



Gujarat earthquake

Closer to our hearts

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THE devastating earthquake that rocked the western Indian state of Gujarat and also in a much lesser scale some parts of Sindh province in Pakistan has brought home the message that South Asia has commonality in many areas including vulnerability like experiencing natural disasters like floods, cyclone and earthquakes. When any severe cyclone or hurricane strikes or likely to hit eastern coastal areas of India, the alarm bell is also rung in Bangladesh because of the geographical proximity. Similarly, when floods batter Bangladesh or adjacent areas of India, the deluge often transcends the international boundaries. In the shocking catastrophe in the form of the earthquake in Gujarat the death toll may exceed a staggering number of one lakh. And this underlines the fact that South Asian nations are so much extricably linked to each other not only historically and culturally but their physical closeness is such that one devastation affects the others.

The earthquake in Gujarat has sent tremors down the spines of Bangladesh as well, although the region is closer to Pakistan for the simple fact that this country is not out of the danger zone

when a neighbouring country is struck by the calamity of unbelievable magnitude. Newspapers reports and experts here immediately sat down to analyse the chances of tremors in this country and most agreed that several areas of Bangladesh very much falls in the vulnerable zone and necessary measures must be taken to meet any eventuality. True, predictions about earthquakes are difficult but contingency plans must remain in preparedness.

Obviously, the countries of the South Asian region can certainly cooperate in the field of disaster management. These nations often face natural calamities that not only claim huge toll of lives but also leaves colossal damages to other fields including the infrastructure. None of the countries of the region is free from this impending danger and all are helpless to the fury of nature.

The earthquake in India is the latest of the disasters that has engulfed the region. It has struck India with such severity that South Asia has not experienced such a quake in last fifty years. Hearts of the people of the entire region - along with those of the world - are out in grief for the victims and the homeless. The newspapers are replete with heart-rending reports on the woes of the affected people.

It is a matter of common knowledge that the political scene prevailing currently in the region is not healthy because of escalation of the enmity between two big countries and the uncertainty that has gripped the forum South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (Saarc) over the holding of its next summit. The event was to take place in October 1999 but could not be held because of lack of unanimity among the members. The trouble is evidently between India and Pakistan, and consequently their bilateral bitter ties have spilled over to the Saarc, causing indefinite delay to the Saarc leaders' conference. India is known to be unwilling to attend as it considers the time for the summit is not conducive at present. The Saarc summit was postponed and delayed earlier also but never before it hung in the balance for such a long time. Once the decks were cleared, the event took place, and not much time was taken to remove the misunderstanding or the problems that caused the delay. But this time the complexities seem intractable despite certain signs of thaw towards improvement of the situation.

The quake in India has generated sympathy and goodwill in all the SAARC countries which are trying their best to assist India where the relief

works have become too gigantic a task in view of the heavy losses to both men and material. Friday's magnitude 7.9 scale flattened two town in the Gujarat state. The army and thousands of relief workers are grappling to meet the huge relief operations which is proving a Herculean

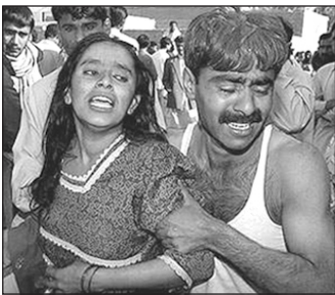
task. Like the world leaders, South Asian leaders too have extended the hands of sympathy to the fellow regional nation in India at this hour of distress although the capacity of these countries are not much and India as a big country has also means to a large extent to meet the situation. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has spoken to Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to convey her deep shock and also expressed her willingness to visit the affected areas in Gujarat. Other leaders of the region have also shown similar feelings. Even Pakistan, whose ties with India are often bad and is believed to be at one of the lowest ebb at present, has sent relief materials in air force planes. Country's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has sent messages of condolences to Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Because of the hostile relationship and belligerent postures by both the sides, New Delhi-

Islamabad ties are quite inimical these days. Against such a backdrop, Indian government was not initially keen to accept the relief materials from Pakistan but later agreed. Planes load of Pakistani relief goods landed at the Ahmedabad Airport. Indeed, it is noteworthy because humane elements do work even during war and here two neighbours are in bad ties and certainly not in a war.

When devastating cyclone and deluge struck Bangladesh in 1984 and big number of people perished in Urir Char island and other areas, all the South Asian countries came up generously with goodwill and assistance. Prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and president Jinnah Jeyewardene flew to the affected areas of Bangladesh's coastal region. Later, General Ziaul Haq also came to see for himself the magnitude of the devastation. In effect, this was the demonstration of the South Asian solidarity with the people of fellow Bangladesh. The world saw with appreciation that a region, which is driven by so much of rivalry and political divide, could rise to the occasion of distress cutting across the differences. The international community had greatly commended the gesture of the Saarc leaders to Bangladesh at that difficult time.

This time too the South Asian leaders have come forward with the gestures that are only expected of them. Their means are small but the requirement is huge given the nature of the destruction. Developed nations and international organisations are coming forward to help and assist the Indian people at such a juncture. Even a small gesture makes big help in the form of understanding and goodwill. The regional countries are exacting doing the same to India at this stage. One can be sure that the people of India will welcome such gesture not only from member nations but even from Pakistan - which is otherwise a hostile nation for New Delhi. But humanitarian approach and principle make people forget many bitterness at least temporarily. None is under the illusion that this gesture will turn the unhealthy political environment in the region healthy overnight. In fact, this is not going to alter the fundamental scene here. Nonetheless, South Asian fraternity which has been developed even in the midst of inherent distrust and misunderstanding has now come to the fore again and this certainly deserves unqualified commendation.

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Sri Lanka

War-clouds on the outposts

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THE Sri Lankan government has rejected an offer by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to extend a unilateral ceasefire until February 24. Instead, the Sri Lankan military continued a major offensive on the Jaffna peninsula, recapturing nearly all territory lost to the LTTE in fierce fighting last year. Government forces are reportedly gearing up for a final offensive to push the LTTE from Elephant Pass, a strategic rebel-held land corridor linking the peninsula with the rest of the country.

However, President Chandrika Kumaratunga called on Sunday for a definite date to begin peace talks with the LTTE but said there would be no ceasefire until the two sides reached a lasting agreement on ending the war.

Then again, despite talk of a truce and attempted mediation by a peace envoy from Norway, the government in Colombo is clearly seeking a military solution to the 18-year ethnic war. With overwhelming forces poised to launch land and air strikes on LTTE positions, the military is likely to drive them back into the jungles. But what if the government victory turns out to be short-lived; what if the rebels revert to guerrilla and terrorist tactics better suited to their abilities.

Since 1983, the LTTE have been fighting for an ethnic Tamil homeland in the north and east. The years of fighting have left more than 64,000 people dead and severely hampered economic growth and development in Sri Lanka. In April last year, LTTE forces overran the strategic military base at Elephant Pass, pushing forward to capture much of Jaffna peninsula. Before recapturing the city of Jaffna which has significant historical and cultural meaning for the Tamils government forces have reportedly received an influx of new weapons, stopping the Tigers short of their goal. Government and Tiger forces have since hunkered down in a trench-warfare campaign, with each side alternately gaining and losing ground.

Better-armed and prepared for conventional warfare, the government troops now appear to have regained the upper hand in the conflict on the peninsula. Sri Lankan infantry troops are positioned about 10 miles from the edge of the main rebel base at Elephant Pass. Currently the military deploys light and medium tanks, field and medium artillery, and 16 multiple barrel rocket launchers (MLRS). The military also has nearly unopposed air superiority, flying ground-attack missions with Israeli-made Kfir and Russian-made MiGs.

The Tigers counter with Chinese-made 122mm and 152mm artillery pieces, as well as MLRS, mortars - mostly 81mm - and landmines that inflict significant casualties on government troops. Gradually, the LTTE accrued weapons in ambushes or when pushing back

government troops. They also have some tanks and various rockets in reserve.

If government troops retake the Pass, rebel forces on the peninsula will be cut off from their supply routes to the country's interior. The loss of the peninsula will further jeopardise the Tiger's food and armaments supply route.

While a victory in Elephant Pass and the peninsula would boost the government and its military forces, it may be short-lived, say Sri Lanka observers. Far from ending the conflict, the fighting may simply shift from the current conventional war, which heavily now favours government troops, to the more traditional jungle war that would favour the Tigers.

Although many thought Prabhakaran's ceasefire offer as a time-out for regrouping, the government seems to have misinterpreted their truce offer as an indicator of weakness. Though the LTTE apparently need time for regrouping after the last heavy battles, there are no signs that their number or morale is declining. The latest losses of dozens of men, as reported in the media, could not decrease the strength of the guerrillas.

Nor has there been any news of desertion, even in minor numbers. If their track record is any guide, all LTTE cadre comprise unpaid volunteers who are prepared for self-sacrifice. Tigers prefer to take cyanide rather than surrender, said the Lake House paper on January 18.

As Sri Lankan troops push the LTTE back into the jungles, in all likelihood the Tigers may launch guerrilla-type operations, combined with terrorist actions all around the country. The government would answer with counter-insurgency operations and heavy aerial bombardments. In this type of war, however, the government forces are unlikely to continue enjoying success or to eliminate the LTTE's armed resistance.

The army's responsibilities are already stretched: half an army is defending the Peninsula and fighting rebels while the other half guards strategic positions all around the country. The physical topography and size of most of the war theatre consists of jungle, precluding the possibility of eliminating LTTE cadres.

According to available reports on various web sites, with the exception of a major sea base in Mullaitivu, all major LTTE bases are scattered throughout a large jungle area of about 5,000 square miles, with heavy woods, bad roads and a sparse population. This region is ideal for guerrilla forces and presents serious difficulties for motorised and infantry units of a conventional army. Even if Sri Lankan troops managed to occupy LTTE-held urban centres of the littoral south of Jaffna peninsula, the rebels can retreat into this interior jungle region. It affords safe haven and a prime area from which to mount surprise incursions.

In addition to jungle warfare, however, the Tigers rely on terrorist tactics to advance their cause. According to an international defence journal, the LTTE has the world's highest suicide bombing rate, with 62 per cent of such cases involving the LTTE between 1980 and 2000. Out of the 271 suicide bombings in the world between 1980 and 2000, they carried out 168. With the government rejecting the LTTE's ceasefire and the latter suffering setbacks on battlefield, the Tigers likely to expand their terrorist activities.

The annihilation or expulsion of Tigers from these jungles and physical occupation of the interior would require a considerable increase in the number of government troops. The current ratio of 10 to 1 in favour of the army (roughly 110,000 government troops and 11,000 guerrillas) may be sufficient for conventional war, but looks quite insufficient for finding and destroying Tigers in the jungle. Nor would the number be adequate to blockade the Tigers, as the area covered would be too large.

In general, the rebel fighters are much more determined than government soldiers. Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickrematunge, an advocate of taking a hardline against the LTTE, plans to establish

a new volunteer brigade to boost the military campaign against them. But enthusiasm is not high among Sinhalese youth. Students were reported to have taken to wearing black-and-white bands protesting the government's rejection of the rebels' ceasefire, said to The Lanka Academic on January 25.

In contrast, Tigers continue to enjoy support among ordinary Tamils of the island. Many still feel oppressed by the central government and Sinhalese majority and see Tigers as their only defenders. Parliament has yet to debate the promise to give broad autonomy to the Tamils, on which Kumaratunga rose to power last year. The broad sympathies and support given to Tigers by a few million Tamils is a guarantee and indicator that their armed struggle would continue no matter what success the government achieves on the battlefield.

The government appears prepared to launch a final offensive to drive the Tigers off the Jaffna peninsula. The most likely consequence may be the change in the armed conflict from conventional war to a guerrilla one, with an increased terrorist campaign by Tigers. And that's not at all a good augury for the government in Colombo.

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Pakistan

Benazir's 'new agenda'

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SOME argue that the influence of military dictatorships, failure of populist Prime Ministers and the Islamic conservatism have placed Pakistan into a state of permanent political crisis. The Pakistani people do not seem to be fortunate in their political leaders whether they come from the right or left.

Good leadership is an essential element in good-governance of a country. Corruption and nepotism coupled with entrenched feudalistic system the leaders have managed to keep Pakistan at the bottom of social indicators compared to those in many South East Asian countries. Hostile relations with India and active involvement in the civil war in Afghanistan have also influenced internal politics and leadership in Pakistan.

After the horror of 1971 unleashed in Bangladesh by the then military regime in Pakistan and the independence of Bangladesh, truncated Pakistan had Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as its leader. He was a populist leader and a great hope for the country. His tragedy lay in the fact that he became a dictator and would not tolerate any opponents to his

regime. His inability to provide food, clothing and shelter to his people as promised disillusioned the people. He became so self-satisfied and complacent about his 'skillful' handling of foreign relations that he ignored the political processes that were fuelling the rise of a right-wing opposition in the country tacitly backed by the military.

After the death of President Ziaul Haq in August 1988 in a plane crash believed to have been caused by a bomb (suspected to have been engineered from international and internal forces who were against the growing 'Islamisation' of Pakistan), the political power in Pakistan oscillated between two politicians Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif for the next decade.

They turned out to be inadequate leaders, as both were interested in self-aggrandisement and used their position to enrich themselves. Both used their personality to win over Pakistani voters who appear to be betrayed and left in the lurch. Twice they became Prime Ministers of the country and twice they were dismissed. They were both convicted on corruption charges and are at the moment in exile. Presently Ms. Bhutto is living in Britain and Nawaz Sharif in Saudi Arabia.

External tensions with neigh-

boring India on Kashmir question added to the downfall of both leaders.

During Benazir Bhutto's regime, many were disappointed with her lack of implementation of policies. She failed to introduce reforms regarding feudalistic hold on agricultural farms, on women's oppression and discrimination, and demonstrated intolerance towards her political opponents.

Her first regime could not come to grips with the ethnic violence in Bhutto's home province of Sind the scene of bitter and bloody rivalry between 'mohajirs' (who migrated to Pakistan from India) and Sindhis. During her second term of office, she appeared to have been mainly occupied with her vendetta against the leader of the opposition, Nawaz Sharif. She failed to lessen religious fundamentalism which became stronger. Her government was known for corruption, patronage and nepotism. Pakistan was suffering from increasingly deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

Ms. Bhutto became alienated from reality and her relations with the President deteriorated. Externally perennial tensions with India were at its peak during her administration and the relations with her counter-part in India became strained. In July 1996, Pakistan suffered a major blow to her attempt to pressure India into negotiations when the UN Security Council who removed the Kashmir question from its agenda. She was removed at the end of 1996 for the second time by her one time protégé, the civilian President. After that, Nawaz Sharif was elected and came into power in 1997.

In an interview with the media last month, Benazir declared that she had decided to return to Pakistan because the supporters of her party Pakistan's Peoples Party wanted her to lead the party. She declared that she wanted to "build a post-cold-war identity for Pakistan." Dramatic changes to international relations have taken place in the '90s and many argue that Pakistan needs to determine a new course for foreign policy that can prioritise between a number of competing interests and garner domestic political support for them.

This is important for Pakistan since after the end of the cold-war, the US one time ally, seems to have lost its primary interest in Pakistan and has strengthened its relationship with India. In addition, China, a traditional friend, also appears to be keen to restore its friendly relations with India. Furthermore, Pakistan's support since late 1996 to the Taliban administration in Afghanistan appears to have annoyed Iran, the US and Russia. (Even Saudi Arabia has turned a cold shoulder to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.)

While Benazir Bhutto was in power she was carried away with her political victory and failed to fulfil her commitments to the people in accordance with her election mani-

festos. Nor she was able to adjust the directions in foreign policy in the light of the rapid change in the global political environment.

However, since then it appears from media reports that she has changed her tune. She hinted that she would pursue peace and stability in the region. This implies that she seems to be willing to come to a deal with India on Kashmir because history and experience illustrate that the Kashmir dispute affords an excuse for the military to intervene in the political arena. Ms. Bhutto also wishes to strengthen the civil institutions of the representative democracy in the country so as to prevent military adventurism in future. These ideas seem to be good but it all depends whether she will be committed to them if she regains power.

General Musharraf is reported to have vowed to keep out both Ms. Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in the political arena through laws banning convicted politicians from taking part in politics. Benazir Bhutto's conviction is under appeal in the Supreme Court in Pakistan. She was convicted in April 1998 and sentenced to five years imprisonment and fined millions of dollars. If the Supreme Court acquits her, then the law will not be applicable to her and she can return to politics, but whether she will be arrested on arrival is another matter altogether.

Pakistan is strategically important as the area is proximity to Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, China, and oil rich Arab Gulf countries. Military rule has prevailed because the civilian leaders have made a mess in Pakistan. The survival of Pakistan as a democratic country will depend on the need for thoroughgoing social transformation and the institutionalisation of democracy together with tougher policies towards Taliban administration and a peace deal on Kashmir dispute with India.

In the changed global scene, it makes sense for Pakistan to change the direction of its domestic and foreign policies, otherwise it risks being isolated. If Benazir Bhutto is successful in carrying out her 'new agenda', she may be successful in leading Pakistan to a new horizon of hope, peace and progress.

The main question is that given her past records is it too much to ask from her? The critics are pessimistic about her change of mindset. It is argued that a few factors may work against her efforts: Islamic conservatism, anti-Indian sentiment prevailing in many sections of the community, anti-Bhutto disposition among some elements of military establishment and political concession to a deal on Kashmir.

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Kashmir

Peace in peril

M ABDUL HAFIZ

EVEN as the peace initiative on Kashmir has been gaining momentum since late November last year when India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee offered his ceasefire proposal in Kashmir and it was responded positively by Pakistan there erupts a new spat of violence not only in Kashmir but also well within both India and Pakistan casting gloom over the prospects for peace. The attacks on the Red Fort in Delhi a place of great symbolic significance by the militants of Lashkar-i-Tyeba came at a time when attempts to start a dialogue between Indian government and Kashmiri groups were making steady progress and the arrangements further dispatch of APHC leaders to Islamabad were under way. The attack in the heart of India carried out by a handful of militants was a severe blow to India's power and prestige.

But it was not India's only predicament. There is little evidence that the Indian government's unilateral ceasefire has produced satisfactory result. While some of the extremist terrorists groups have refused to abide by the ceasefire, most other militant groups do not seem to have totally de-escalated the terrorist activities. The number of Indian security forces personnel killed by the terrorists has shown no significant decline, and even increased in some regions. The number of civilians murdered and injured remained static even during the ceasefire period. Only three days after the Red Fort attack there was a huge bomb explosion in 15 corps Headquarter in Srinagar. There is also a mysterious silence on the part of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen at whose behest the first ceasefire was announced in July last year.

In the meantime, Vajpayee has extended his Ramadan ceasefire for the second time and other interesting. Events like Red Fort incident, the sudden return of Kashmiri Freedom Movement prodigal - Hashim Quereshi in New Delhi and the imminent departure of APHC to Pakistan have taken place in quick succession. All these suggest that the peace drama is about to reach a climax. But no one is sure as yet as to what shape it will end up.

While angrily reacting to the attack on the Red Fort India however resolved that the incident was not going to stall peace moves in Kashmir and an ongoing efforts to talk with Pakistan. Yet what is of concern is also a spate of violence in Pakistan where in a well-coordinated series of bomb explosions Lahore, Faisalabad, Hyderabad and Kharian were rocked only three days later on 25 December, 2000.

In case of Red Fort Lashkar-i-Tyeba claimed the responsibility for the incident. But there were no such claimants for the bomb blast in Pakistani cities. However, Pakistan has been instinctively pointing an accusing finger at India. For all bomb blast in Pakistani cities the most popular theory goes that it is the part of a tit-for-tat covert war waged by Indian intelligence agency. This campaign is intended to raise the cost for Pakistan of its support for the struggle in Kashmir. It is this reasoning which makes the linkage between Red Fort incident and recent bomb blasts in Pakistan seem quite plausible. It is this logic is pursued, it seems obvious that more such retaliatory incidents can be expected after some militant groups have intensified their increasingly daring attacks on Indian targets in and outside Kashmir.

The Vajpayee government views the escalation of militancy by Lashkar-i-Tyeba and others as a conscious effort to sabotage the peace moves. These moves include the Kashmir ceasefire announcement by New Delhi, restraint on, and announcement of withdrawal of some troops from the hope by Pakistan and an impending visit by APHC delegation to Pakistan. Apart from the rejectionist Kashmiri groups many others including the Hizbul Mujahideen have not reacted in knee-jerk fashion to New Delhi's ceasefire initiative. A window of opportunity seems to have opened up for exploring a peaceful resolution of Kashmir conundrum.

However, failure to capitalise on it by any or all of the actors could rapidly shut the window and spell disaster for future. This could make it much harder next time round to rehabilitate trust and confidence among the protagonists. The present signs are more hopeful than they were in the past. But the extreme fundamentalist groups and their supporters amongst the religious parties in Pakistan seem bent upon sabotaging the emerging peace prospects. For the military government of Pakistan a partial paralysis can be detected on how to handle the extremist Jihadist groups.

Perhaps, India has a role to play here. It is of the view that Musharraf can rein in the Jihadists if he wants Musharraf is already misunderstood for the signs of moderation he has shown. The Islamic Right in Pakistan has described him 'security risk' and asked the generals to sack him for abandoning the Kashmir agenda. India would do well by keeping in view General Musharraf's limitations.

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