feeble attempt to establish democracy got a crushing blow from the military junta in Pakistan.

With the increased effort of these two countries to acquire more sophisticated weapons the arms exporting countries would be doing better business. At the same time there will be modernisation of ordnance factories in Pakistan and India. This will result in bigger import bills for both these countries. It may be pointed out that India will increase its import of crude oil from 57.81 million tons in 1999-2000 to 85.24 million tons in 2000-2001, an increase of more than 47 per cent within a year.

However, the ordinary people of these countries are to bear the brunt of struggling for this paradise on earth. The growth rate of

literacy will slow down, the health care programmes will have to be curtailed, the number of unemployed will rise. It may be appropriate to point out in this regard that more than 300 million Indians are below the poverty line. The suffering of the Kashmiris, particularly of the India-held Kashmir, will increase. No effort at depicting a bright future either by India or Pakistan can console them.

The other members of SAARC, particularly Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka are adversely affected because of serious Indian suspicion of Pakistani espionage (activities of ISI) in these countries. The spirit of developing good neighbourliness as enunciated in the SAARC Charter has already dampened. The way India showed its displeasure toward Nepal in the plane hijacking incident exposes India's lack of respect and understanding for the sentiment of its neighbours.

Amidst all these some interesting development in the Kashmir front was noted a few days back. The Hizb-ul-Mujahideen militant group offered its unilateral ceasefire in Indian-administered Kashmir. It suggested for a tripartite dialogue between India, Pakistan and All Party Hurriyat Conference. Though Vajpayee readily agreed to a dialogue with the militants he was adamant on not including Pakistan till it stopped insurgent activities in Kashmir border. Pakistan denies its link with the Kashmir border. With the expiration of the time limit on 9 August 2000 the cease-fire proposal was called off and hostility started

The issues at stake and the disturbing trends that are now witnessed are not primordial in nature, but of quite recent origin - maintains an analyst. Many factors are responsible for the festering evils of civil and ethnic strife, violence and terrorism. The cogent reason is the disparity in income distribution and monopolisation of the gains of recent socio-economic developments by the ruling elite depriving the common people and the minority religious and ethnic groups as well as denials of their basic human rights and rightful share in state power.

The mindset of the ruling elite in the most of the South Asian countries have not undergone any significant transformation with the passage of time. They are ruling over free peoples with the mentality of enslaver. As a result ethnic and sectarian identities, communal polarisation and groundswell of religious fanaticism among the deprived and marginalised groups have all added to the growing strain in internal and interstate security in the region assuming the character of non-military threats from sources within the countries rather than from outside.

Pakistan is at loggerheads with India on the issue of Kashmir. Both the countries have acquired nuclear capability and both are vying for supremacy in the region. This has a debilitating impact on the smaller states like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. Because of its strategic location, military and economic strength, large size and huge population neither of these smaller states afford to antagonise India at the risk and peril of destabilising the regimes through various covert and overt means. It was a common knowledge that India was at the roots of Tamil

insurgency in Sri Lanka and Chakma rebels in Bangladesh got sanctuaries in the neighbouring states of India. This is a pressure tactics that New Delhi resorts to for punishing the regimes that defy its suzerainty. Drug trafficking on a massive scale and cross-border terrorism have multiplied the woes of South Asian countries. Due to intense rivalry between India and Pakistan the process of SAARC summit has recently been stalled.

For improving interstate relations in South Asia there is no alternative to re-start of SAARC. Before Bangladesh, which pioneered SAARC, could take such a venture it proved to be still-born when Pakistan's Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf took exception to Sheikh Hasina's criticism of military takeovers by toppling elected civilian governments. The much-publicised summit level meeting between Bangladesh and Pakistan could not, therefore, be held. It has pushed SAARC to further uncertainty. Though Myanmar is under the rule of army junta it has been accepted as a full-fledged member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Despite differences in ideologies of the member states ASEAN is working with full vigour with co-operative and accommodative spirit.

Leaving aside its obduracy India should accept the reality of military regime in Pakistan and start meaningful dialogue with it. Such a constructive step will help contribute to regional peace and stability. SAARC alone can create a facade of peaceful atmosphere through increasing interaction among member states at different levels. To revive SAARC India should take the lead and maintain a low profile like that of Indonesia in ASEAN.

People

The Family Man

Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf said in New York that he wishes that he could spend more time with his family and asserted that he does not allow his immediate family to 'interfere at all in his official work' keeping in view the experiences of the past.

'My family does not want to come into limelight and they remain aloof from the government, and I like that. I like them to stay away as far as possible from government,' said the chief executive. Gen Musharraf who was in New York to attend the UN Millennium summit will go to Boston to spend a day with his son Bilal who is a student at a University there.

Weighed Down By Fate

It's time to be distrustful about any vapour of optimism that you might find wafting through New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium. For, India's chances of winning a medal in Sydney this month are really slim. Dogged equally by selection whims and injuries, Indian boxers and

weightlifters (read the strong men and women) are going Down Under with loads of hopes of bettering national and personal marks. Nothing beyond that. No one, barring a few, is really talking of bringing in medals. The sad part is, much more than track events and hockey, they are India's best - the squad really in with a chance, theoretically.

The Campaigner

With the cross-border trafficking in women and children taking a menacing trend in South Asia, a popular Hindi film actress Manisha Koirala announced she would kick off a campaign against the heinous crime. The India-based Nepalese matinee dame will be the key star campaigner at a fortnight-long programme planned by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) next month against human trafficking in the poorest region of the world.

The Buzz...



Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh: 'We cannot forget what they did here in 1971... We have officially asked for a copy of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report which is a proof of the heinous crimes committed by Pakistani rulers but they are dilly-dallying to give it... I would like to question the conscience of the Pakistani people about whether they should apologise for the crimes committed in 1971.'

General Pervez Musharraf, Chief Executive of Pakistan

'Let's forget the bitterness of the past and move forward...'

Why do we want to live in history? As a Pakistani, I would like to forget 1971... what happened then is nothing that any of us can be proud of. But why do we want to dig the past up?'

Naseerullah Babar, former interior minister of Pakistan: 'Let there be no doubt or mistake that it was late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who ordered the inquiry and to accuse him of the debacle is a travesty of truth of which only a handful of our generals can be capable of.'

Atal Behari Vajpayee, Prime Minister of India: 'I was in the same room as Gen. Musharraf during the opening ceremony of the millennium summit at the United Nations.'

Asma Jahangir, former chairperson of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan: 'I have not been able to comprehend what is Pakistan's policy on Kashmir, whether Pakistan wants to make it part of the country or let it remain independent. If so, what will be the position of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) and the northern areas.'

Dr M Farashuddin, Bangladesh Bank Governor: 'We had set an international standard of classification and made it effective from January, 1999. However, some quarters felt that the law was a bit too harsh. But we had to bargain a lot even to get the amendment in its present form.'

The Region This Week

Tough on Pakistan

INDIA accuses Pakistan of fomenting unrest in Kashmir India's Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, has used a speech to the UN Millennium Summit to attack Pakistan and justify India's nuclear weapons programme. Vajpayee described a speech to the summit on Wednesday by Pakistani leader General Musharraf as a 'mockery of the truth'.

The Fighting General

THE army officer in charge of Sri Lankan troops in the northern Jaffna peninsula, Major-General Anton Wijendra, said a major offensive against Tamil Tiger rebels was successful. But he said he would have preferred to have made greater territorial gains, and predicted that more heavy fighting could be in the offing. General Wijendra said his troops had inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy and that they had made the town of Jaffna more secure against rebel attacks.

Month-long curfew

IN the northern Indian state of Punjab, a curfew has been imposed on a 500 metre stretch along the border with Pakistan. The authorities say the dusk-to-dawn curfew, expected to remain in force until next month, is to deal with cross-border crime. Police say there's been an increase in arms and drugs smuggling there over the past few months but the area is very difficult to monitor.

Fernandes in West Bengal

INDIA'S Defence Minister, George Fernandes, has toured areas of the state of West Bengal which have been worst hit by recent violence. Thousands of local people have complained about what they call Marxist terror and have demanded further action from the federal government. The Railway Minister, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress party is calling for the imposition of President's rule in the state, which would give the security forces special powers.

Straw's concern

THE British Home Secretary, Jack Straw, has expressed concern about a former British Army officer serving a life sentence in an Indian jail. Speaking in Calcutta, Straw said the Indian government should reconsider the basis for holding Peter Bleach, given that his co-defendants had already been released. Bleach was jailed nearly five years ago, along with five Russian pilots, on the charge of dropping an arms consignment over the Indian state of West Bengal.

Lankan politician killed

A candidate of the ruling People's Alliance in next month's general elections in Sri Lanka has been assassinated. The victim was named as Chellian Perinpanayagam, a former mayor of Batticaloa town, some 330km (206 miles) east of Colombo. A senior military official said another man, named as S. Manoharapillai, was also killed in the attack.

Bus fare in Bangladesh

THE Bangladesh government has defended a decision to increase bus fares by fifty per cent. The Communications Minister Anwar Hossain said the rise was necessary because fares had remained static for the previous eleven years. He said an expert committee had recommended doubling fares as a result of factors like the recent surge in fuel prices and last month's six per cent devaluation of the national currency, the taka.

Army 'pushing forward'

FRESH fighting has erupted in the northern and eastern Sri Lanka, with the army saying it has pushed into rebel-held territory. The Tamil Tigers were reported to have launched new attacks on Monday in the Trincomalee area in the east of the country to try to make up for lost ground in the northern Jaffna peninsula. In a statement late on Sunday, the Sri Lankan Defence Ministry said that troops - backed by ground attack aircraft and navy gunboats - had advanced three kilometres into Tiger-held territory in the Jaffna peninsula.

- Compiled by Ekram Kabir