

CENTRAL ASIA

Nervous spring

WITH spring not far off and with it the opening of Central Asia's snowy mountain passes, the region's leaders are growing nervous about expected attacks by Islamist militants from Tajikistan. The remote passes of south-west Kirgizstan are again likely to be the route militants take to Uzbekistan, whose government they aim to overthrow. Last year, 30 Kirgiz soldiers were killed trying to defend the passes, most by sniper fire.

There are reports that Juma Namangani, a leader of the radical Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), has already crossed from his base in Afghanistan into Tajikistan with several hundred men, equipped with high-quality arms and supporting technology. The IMU, which also aims to set up an Islamic state in the Fergana valley, an area shared by Kirgizstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, has been declared a terrorist organisation by the United States. It is said to have ties with Osama bin Laden, a Saudi living in Afghanistan who the Americans believe organised attacks on their embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. The IMU is also thought to have links with Afghanistan's drug traders.

Although the militants are at present relatively small in number, the armies of Central Asia are taking no chances. Kirgizstan's defence budget for this year has been almost tripled, though it is still only \$16m, and President Askar Akaev told his defence council last week to be on the alert. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are also beefing up their armed forces. Uzbekistan has the largest and reportedly strongest army in Central Asia. But it was badly shaken by an IMU attack last summer. No figures have been officially announced, but at least 200 Uzbek soldiers were probably killed.

The presidents of Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan met in Almaty, in Kazakhstan, on January 5th and agreed to co-operate against the growing threat. In the past, though, the four leaders have tended to pursue their own plans, in part out of necessity. "The authorities in Tajikistan do not control the whole territory," says Miroslav Niazov, deputy chairman of Kirgizstan's national security service. "That's why we are planning our own approach and taking preventive measures."

Uzbekistan, whose repressive ruler, Islam Karimov, has jailed thousands of opponents and driven more into exile, is secretly being blamed for the whole mess. The Kirgiz still grumble about Uzbekistan's accidental or not so accidental, as some Kirgiz believe dropping of bombs on a village in Kirgizstan during an IMU attack in 1999. Instead of hitting the rebels, the Uzbeks killed 12 villagers and damaged dozens of houses. Uzbekistan has upset Tajikistan by laying mines along the Uzbek-Tajik border. At least 20 Tajik civilians have been killed over the past few months, after wandering accidentally into the minefields.

Many Central Asians believe that the Islamist threat will end only when stability returns to Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Although Tajikistan's long civil war is over, the country remains divided, with some areas still not under government control. As for Afghanistan, the ruling Taliban are likely to be shunned as long as they continue to provide a base for groups like the IMU, never mind the repression of their own people.

Courtesy: The Economist of London

VIETNAM UPDATE

Ties with Thailand

TALKING with visiting member of the Privy Council of the King of Thailand, Siddhi Savetsila, Vice President Nguyen Thi Binh said both countries should strive to consolidate and promote their long-standing friendship and cooperation. This would serve the interests of both Viet Nam and Thailand, and would also deliver benefits to other countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Binh said credit must be given to His Majesty the King of Thailand and the Thai royal family for their contributions to strengthening the bilateral ties between the two countries.

In the world forum

DEPUTY Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem told the World Economic Forum in Davos that rich industrialised countries and major multinational corporations should help poor countries gain access to development opportunities. The developed world must assist their less-developed neighbours to ensure their sustained growth in the globalisation process, he said. Globalisation is an inter-related process with both positive and negative factors, Deputy PM Khiem told the forum's plenary session on Globalisation's Impacts on Asia. To harness the advantages and limit the negative impacts, he said that all nations had to develop their internal strength and human resources. They must take full advantage of their responsiveness to crises and forge a judicious mechanism and policy for integration into the world.

Knuckle down to work

Minister Phan Van Khai told a two-day Cabinet meeting in HCM City that Cabinet members should knuckle down to work and should swiftly implement the National Assembly resolution on socio-economic development this year. He pointed out many pressing problems, including the increasing trade deficit, the sluggish development of investment projects, and inefficient investment in infrastructure. The Cabinet meeting reviewed the country's socio-economic conditions in January, considered reports from inspection agencies, and discussed action plans for several initiatives including the Son La Hydro-power project and the draft Law on Customs.

Oil export increases

VIET Nam's export turnover reached \$1.1 billion in January, 0.5 per cent higher than the previous corresponding period. Crude oil once again secured its place as Viet Nam's top export earner, with revenue of \$310 million in January, 37.8 per cent up on last year. Textiles and garments turned in growth of 3.1 per cent to reach \$135 million, while sea-food exports recorded a stunning 54.9 per cent increase to reach \$110 million in the month. The country grossed \$26 million from 150,000 tonnes of rice, a 2.2-fold increase in volume and 52.9 per cent higher in turnover. The country once again imported more than it sent offshore, with imports during the month hitting \$1.2 billion, up 8.7 per cent on January 2000's level. Among the items with the highest import turnover, fuel and materials for textiles and garments topped the list.

Success in Soc Son

Le Kha Phieu has praised the residents of Ha Noi's outlying district of Soc Son for their efforts to eradicate the scourge of poverty from their region. Visiting the district Phieu told local people he was very impressed at their success in virtually eradicating hunger and substantially alleviating poverty over the past two years. These include the construction of more than 330 new houses, and the allocation of over VND51 billion to local farmers for expanding their production. Thanks to these efforts, the number of poor families fell from 7.7 per cent of Soc Son households in 1999 to 6.5 per cent last year. The number of well-off farmer households increased from 14.6 per cent in 1999 to 17 per cent last year.

Off you go

VIET Nam is looking to send an estimated 50,000 workers abroad this year, an increase of 20,000 over the 2000 total, according to Tran Van Hang, Director of the Overseas Labour Management Department. According to Hang, the economic sectors with the highest demand for imported workers this year are the electronic goods, construction, domestic worker, garment and textile and agricultural sectors. Last year, the country sent nearly 31,500 workers abroad, slightly above the yearly target of 30,000 and 1.5 times higher than in 1999. Of these, 8,000 went to Taiwan and 7,000 travelled to South Korea. Many of the workers were sent abroad under contracts signed between Vietnamese labour export agencies and their foreign partners, but a significant proportion left the country under contracts signed between individuals and foreign employers.

The bridge

THE 161km road from Ha Noi to Lang Son was opened to traffic and will cut travelling time from the capital city to the Chinese border from four hours to just 2.5. The Asian Development Bank provided a \$120 million soft loan that allowed nearly 80 per cent of the road to be upgraded. The highway is now covered in asphalt, and has been widened from 7m to 10-12m, allowing vehicles to travel at 60-80kph from Bac Giang to the Viet Nam-China border, and 100kph from Ha Noi to Bac Giang. The Ha Noi-Lang Son highway section had already benefited from a system of 14 bridges, with total length of 2.35km, that opened to traffic at the end of last year. Almost all the bridges are the same width as the road, and the longest - the Phu Dong Bridge over the Duong River - is 930m long.

Compiled by Ekram Kabir

AFGHANISTAN

The bitter generation

AMNA KHAISHGI in Karachi

CHILDREN are the hopes for every nation. Their development secures the development of a country. The country that brought up an insecure generation faces an insecure future. Afghanistan, thus, is witnessing the same. Stretching on more than 20 years, the armed conflict in Afghanistan has devastated the lives of millions of Afghan children.

They not only suffered from economic hardship, but the physical, emotional and mental development of generations of Afghan children has been severely affected by the ongoing fighting. Even if they have not been the direct targets of human rights abuses, the majority of Afghan children have been the witness to acts of violence and destruction, which have destroyed the social fabric of the society. Death, displacement and lack of livelihood have affected Afghan families to provide the emotional and financial support children require.

About four million children in Afghanistan have died from malnutrition and illness, while some 268,000 children under the age of five have died each year from easily treatable diseases such as diarrhoea and pulmonary. Children have had to find their own means of coping with the horrors of war.

Young boys have taken on the responsibility of adults as the breadwinner of the family after their fathers have been killed. Criminal gangs engaged in drug trafficking and smuggling have preyed on their vulnerability. Armed groups have recruited children as young as 14, to fight in battles, turning them into perpetrators of violence themselves. The trauma of experiencing such brutality and being surrounded by violence, fear and hardship has deeply affected the Afghan children.

Armed political groups subjected children to abduction and sexual abuse. Young girls, in particular, have been abducted and detained and sold into prostitution. The rape of young girls by armed guards appeared to have been condoned by leaders as a method of intimidating vanquished populations and rewarding soldiers. Recently a 15-year-old girl was repeatedly raped in her house in Kabul after armed guards entered the house

and killed her father for allowing her to go to school. "They shot my father right in front of me. He was a shopkeeper. It was nine o'clock at night. They came to our house and told him they had orders to kill him because he allowed me to go to school. The Mujahideen had already stopped me from going to school, but that was not enough. They then came and killed my father. I cannot describe what they did to me after killing my father..."

In late 1994, the Taleban armed political group emerged as a military and political force and has since captured around 80 per cent of Afghanistan. Over this period there has been a change in the nature of the conflict, and human rights abuses have taken on a new dimension. In contrast to the Mujahideen groups of the past, the Taleban appeared as a more cohesive force in 1994 and 1995 bringing a degree of order to areas of the country brought securely under their control. Their policy of disarming opposition groups resulted in a reduction in acts of banditry and extortion, winning them popular support from the traditional Afghan families.

However, as the war continued and the Taleban's objective of a military take-over of the country proved more difficult, the Taleban opted for making tactical pacts with local commanders. These local commanders are now largely in charge of the security of the areas they control. The Taleban, on occasions, have blamed serious breaches in law and order and subsequent human rights abuses on their local forces over whose conduct they appear to have little control.

The Taleban's strict interpretation of Islam incorporates a rigid social code, which has been imposed on the civilian population in areas under its control. Through a multitude of edicts, severe restrictions have been placed on women's movement, employment and education, institutionalising traditional discrimination prevalent in Afghan society. The edicts banning women's employment and education and restricting women and girl's movement have undermined, especially in urban areas, women's ability to contribute to the financial well being of the family. As a result, very young children have been forced out to work, at times with the livelihood of

the entire family dependent on their jobs. The aid community in Kabul believed that as of early 1999 an estimated 28,000 children, some as young as nine years old, were working on the streets of the capital. With increasing numbers of displaced families arriving in the city, this figure is now thought to be even higher.

Also access to education has been reduced as schools have been destroyed and teachers forced to flee. In recent years the actions of various armed groups who have banned education for girls has further limited opportunities for learning, which has institutionalised the wide gender gap prevalent in education in the country. This edict is seriously weakening Afghanistan's prospects for economic and social development. The disruption of education has not only affected girls; boys too have suffered from the ban on women's employment due to the fact that around 40 per cent of teachers were female.

The Taleban has responded at various times saying schooling for girls would be reinstated when peace and security is achieved, or when they have taken control of the whole country, or when they have sufficient funds to implement segregated education. However, whether the Taleban will live up to these promises remains to be seen. During the present Taleban rule, another unfortunate and brutal reality has been reported that the Taleban carrying out deliberate or indiscriminate killing during wide scale massacres. Children were among around 70 civilians who, according to the survivors, were arbitrarily killed by armed Taleban guards in September 1997 in Qezelabad village near Mazar-e Sharif. All of the victims belonged to the Hazara ethnic group. Among them an 8-year-old had been decapitated. Two boys of about 12 were reportedly held by the guards and had their arms broken with stones. As the Taleban have clamped down on political activists who peacefully oppose the continuing war, children have been held hostage in place of their fathers who have escaped arrest. Last year Amnesty International learnt of at least nine boys who had been taken hostage in Kabul and other parts of the country in 1998. These children were released after several months in detention

where they were reportedly subjected to torture and ill treatment. Most recently, an international aid agency warned that around 20,000 women and children were facing death in Afghanistan unless they received urgent supplies of medicine and food. The warning came after the forced displacement of over 100,000 people north of Kal by the Taleban during a military offensive against the anti-Taleban alliance in the area. The recent ban of refugee influx in Pakistan has worsened the situation. Families with small children are dying on the border due to the chilled winter and unavailability of livelihood but nothing has been yet materialised to help this unfortunate generation, who is leaving their home state due to lack of survival chances. A Hazari Afghan, while talking to the reporters, cried that his ailing daughter died on the border, as the Pakistan's border forces did not allow him to enter in Pakistan. "Where should I take my daughters, there is no place for them neither in their home state nor in the refugee camps."

Even children that are born in refugee camps are facing identity crisis. What they have experienced in their lives is just violence and hardship. This bitter generation appear as an effective weapon by the vested forces in both Pakistan and Afghanistan and as result the wave of violation seems to have no end. "What this world has given my in this dark camp, I will return all this to them," said the angry 18 year old Yousuf with Ak47 in his hand.

The agony of Afghan children is an unending tragedy. But generations of children have already been physically and mentally suffered a lot by the horrors of endless conflict. Unless immediate action is taken to ensure the freedom and dignity of children and create conditions in which they can develop their potential the prospects for lasting peace and prosperity remain remote. Afghanistan has already lost so much; it does not afford to lose more. A smile on an Afghan child will brighten the country's future.

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MALAYSIA



In conservative northern states, women can be seen wearing veils, while attitude are more relaxed in Kuala Lumpur.

ARJUANA RANAWANA

in Kuala Lumpur

ZARINA'S ordeal in college began on her first evening when she took off her headscarf in her dormitory. Her conservative roommates were aghast to see pink-tinted hair tumble out. Word got around, and the next day, a fellow student came up to her and called her a *bohsia*, a derogatory label for a "loose" girl. On the third day, a male teacher told the school assembly: "I know there is one among you who comes from a certain background and is not used to conforming to the Islamic way of life." He labeled "that person" a social degenerate, a term normally reserved for prostitutes and drug addicts. "I knew he was talking about me," says Zarina, a 19-year-old Malay-Muslim. At the end of that week, she was punched by a senior in the bathroom. Zarina fled the school, located some 20 km south of Melaka, never to return.

Zarina's experience reflects the dark side of a new Islamic resurgence in Malaysia. At the same time the country is casting aside past notions of race and religion, it is seeing the strengthening of the Malay majority's Muslim identity. Rural areas in the north ruled by the opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pas) have always been known for their strict Islamic ways, but recently even Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor, considered the most modern regions in Malaysia, have been subject to the Islamising trend. In late November, religious authorities launched a surprise raid on the capital's upmarket entertainment district of Bangsar Baru; two Muslim girls in mini-skirts were taken away from one bar and charged with wearing improper attire and being found in an establishment that serves alcohol. Now many are wondering whether they are witnessing the beginnings of an intolerant religious state - and what this means for both Malay-Muslims and non-Muslim minorities.

What is behind this new wave of religiosity? The stresses of the economic slowdown and, more significantly, the political crisis of the past few years - namely, the sacking and jailing of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim - are the main factors. Opposition politician Chandra Muzaffar says people seek refuge in Islam because of disenchantment with the government. "The leadership has transgressed very fundamental norms in Malay and Islamic culture in the treatment of Anwar," he says. "Malay society is expressing that disenchantment by asserting an Islamic identity, because the ruling elite is seen as un-Islamic."

Paradoxically, at the vanguard of the Islamic resurgence are those traditionally considered progressive: the youth and academia. Islamist ideas have especially influenced student organisations in

universities. College student Pushpa, 21, a member of the Indian minority, says a strong wave of Islamic feelings has swept her school, which is situated near Kuala Lumpur. Pushpa herself has not felt any pressure to convert or conform to Muslim regulations, but student leaders have actively promoted Islamic values. In September they organised "Tudung Week," in which all female Muslim students were "encouraged" to wear a tudung (headscarf). "All the girls were given scarves," says Pushpa. "They also held a fashion show where the models wore headscarves and Malay dresses. The message was that you could dress according to the prescribed way and still be trendy."

Often the expression of Islamic identity is not so benign, and women in particular have been bearing the brunt of the trend's darker side. "We find that attempts to control women and young girls are the most important manifestations [of the Islamic resurgence]," says Ivy Josiah, executive secretary of the Malaysian Women's Aid Organisation. She points to the case of a 22-year-old Kuala Lumpur

resident who was forcibly sent to a so-called rehabilitation center for errant girls. The woman had been seeing a youth of another faith against her parents' wishes. The parents reported her to the religious authorities, who picked her up and had her institutionalised. Under Malaysian law, anyone over 21 years of age is free from parental control, but parallel Islamic laws in force in the states allow parents to police their unmarried daughters whatever their age.

At the rehab center, which was actually meant for drug offenders, the woman and four others like her were put to work as maids at the residence of the head of the institution. The "rehabilitation" consisted of the official locking himself up alone with each of the women and forcing them to confess to each alleged act of wrongdoing, including giving detailed descriptions of "whatever they had done with their boy-friends." After weeks of this regime, the five young women staged a breakout and went into hiding. Josiah says she has protested to the authorities about the center, which receives government aid. "We found that the institution

was licenced to provide rehabilitation for male drug addicts only," she says.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) have always been quick to blame any manifestations of religious extremism on Pas, whose stated aim is to establish an Islamic state. "Pas would like [Muslims] to be inward-looking, separated not only from non-Malays but also from Muslims who are too friendly with non-Muslims," says Mahathir. Yet UMNO has found itself playing the same game. In the wake of the Anwar affair, many Malay-Muslims the bedrock of UMNO support, turned to the "purer" Islamic values that Pas was perceived to represent. In order to woo them back, UMNO has resorted to the same kind of religious measures that it once ridiculed. Last year, the UMNO-controlled state assembly in Perlis state passed a bill that would send apostates to rehabilitation centers. Stricter regulations, notes playwright Hishamuddin Rais, are "UMNO's response when Pas accuses them of being less Islamic."

The tussle between UMNO and Pas for the religious high ground has contributed to the escalating spiral of Islamisation and among those caught in the middle is Hishamuddin. One of his works, *Toh Ampoo* ("Brother Brown-Nose"), was due to be staged at Pas headquarters in Selangor state last September, but party officials cancelled it three days before the show. "They said this was because there were women acting and because there was no separate seating for [men and women] in the audience," says Hishamuddin. Performances scheduled to be held in the states of Trengganu (controlled by Pas) and Pahang (controlled by the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition) were also axed.

Minorities are especially concerned about Islamisation. "We don't want this political race between Pas and UMNO to result in each side over-emphasising its 'Islamic-ness,'" says S. Vijayarantnam, an ethnic Indian who chairs the Race Relations Committee of Barisan Nasional member Gerakan. "I hope that this sort of thing will not result in there being a divide between Muslims and

non-Muslims purely for political purposes." Pas secretary-general Nasharuddin Mat Isa insists non-Muslims have nothing to worry about. "Islamic states and Islamic law have always been put to [minorities] in a distorted way," he says. "We are trying to explain that this is a fabricated fear."

But such words reassure neither the minorities nor liberal-minded Malays. "If they were to implement their Koranic interpretation on arts and culture," warns Hishamuddin, "Malaysia would be a cultural desert." Says Josiah: "What we are most concerned about is the control of the state by religious authorities. Any cleric, be it from any religion, should not have the right to control our personal lives."

As for Zarina, her parents took her out of the college and placed her in a private school. There, the teenager has thrived among students of different faiths. But if the Islamic resurgence continues, it might be only a matter of time before the long arm of religious radicalism reaches her oasis of tolerance.

Courtesy: Asiaweek



PHOTO: ASIaweek