

Sri Lanka

Peace Charade: The Lull before the Storm?

By Ekram Kabir

IT'S the annual D a n c e d e Deaux in Sri Lanka. It comes about at this time of the year. It's more important than the year not only because it's holiday season, but once again the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and President Kumaratunga's government are waving the olive branch from their perches on the shoulders of Norwegian mediators.

Norwegian peace envoy Erik Solheim has again arrived in Colombo to try to broker peace talks between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels, fighting for a separate homeland. But after more than a year of efforts, Solheim is yet to arrange a direct meeting between the two sides - who remain divided on how to stop fighting and start talks. Solheim's mediation efforts, say media reports, seem shrouded in secrecy because of opposition to his involvement from Sinhalese nationalists. Street protests against the peace process are not uncommon, with demonstrators denouncing Solheim's efforts as foreign interference. But the Norwegian embassy in Colombo says that its envoy will be having a number of normal meetings, though it has said he is unlikely to meet the Tiger leader again on this trip.

However, hopes were raised when Solheim had a rare meeting with rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran in his jungle stronghold in Yanni in November last. Soon after, the Tigers offered unconditional peace talks and then declared a one-month unilateral ceasefire as a goodwill gesture. But within hours of the ceasefire offer, the Sri Lankan government launched a fresh offensive against the Tigers, saying it feared the rebel side would exploit any lull in the fighting to re-group.

As a result, efforts to bring the two sides to the negotiating table

were stalled, with the government saying peace talks have to begin first and make some progress before a ceasefire, while the Tigers say a ceasefire should come first.

But according to government ministers the ceasefire declaration is for the Tigers to take a breathing space. Another said it is nothing but a plot. But Tamil party sources clearly say that this time the Tigers mean what they say. Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) senior vice president V Anandasangarai said that the government at some point will have to believe the Tigers if a lasting peace has to be established in Sri Lanka.

While the 'peace charade' goes on, the Sri Lankan army has reportedly retaken more territory in the northern Jaffna peninsula from LTTE. The government captured a further 50 square kilometres (31 miles) of ground south of the main A-9 highway where they made major advances on January 7. The army says the latest advances minimise the threat to Jaffna town.

In her New Year message, President Kumaratunga called on all citizens to join hands to usher in a durable peace while also defeating the scourge of what she called terrorism. And the latest fighting comes less than a week after the

Tigers announced a unilateral ceasefire. They called the month-long truce as a gesture of goodwill during the festive period to encourage Norwegian-led attempts to start peace talks. The LTTE asked the government to reciprocate in kind, but the government dismissed the move allegedly as a publicity stunt. It has accused the Tigers of violating their own ceasefire by launching mortar attacks.

It's worthwhile to mention that the conflict in has led to the deaths of 4,000 people in the past year alone, and more than 60,000 people are estimated to have been killed in the almost-17-year-old conflict since LTTE began their fight for an independent homeland.

Now while the government troops continue to march forward steadily, capturing the lost lands and also recovering a whole heap of armmunitions belonging to the Tigers, a kind of uncertainty prevails in the island. The LTTE seems to have opted to maintain the cessation of hostilities which they declared on December 24. But reports indicate that they have violated their own ceasefire agreement in a few places. Therefore, the obvious assumption springing in the minds of the people and especially almost all political and

war analysts is that a full scale war is likely to break out any time. Moreover analysts go on saying that the new year may turn out to be 'disastrous' for the government as it has already failed to grab the opportunity it received from the Tigers to enter into the peace process. The Tiger cadres, according to reports, were given special training to bounce back on the government troops once the ceasefire period is over. It is also reported said that this time the Tigers may come out 'hard' as their ceasefire appeal was ignored by the government.

On the other hand, Tamil political parties have already expressed their opposition to the government's move to go ahead with war while the Tigers have declared unilateral ceasefire. They are planning to carry out a campaign to inform all the western nations to bring pressure on the government of Sri Lanka and ask them to stop the war and continue dialogue with the Tigers. America has already pledged support to the Tamil parties to play its part at the necessary in appropriate time. The US ambassador in Sri Lanka Ashley Wills gave the assurance that his country would not turn a blind eye at the correct time when seven Tamil political parties met him in Colombo.

The coming weeks and months are going to be very crucial for President Kumaratunga. At this time when confusion and suspicion mounted in the country, President Kumaratunga needs to make a clear statement about the governments position. She needs to exhibit a cohesive mechanism to respond to the important developments that affect Sri Lankan security. Failing that the government may have run the risk to be told by the western nations to react positively which many say would tarnish the image of the country and Kumaratunga's Peoples' Alliance government, which is already under attack by faultfinders who say that she takes orders from the



Government's latest attack

Achievement

New Hope on the Block

By Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

A regional think-tank comprising eminent persons from the countries of South Asia recently with a view to promote co-operation and understanding in the region. The timing of establishing the think tank is particularly remarkable since the entire process of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) is currently passing through a critical phase. The South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) with notable figures from the member-countries held its first board meeting in Dhaka just the other day and also held a dialogue on "Agenda for South Asian Co-operation". The forum meant to act as a kind of non-official group that will take up various subjects and suggest to the proper authorities for co-operation and promotion on a regional scale.

The first programme organised by the group on January 14 dealt with issues like "Investment co-operation in South Asia", "Building a South Asian Free Trade Area", "Energy Co-operation in South Asia" and "SAARC Social Order". Scholars, intelligentsia, business leaders and others from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and host Bangladesh attended and presented their papers. The Bangladesh

Finance Minister S.A.M.S. Kibria, Industries Minister Tofail Ahmed and Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad were the speakers in three sessions. Professor Rehman Sobhan, the wellknown economist and executive director of the newly floated forum said the ministers have been involved in the deliberations of the first dialogue of the SACAPS because it is necessary that the policymakers must know the mind of the persons who do not reflect the government policies or attitudes but echo the feelings and observations on a broader regional basis taking into account the pros and cons of the matters involved.

The ministers welcomed the coming up of the new think tank, expressing the hope that it will be able to contribute in its own way to the efforts of regional co-operation. Former finance minister Saifur Rahman was to attend one of the sessions as chief guest but could not make it due to his engagements in Sylhet. However, it is noteworthy that the need for departure from only government personnel and include eminent persons from the opposition side is necessary for the kind of exercises that the SACEPS has embarked upon for peoples interests. Views and opinions from a person of Saifur Rahman's stature and experience would have certainly lent further important ingredients to the outcome of the dia-

logue. Needless to say, the SAARC or the political environment in the South Asian region are not conducive at the moment for co-operative developmental programmes since the next SAARC summit still hangs in the balance and consequently, this cast a shadow over the effective future of the seven-nation economic forum.

True, activities in several other areas are not stalled despite the uncertainties over the summit. But the fact that a standstill persists at the highest level does not augur well for the organisation. The summit that was to take place in November 1999 could not be staged as yet because of lack of unanimity among all the members. It is a common knowledge that the conference of leaders cannot take place because of the Indo-Pak rivalry and differences which took a new dimension over the last one-and-a-half years causing serious setbacks in the SAARC process. Although the problems essentially stem from bilateralism, the collaborative venture has come under cloud. For, the next summit is to take a number of important decisions.

Indeed, it is a bad time for SAARC. The efforts at non-official level to strengthen contacts among various professional groups yielded considerable benefits before and interestingly it was more discernible about India and Pakistan whose state-level ties are never free of

trouble. Different organisations in different countries are also contributing to the concept of "people-to-people" contacts. These organisations can put pressure on their governments at the national level as well as on a regional scale for veering towards the positive ways when the official approach seems to be mired in the negative directions. Arguably, all national governments are expected to see their own interests even while remaining committed to collective spirit. But the think tanks and other non-official organisations' role here can be catalytic in removing the differences as far as possible. The contribution can be quite effective in a given situation and prove substantial.

The South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) can fill a noticeable void in this regard as it may help building closer links among the member countries in one hand and seek to weather bad times on the other by bringing the constructive approach to the fore. The SACEPS will hopefully supplement the on-going non-official roles already in existence in the region and contribute to a better future for the vast multitude living in the area. The new forum can, through its programmes, contribute immensely to the economic well being of the people.

India

Chal Mere 'Bhai'

By Harun ur Rashid



FORMER Prime Minister and Chairman of the Standing Committee of National Peoples Congress Li Peng has been undertaking a nine-day goodwill visit to India. He is considered the second most powerful man in China. This is the second visit of Li Peng to India. He visited the country as Prime Minister of China in 1991. It may be recalled that India's President visited China last May. Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited India in 1996. All these bilateral visits, analysts argue, may enable India's Prime Minister Vajpayee to visit China.

Li Peng arrived in New Delhi from Bombay on 11 January and soon met with Vice President Krishan Kant and the Speaker of the Parliament GMC Bhaloo, besides other leaders from the parliamentary parties. Li Peng met with the India's Prime Minister on 15 January. Thereafter he left for Bangalore and Mysore.

India and China fought a war in 1962 and their relations remain uneasy until this date. The border on the Himalayas has not been demarcated and each country occupies a large chunk of each other's territory. India suspects that China is encircling strategically India from Indian Ocean region to Persian Gulf. Pakistan is China's traditional ally and allegedly secured assistance from China on nuclear and missile technology. Pakistan's chief of navy is reported to have said in recent days that they are acquiring warship from China and strengthen their defence capability as part of a \$630 million modernisation drive.

The visit is an important one amidst the special relationship between China and Pakistan.

The visit is significant in another dimension. The relations between them nose dived after India conducted nuclear tests in May 1998. It appears the visit is to restore their bilateral relations on an 'even keel'.

During the visit Li Peng made many statements which demonstrated China's willingness to elevate the bilateral relations to "a new height". He reportedly said, "We are required by reality to elevate China-India relations to a new height in the 21st century. As our common ground far outweighs our differences, the Chinese and Indian people have ample reason to develop friendship and become good neighbours and friends."

The statement is significant and has alluded to the compulsion of maintenance of friendly relations. It could be argued that in the present day world environment-both strate-

gic and economic- both countries appear to have many common interests on which they could build upon their relationships to a new level.

Both China and India appear to be uncomfortable with the unipolar world. After the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the US is the only remaining super power. The US seems to call all the shots in international and security matters. NATO waged a war against Yugoslavia in 1999 under the command of a US General without the approval of the UN.

During the armed conflict, both China and India were on the same boat as they opposed the war against Belgrade. There is a view that both countries viewed the war from their domestic perspectives-India for Kashmir situation and China for Tibet and Taiwan position.

During the visit, Li Peng said: "Given the complexity of international affairs, it is unfair and impossible for them to be dictated by a country or a few countries-global challenges should be met by countries working together." The statement demonstrates that China is an ardent advocate of a multipolar world and will find a willing ally in India. Both appear to curb the power of the US in the region by re-establishing friendly relations with each other.

With the incoming Bush administration, the engagement with China under Clinton administration may undergo a change. The National Security Adviser of the new administration Dr. Condoleezza Rice reportedly considers China as "a competitor" to the US in Asia-Pacific region. As a result it is argued that India will be used as the countervailing force to China. The US is expected to maintain a close in strategic relationship with India during the Bush era to restrain China's influence in the region.

China wishes to send an appropriate message to the US that the world's politics is not seen as black and white and this visit to India demonstrates exactly that position. Both India and China appear to have common strategic interests to see that the role of the US may not sweep in the Asia Pacific region. If China and India can come to an understanding as to their strategic interests it may restrain the power of the US in the region. Each may accommodate the other in carving out its own sphere of influence in the region.

Both India and China are worried about the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. It is alleged that some of the Muslims militants are being trained in Afghanistan and are involved in the fight in the Indian-administered Kashmir on behalf of



Welcoming Li Peng in Mumbai

Kashmiri Muslims. China has been facing reportedly unrest among the Muslims (Uighur) in Xinjiang, bordering Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Both India and China want to ensure that "terrorism" is not being exported from Afghanistan to destabilise the security situation within the country. A common strategy may be adopted by both to check the influence of ultra-orthodox militia from Afghanistan. It is interesting to note both the US and Russia have joined hands together in imposing UN sanctions on Taliban regime because of their alleged backing of "terrorism".

India seems to be pleased with China's position in Kashmir. Despite friendly relations with Pakistan, China seems to have a neutral position on Kashmir dispute. The core issue in Kashmir appears to be the right of self-determination in that disputed territory. There is a view that in many countries new national borders might be created under the guise of self-determination doctrine. There is a view that China is not comfortable with this issue of self-determination in Kashmir as this principle could be applicable to Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan.

Both countries face an uncertain global economy. The Asian economy relies substantially on US demand. Any serious US slump is bound to have considerable impact on economy in Asia which is significantly export-oriented. The local currency in Asia is going through a game of a snakes and ladders board with the currency itself descending snake against the dollar. There is a saying that when the US economy coughs, the economies in Asia get choked.

Furthermore, banks remain weak in much of the region where the financial reform and de-regulation processes are still a battle-field. In the coming years the experts believe that Asia may expect lower inflows from the US funds. China remains a largely planned economy with a non-convertible currency. India's economy has been

slowly down. Prime Minister Vajpayee is reportedly admitted that the economic reforms have not taken place as expeditiously as they were expected.

China is to abide by the rules of the global trade with its entry into the World Trade Organisation. Both India and China need to co-operate in the WTO as against the US and European Union. Many of the rules of WTO appear to favour the West. The Millennium round of global trade talks may commence this year under the auspices of WTO. It seems desirable that both India and China adopt common position in the WTO meetings. China is interested in information technology and India may provide assistance in China in this field. Li Peng's visit to South India is an instance in point.

In the light of the economic and security environment, there appears to be mutual benefits if the two countries can co-operate meaningfully in the years ahead. Li Peng has reportedly said in India that in the new century "Let us make joint efforts to build China and India into prosperous, strong, ...countries. And let us work hand in hand for peace and development in Asia and the world at large."

The aspirations of the Chinese leader are great and noble but its implementation may not be readily achieved. One may argue that a few factors may work against the effort at the moment. They appear to be: the presence of the Dalai Lama in India, the unresolved border dispute and India's perception of nuclear asymmetry with China. (India believes in the principle of mutual and equal security with China).

India-China relations are complex and run on many fronts. The visit has injected a new dimension in their relationship and the spirit of 'Hindi and Chini Bhai Bhai' may proceed at a glacial pace. Any forward movement between the two giants is better than no movement at all for the sake of peace in the region.

Bhutan

Unite against Security Threat

By Tenzin Rigden



THE home minister, Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho, called on all Bhutanese people to support His Majesty the King and the government at a time when the country faced a grave security threat from the illegal presence of the ULFA and Bodo militants on Bhutanese soil.

Addressing the Eighth Plan mid-term review meeting of Tsirang dzongkhag early this week, the home minister said that a strong national unity was essential and that people should be ready to even sacrifice their lives to safeguard the nation's security and sovereignty.

Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho said that Bhutan had so far conducted three "unproductive and inconclusive" rounds of talks with the militants, two with the ULFAs and one with the Bodos. But they had used

various pretexts, excuses and conflicting proposals to stall the talks.

Nonetheless the royal government was confident of solving the problem, whether through dialogue and other peaceful means or through military operation, the Home Minister said.

Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho also recalled the destruction to development infrastructure and the hardships suffered by the people during the ngolop uprising in 1990. Even today, the ngolops continued to terrorise innocent people, rob and desecrate kuten stungens and attempt the so called "peace marches" with political motives.

Five days later, a bigger mob of 5,000, carrying khukhurs, bows and arrows and bombs inside their bags, converged on the Tsirang dzongkhag headquarters and presented a total of 22 demands. They demanded that they should be allowed to wear khukhurs all the time, no member of the so

called Bhutan People's Party (BPP) must be arrested for any reason, and that the BPP flag must be kept flying in front of the dzong. All offices and schools were to be kept closed till their demands were met.

Reiterating the concerns expressed by the Home Minister, the Lhengye Zhungtshog Chairman, Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba, said that Bhutan was going through a critical situation because of the security threat posed by the militants. The country's development process, already affected by the ngolop problem, was confronted with an even bigger risk from the ULFAs and the Bodos.

Referring to the recent attacks on the Bhutanese nationals in Assam Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba said that when large numbers of Bhutanese travellers were killed and injured the international media had not given the coverage that an incident of this proportion deserved. "We the people of Bhutan must think carefully and realise that, in times of great disaster,

there will be no one to help," he said. "Most countries were hardly bothered, which shows that we must protect ourselves."

Several representatives of Tsirang expressed their solidarity with the royal government in countering the security threat to the country from the militants and the ngolops.

Former chimi, C. B. Pulami, said that the militants had endangered Bhutan's sovereignty, disrupted development work, and jeopardised its impeccable neighbourly relationship with India. "The recent killing of Bhutanese across the border has come to us like a bolt from the blue," he said. "This is proof that an immediate action has to be taken to throw them out of our country."

According to Shetlual Koirala of Kikhorthang geog it was now time for the Bhutanese people to make sacrifices in the service of their country.

Courtesy: Kuensel of Thimpu

Security

The US Factor in the Region

By M.H. Askari



WITH a number of US South Asia experts, including Stephen P. Cohen, senior fellow of Washington's Brookings Institution, visiting South Asia lately, there can be little doubt about the United States' interest in the current developments in the region.

Pakistan and India now appear to be more inclined than in the past to resume a dialogue to resolve their outstanding disputes, including Kashmir. It is also quite possible that Washington would want to make sure that there is no last-minute slip between the cup and the lip. The conciliatory tone of the Indian prime minister's views on India-Pakistan relations, as reflected in a recent newspaper article written by him, has prompted Pakistan's foreign minister, Abdul Sattar, to make it known that Chief Executive Gen. Musharraf would be willing to enter into a dialogue with India at any level, at any time, but this is perhaps the first time that there is specific indication that he would be prepared to under-take a visit to India if that would help restart the long stalled process of bilateral negotiations.

While some cynics would regard this as a clever move to get India to confer legitimacy on military rule in Pakistan Mr Sattar's statement is well-intentioned and does merit a positive response from the other side. So long as there are tensions straining their relations, neither India nor Pakistan would find it possible to devote the energy and efforts needed to normalize the situation in the subcontinent.

Addressing the English Speaking Union in Karachi the other day, Prof Cohen expressed Washington's concern about at the gravity of the situation in South Asia and hoped for a bigger role by the US in promoting peace and stability in the region. At about the same time, the US ambassador in India, Richard F. Celeste, while delivering a lecture in Chennai on Indo-US relations, also recalled President Clinton's visit to India and Pakistan last year and the hope expressed by him for a reduction in violence in the occupied Kashmir. The ambassador welcomed the emerging prospects for dialogue between Islamabad and New Delhi and the steps taken by both sides for defusing tensions. He may well have been articulating Washington's active interest in promoting the chances for substantive talks on the Kashmir issue.

In stressing India's importance, as "a major regional power," Prof Cohen

also underscored Pakistan's importance to the US's foreign policy. He spoke of Pakistan's geo-strategic position as a neighbour of China, Iran and Afghanistan, making it very relevant to the future course of Washington's foreign policy. All three - China, Iran and Afghanistan - are in varying degrees problem areas for the United States. Washington's ambitious plan for expanding economic ties with China and benefiting from its huge market are not yet free of uncertainties and need time to achieve its full potential. Iran loses no opportunity to express its lack of trust in the US, while Washington has not been able to tame Afghanistan which it regards as a major breeding ground for militant religious fanaticism. Prof Cohen specially mentioned the possibility of Pakistan serving as a bridge between the US and Iran and help promote reconciliation between the two.

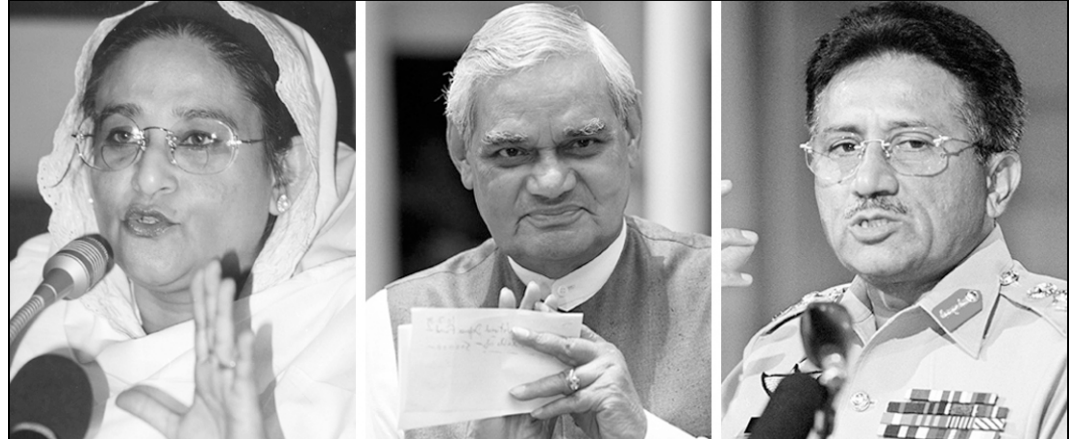
What makes the future course of Pakistan's relations with the US somewhat difficult to predict, in the perception of America's South Asia specialists, is the country's uncertain political situation. There is open scepticism about how the ruling military set-up is going to handle the complexities of the transfer of power to an elected political government. They also appear to believe that in the presence of tensions and violence straining relations between India and Pakistan, especially over Kashmir, it

would not be easy for Washington to develop fresh initiatives for promoting peace and normalization in South Asia.

Also of concern to Washington is the problem of heightened religious fanaticism on both sides of the divide in the subcontinent. Particularly how the jihadi groups would be brought under some sort of discipline if and when there is a measure of agreement between India and Pakistan on Kashmir.

Prof Cohen appeared convinced that any fresh initiatives for South Asia, in order to be purposeful, would involve a personal visit by the next US president to India and Pakistan on a priority basis. He would want such a visit not to be put off till the last phase of the president's tenure, like it had happened in the case of President Clinton's visit to India and Pakistan - in March last year.

It would be unrealistic to believe that India's decision to declare a unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir and Pakistan's reciprocal response to it could have happened without some prodding from the US. A senior (Pakistan-born) American diplomat, Dr Shirin Tahir-Kheli, is of the view that the basic premise for any US engagement in South Asia has to be prompted by a desire "to help solve the crises that stand in the way of a permanent and productive peace between India



and Pakistan." What is suggested is that Kashmir would need to be at the top of any such agenda.

Some years ago Dr Tahir-Kheli disclosed that the Clinton administration was "quietly putting out the word that it would like to do something on Kashmir in its second term in office." She proved right. However, she also believed that all the parties to the dispute - India, Pakistan and the Kashmiri people - were exceptionally rigid in their respective positions - something that could obstruct a resolution of the dispute. India was firm in its demand that any solution of Kashmir had to be found on the basis that the state was an integral part of India while Pakistan insisted that since 1989, when the freedom fighters resorted to armed struggle for securing their rights, the situation had undergone a basic change. For their part, the Kashmiri themselves were increasingly in favour of independence of their state.

There has also always been a view held by opinion-makers in the US that so long as Washington supports human rights as a priority issue in its foreign policy, the violation of these rights in Kashmir could not be overlooked; India would be mistaken if it believes that since the US has partly ignored the human rights issue in China in the interest of its trade and investments, it would do the same in respect of Kashmir as well. In view of the pressure of public opinion, policy planners in Washington would find it difficult to disregard the violations committed by the Indian security forces in the valley, particularly because India does not permit independent human rights agencies access to Kashmir.

What in recent years has brought about a significant change in Washington's perception of India as a facilitator of its foreign policy is the opportunity offered by the economic liberalization policy adopted by India in the 1990s. This resulted in what was seen in Pakistan as a "tilt" towards India. However, American spokesmen maintain that what Pakistanis often lose sight of is the fact that Washington wanted Pakistan to recognize its preference for elected governments even though some of these might be inefficient and corrupt. They want democracy and economic liberalization to make progress in Pakistan as in other Third World countries.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan.