

Sri Lanka

Peace Charade: The Lull before the Storm?

By Ekram Kabir

IT'S the annual Dance de Deaux in Sri Lanka. It comes about at this time of the year. It's more important this 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 Vanni 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 govern-

ment 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 Anandasangaraj 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 minimises 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 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 ammunitions 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 government's position. She needs to exhibit a cohesive mechanism to respond to the important developments that affect Sri Lankan security. Failing that the government may 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 West.



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 Asian region has come up 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 would 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 dialogue. 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.

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, it would not be easy for Wash-

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.

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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 environment-both strategic and economic- both countries appear to

have many common interests on which they could build upon their relationships at 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.

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 Balayogi, 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.

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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 Kashmiri Muslims. China has



Welcoming Li Peng in Mumbai

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

Li Peng 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 ULFA and one with the Bodos. But they had used various pretexts, excuses and con-

flicting 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 ngolop continued to terrorise innocent people, rob and desecrate kuten sunghens and attempt the so called 'peace marches' with political motives.

Five days later, a bigger mob of 5,000, carrying khukhuris, bows and arrows and bombs inside their bags, converged in the Tsirang dzongkhag headquarters and presented a total of 22 demands. They demanded that they should be allowed to wear khukhuris 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 Zhungshog 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 Shetul Koirala of Khorhong 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.