

SRI LANKA

Banning LTTE from Britain

EKRAM KABIR

THE listing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as a terrorist organisation by Britain has struck a strategic defeat for the Lankan insurgents. The blow has been diplomatic, symbolic and psychological. It calls into question the viability of the Eelam project itself. However, the Tigers' Diaspora support is not likely to evaporate, but given the international pressure on the LTTE for a negotiated settlement of the 18-year civil war, it will start to wobble and slowly shrink.

So, it's the international antipathy for the LTTE which is turning the wind in favour of Sri Lanka government. And is that good news for the government? Well, from the government side, there were no chest-thumping victory speeches in response to the UK ban, though this is what Colombo had been pushing for years. Ignoring the calls by right-wing Sinhala elements, following the ban, for more war against the LTTE, the President Kumaratunga, speaking at a convention of her Sri Lanka Freedom Party, reiterated her government's commitment to the peace process.

It was against this backdrop that the Norwegian special envoy, Erik Solheim, made yet another visit to Colombo, during which he met Kumaratunga for a round of discussions along with the Foreign Minister Kadirgamar. On his way back to Oslo, he stopped at London where he met Anton Balasingham of the LTTE. Observers say that in itself is an indication that the peace process is on course. Then, there is the sheer fatigue and the growing unacceptability of the cost of war being experienced by both sides.

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 2000, 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 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 gaining and losing ground alternately.

Recently, the US ambassador's speech in Colombo was noteworthy regarding peace in the country. He said: "We reject the idea of an independent Tamil state carved out of Sri Lanka territory; we regard the LTTE as a terrorist organisation and do not believe it is the sole representative of the Tamil people of Sri Lanka; we are also for Tamil rights. The Tamil people must be treated equally, respectfully and with dignity within a democratic Sri Lankan state whose exact political form should be determined by the people of this country; we do not believe Sri Lanka, or any part of it, is the special preserve of any one ethnic group; indeed we regard Sri Lanka as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-cultural state."

The next significant international contribution to the setting of the parameters was the British High Commission's statement released soon after last month's British anti-terrorist ban on the LTTE. The British statement took on the same position that the aspirations of all communities should be satisfied. It also significantly made reference to Sri Lanka as a "unitary state". The British statement said, "The UK continues to believe that the only way to find a permanent solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is through a negotiated settlement which addresses the aspirations of all communities within a unitary state."

Why is the international community - the US and the UK - is so eager to end Sri Lanka's civil war? Well, the US ambassador's message was the most forceful expression of the new global order that America seeks to create. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was the main superpower rival of the US, there appeared to be a prospect of the proliferation of new states. There were studies that predicted a doubling of the world's countries to over 400 in the next quarter century. But now the signs are clearer that the formation of new states will not be encouraged by the superpowers. The turnaround in the US position in Kosovo is striking in this regard.

Now that the US is the world's only superpower, what it requires most of all is a stable world

order. The problem with the proliferation of new states is that they can add to global disorder. It is easier to have order with fewer rather than with more countries. Once the independence of a state is internationally recognised, it gains access to many benefits, such as the legal trade in armaments including weapons of mass destruction which can later fall into the hands of terrorists. The more the number of independent states, the greater will be the prospects for states like Iraq and Afghanistan to cause conflicts in the world.

But it is not only the formation of new states that will be obstructed by the new global order. The recent British anti-terrorism law follows the model set by the earlier US anti-terrorism law and the European Union resolution against the financing of terrorism. The concerted international opposition to violence by non-state actors is a development that has taken place after the conclusion of the cold war. In the cold war period, the United States and Soviet Union had not qualms about promoting violence against governments that they perceived were in the rival camp. But after the cold war, there are no more rival superpower camps. There is only one superpower and virtually all governments in the world want to be on good terms with it.

In the old global order violent struggle by groups claiming to represent an oppressed class or nation was permissible. But in the present global order political violence is not permissible due to the potential for the uncontrollable proliferation of weapons and instability. So far Sri Lanka is experiencing the new global order being used against the LTTE.

The recent developments seem optimistic, because it may ultimately lead Sri Lanka to put an end to this crippling war. But at the same time, Sri Lanka needs to understand that the West is not doing any favour to it by helping to end the war. The West is simply serving their own interests how best to rule the world. And Colombo should squeeze the best out of the situation for its own sake. It needs peace and stability.

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NEPAL

What the Left can right

PITAMBER SHARMA

FROM relatively small beginnings on 13 February, 1996, the Maoist "People's War" has, to use their own phrase, "moved from peak to peak". The Maoists have marked this achievement by christening their revolution the "Prachanda Path", and the government by the formation of an armed police force. For the first time in the last half a century "development" is gradually being pushed to the back seat. In a very unexpected way, the Maoists have provided the most telling critique of the relevance of the mode and meaning of "development" practised in Nepal over the past decades.

The People's War is Nepal's first home-grown insurrection with an explicit ideology and a pan-Nepali coverage. Over the past five years the Maoists have built an impressive, functionally efficient network of decentralised area-based guerrilla organisations capable of mobilising hundreds of youth at the local level. These organisations appear to be built on the base of poor peasants and the occupational caste groups, something no political organisation in Nepal had attempted at such a scale before. The mass of aspiring, partially educated and unemployed youth have been the breeding ground for Maoist recruits. The strength of the Maoists has been the historic weakness of the Nepali state. They have capitalised on centuries of isolation and underdevelopment of the remoter regions. Ideological cooption, extortion, loot, and appeasement of the peasantry have all been used to good effect to mobilise local financial and combative resources to allow them to procure arms and ammunition from outside Nepal and maintain a reliable cadre base. The brutal strategy "liquidation" of "informers" and other "dubious" elements has in the short term nullified the danger of subversion from within. The logistical capability of the Maoists in terms of propaganda, recruitment, training, deployment (both for combat purposes and for propaganda) and "hiding within the masses" has, by all accounts, been remarkably effective. Whether the Maoist force can continue doing so in the event of an all-out war declared by the state is really a moot question.

The Maoist leadership has its share of problems. A decentralised command structure can breed local "strongmen" particularly when ideological conscientisation, political and financial accountability, and reconstructive development at the local level remain weak. Maoists also

appear to be plagued with problems of organisational, tactical and politico-strategic nature. But the fact is that the central government bureaucracy appears to be losing its tenuous hold on the Nepali countryside. If there were an election in the near future it is doubtful whether full (not to talk of fair) elections could be held in the Maoist-affected districts.

The Maoist People's War has radically altered the balance of political power within Nepal, and by implication, called into question the entire political and economic development strategy of the country. The issue is not whether the Maoists will prevail, the issue is whether the questions of equity and social justice, of access to resources and opportunities for better livelihoods that they have raised can continue to be ignored. One may disagree with the Maoist methods of "revolution", but it is hard to disagree with the legitimacy of the questions that have been raised. The on-going squabble and stalemate in the national legislature makes an interesting, and indeed ironic contrast to the larger ramifications of the Maoist People's War for the prevailing political, economic and social status quo in Nepal.

The government's response to the Maoist insurgency, instead of bringing a paradigm shift in development thinking, political, economic and social has not been serious, not constructive, and not innovative. The debate the Maoist People's War should have initiated within ruling circles has unfortunately been limited to the search for a symptomatic rather than a systemic treatment of the issue. The violence and terror perpetrated by Maoists as well as the government forces need to be deplored and all effort needs to be made to end it. But the "quiet and sustained violence" endured by Nepalis because of degrading poverty, of inhuman corruption of political, social and economic exclusion and exploitation also needs to be addressed.

The creation of the armed police force signifies a fumbling resolve to meet force by force. This can only lead to the perpetration of violence at a much larger and intensified scale. It conveniently sidesteps the central issue of the need for a deeper structural change in the body politic. There is political procrastination and bankruptcy in economic policies and programmes. This is hardly surprising in a government wedded to market reforms, indiscriminate liberalisation, and "mobilisation" and "empowerment" of communities under the "benign" watchful eyes and guiding hands of the donors; the Maoist insur-

gency is simply a meaningless irritant in the otherwise smooth road to capitalist "development". Clearly, even the mindset to deal with the crisis is absent.

Unfortunately, it is the response of the moderate left to the Maoist People's War that has been the most enigmatic. They have consistently called for "structural changes in the political and economic system", and, at least in theory, the left has remained vocal in the struggle for a society free of exploitation, and in championing the cause of the underclass, the poor, the deprived and the dispossessed. "Societal transformation" has been their main ideological plank. They want Nepali nationalism strengthened to withstand the onslaught of "Indian expansionism". But all these points are central also to the Maoist agenda, and one would have expected a fitting response to Maoist extremism from the political left, a response that would go beyond the rhetoric, and outline an alternative political and economic agenda and actions to achieve those ends. Instead, the left political parties have proved to be dumb, confused spectators caught between friend and foe.

If any political formation in Nepal has the capability to pull the carpet from under the feet of the Maoists, it is the organised left with its roots in civil society. That capability has to derive from a clear understanding of the possibilities of structural change within a democratic system. Such a political, economic and social agenda and programme would provide the basis for political action both within and outside parliament. This would, of course, demand a return to a politics based on ideology, a commodity rare in Nepali left politics today.

The Maoist People's War has fundamentally questioned the credibility of Nepal's mainstream left. It is doubtful whether a dialogue devoid of an economic and political agenda would really contribute much to the resolution of the Maoist insurrection, and it would be up to the left political parties to make a singular contribution by negotiating such an agenda, and bringing the nation back from the brink of a civil war in which there would be no winners.

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BANGLADESH

The sweet-sour "sigh of relief"

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

IT all happened during the Eid holidays. When everything was virtually closed, silver lining emerged in the otherwise instable political scenario in the country. "Instable" because recent cases of violence and the war of words centring several incidents just ahead of the coming general elections queered the pitch of a healthy election year. Besides there existed yawning gap in the positions of the government and the opposition on the fundamental issue of the timing of the polls. The government wanted to remain in power till the last day it is permissible under the constitution which is July 12.

While the prime minister was never so emphatic that the government would continue to enjoy power till the last day, some ministers were certainly over-enthusiastic about it. In fact, the prime minister said she had planned to go for polls much before the schedule - even as early as late 2000. But her calls in this regard fell in the deaf ears of the opposition. In any case, she kept on saying that voting will take place "on schedule" which meant she kept her options somewhat "open" since a difference by a few months would not mean that the polls were not held on schedule.

On the other hand, the mainstream opposition has been clamouring for fresh polls for a long time. They were demanding resignation of the government, which quite expectedly was not heeded to by

the party in power. Then things started getting intense this year. Since democracy in a way still remains in a nascent stage in Bangladesh, people seem to be prone to discussions on developments that may scuttle the normal democratic procedures like the holding of the general elections under normal conditions. Cynicism prevails about the holding of the polls in certain quarters. Most believe that elections would be the usual milieu of our political pattern and the polls this year will decide on a new government - whether the incumbent party returns or the opposition captures power. Once again there are talks like the popularity of the ruling party and the problems within the four-party alliance on several issues like seat adjustments if they succeed in maintaining the unity till the polls.

But main issue that dominated the speculations in the political, diplomatic and other circles in Bangladesh is the time of the election. Is it after the government completes its full term or little early? "Little" because in any case the government has already completed 56 of the 60 months mandated to remain in power. The government some time back gave impression that it is keen to stay till the last day because it wanted opposition's threat as hollow. For its part, the opposition kept their pot boiling by calling agitational programmes. It could not make much dent but there is no slackening in its drive. This situation heightened tensions making the time of elections

unclear. Politics of confrontation loomed large. Rather unexpectedly a picture emerged during the Eid holiday. Before the holidays began, the prime minister hinted that she is totally flexible on poll dates and went to the extent saying that any time suggested by the main leader of the opposition is acceptable. She even said that leader of the opposition need not make this announcement in parliament as suggested by the prime minister before and added that the announcement may come from any place.

When the prime minister was in Saudi Arabia, the opposition leader met the ceremonial non-partisan head of the country and asked for elections by May. The prime minister responded within 48 hours, saying her party is ready for polls by June 12. Suddenly, political scene was enlivened and people began getting a picture of the time schedule for the voting.

The prime minister came back from Saudi Arabia and repeated what she said from Medina. The opposition leader, away in China on an official trip, also kept on reacting to the political developments. But bottom line is that both are now closer than ever on the timing of the polls. Meanwhile, many speculations are galore like disagreements within the four-party alliance on some issues. Eagerness by some ministers to remain in power as long as possible has not been overlooked by the interested circles. This is exactly the situation that the country is now passing through. People are convinced that elections

are round the corner. There are smaller issues which appear to threaten the healthy pitch of the polls, as both sides often come out with statements fraught with provocation. The chief election commissioner expressed optimism by saying that it is possible to hold the elections by middle of June. The stage seems more or less set for the polls now. However, insistence by the opposition that elections must take place by May or indications that the government may delay handing over power to caretaker government than expected is not contributing to the silver lining that has emerged in the political horizon. Both sides need to demonstrate rationale approach to create the road to smooth holding of the polls.

Certainly, the prime minister and the leader of the opposition in recent days have shown political wisdom and maturity. They must live up to the expectations ignoring smaller groups within the respective parties preferring hard-line approach or over-enthusiastic attitudes. All actions and statements must be based on reasoning so that the nation gets the elections in a free and fair atmosphere. The "sigh of relief" must not turn sour since people abjure unhealthy politics and violence. They do not need to keep their fingers crossed but look forward firmly on a positive note that ensures impartial polls under the admirable concept of non-partisan interim government.

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INDO-PAK

Back to Track II

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AN informal diplomacy on sensitive bilateral issues by men enjoying the confidence of the establishment had been in vogue for sometime in South Asia. The culture grew surprisingly fast during the '80s and kept gaining momentum till the regional rivals went into fresh estrangements following their nuclear tests in 1998. India always had credible sets of track II players in its vast academic community comprised of scholars, bureaucrats, diplomats, military brass and so on. Pakistan also did not lag behind in having deft interlocutors for behind-the-scene diplomacy which, of late, became almost a norm to head off crisis usually pertaining to border violations, Kashmir or nuclear issue. Indeed, a large number of academics, former diplomats or retired generals kept themselves engaged in ironing out differences of views, offering multiple choices for crisis management and building confidence among the neighbours, not without success.

The practice came to an abrupt halt when both India and Pakistan exploded their nuclear devices giving a new meaning to their decades-old hostility. Although it could be revived for a while after Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee's bus journey to Lahore in early 1999, the process suffered fresh setback with the outbreak of Kargil war. It virtually took a nosedive with the accession of General Pervez

Musharraf, believed in India to be the mastermind behind Kargil, to power in Pakistan. As a result, a weird situation prevailed in their relationship when none wanted to talk to each other either formally or informally. India said it had nothing to do with Pakistan's military regime. And General Musharraf thought that he also couldn't care less.

The year 2001 seems to have dawned on a note of new beginning. Not only is there a peace initiative in evidence, a multi-channel effort is gushing forth to bring about a thaw in the relationship. While the state-level gesture, such as reciprocal measures to foster détente in Kashmir have been marked by ups and downs, the track II initiatives have assumed renewed importance. Several such moves are already underway both in Kashmir as well as in Delhi and Islamabad. While the PMO (Prime Minister's Office) at Delhi headed by redoubtable Brajesh Misra may still be toying with much publicised formula of Niaz Naik, R K Mira, Prime Minister Vajpayee's envoy is engaged in a deal to be cut with the APHC in Kashmir. In the meantime, there has been a new alacrity in track II diplomacy between Delhi and Islamabad.

A newly founded Policy Research Institute in Islamabad took the lead in reaching out to Delhi's Policy Group headed by India's former foreign secretary K S Bajpai. While the Nimrana process has been resumed in a low key, the

activism of Policy Research Institute gained some momentum when its delegation visited New Delhi in August last and held talks with its Policy Group. The focus was on nuclear restraint and risk reduction.

It however, turned out to be a milestone event when Delhi's Policy Group returned the visit from January 12 to 16 January this year and held series of meetings with scholars and experts in Islamabad. The Indian delegation was indeed a 'rainbow collection' and included such heavyweights as K S Bajpai and General Raghavan, both from Delhi's Policy Group, apart from Air Chief Marshal S K Mehra, India's former Air Chief, J N Dixit, India's former foreign secretary, Admiral K R Menon, India's former chief of Naval operation and author of the book 'India's Nuclear Strategy' and Professor Matin Zuberi of the department of disarmament studies at JNU. Air Chief Marshal Mehra and Prof Zuberi are also the members of India's prestigious National Security Advisory Council.

The delegation had wide interaction in Islamabad. It held seminars at Quid-e-Azam University and Policy Research Institute and took part in a largely attended public seminar at an Islamabad hotel. Its members called on the Foreign Office and were received by the foreign minister. The exchanges in Islamabad in January last marked the return of both India and Pakistan to the process of confidence between the two countries after their

nuclear test in May 1998. Although the documents signed at Lahore in February 1999 during the visit of Prime Minister Vajpayee had included a memorandum of understanding on measures for risk reduction and confidence building the whole process was put in the backburner in the wake of Kargil war. Therefore this track II initiative has practically brought those undertakings for the first time to the fore.

The detailed discussions in the seminars which were participated by large numbers of local scholars amply focussed on the ways in which the risks of the conflict could be reduced and restraint maintained. The discourse was conducted with frankness and a sense of realism. It was felt that the bilateral agreements already reached such as the Simla Accord, the Lahore declaration and the accompanying MoU provided an adequate framework on which to build the structure of risk reduction.

While an ideal solution envisages the early resolution of political disputes, that may be a far cry in present politico-strategic milieu. In the meantime, the prevention of a nuclear holocaust is an overwhelming imperative. To an extent, the Islamabad meetings have been able to address at least the elementaries of that gigantic problem.

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When will we budget for education?

SUKANTA CHAUDHURI

WHAT does the Union Budget have to do with education? Every year, the Budget reports bristle with reactions from captains of commerce and industry.

The counterweight is provided by Opposition politicians, and the human touch by housewives and street traders. We seldom hear the opinion of teachers, doctors, public servants or social scientists other than economists.

This is to take a remarkably narrow view of "the economy" as something distinct from common life and well-being. Every year, critics of the Budget seem to target precisely this flaw but never quite spell it out. Moreover, they usually have a political axe to grind.

They might profess a concern for the public weal, grassroots security and quality of life rather than the balance sheets of companies and governments; but they stand discredited by their suspect motives also, more often than not, by their own failure to dispense these blessings in earlier times, when their

humane ideology was officially unassailable.

With such friends of welfare doctrines, who needs enemies? These days, no apology is needed for a markedly pro-capital Budget intent on capturing the Australized market constituted by the Indian middle class, without those counterweighting proposals for education, public health or drinking water witnessed two years ago.

The beneficiaries of such schemes would constitute a yet bigger market, and the enlightened workforce that alone could feed such market. There is nothing to suggest that either our rulers or our men of wealth look so far ahead. We are dead to the sheer economic folly of nursing a population that is one-third illiterate, where millions of potential workers and consumers go blind every year for lack of a pinch of vitamins - or the best source for such vitamins, a nutritious diet.

It is one thing for the state to sell off its airlines, steel plants and bakeries. Had it done so 20 years earlier, we would have had many thousand of crores for direct investment in social uplift. (The boost to

the nation's work ethic at the demise of the public sector would have been unimaginable.)

It is quite another thing to expose education and public health to a market economy. The current cant on the latter score has reached a point where public servants can buttress their traditional non-performance with the new ideology.

Where no business interest is involved, the present government is content to act like its predecessors. Last year, Rs 458 crores of capital grants for primary education, almost one-seventh the total allocation, remained unspent.

This year's Budget makes four promises about education. One is the extension of technological education through private investment, with tax relief as incentive. Another is the expansion of computer education in schools.

These schemes scarcely break new ground. The third, broached by the minister with a moving personal reference, grants education loans on marginally easy terms. This may bring some relief to the middle class; as a proposal to bring education to the poor, it is so frivolous as to be derisory.

Any college entrant who can enter a bank and extract a loan of a few lakhs is, on final analysis, a privileged citizen. The gulf between that student and the child shut out from primary school remains as unbridgeable as ever.

Such loans might as well be said to benefit the man in the moon. In practice, they will largely profit our superprivileged class. Their offspring will pocket the money, go abroad and stay there, unblushingly adding to the bad debts of nationalised banks.

VIEW FROM KOLKATA

The only proposal with rich potential is the fourth (actually the first as listed), to combine all existing schemes for elementary education into a single nationwide scheme. The problem is, no funds seem to have been marked for this vast and noble scheme.

The total expenditure on human resource development which includes selectively lavish provision for arts and culture, as well as

sports, child welfare, women's affairs etc., has gone up by just Rs 660 crores, or 10 per cent.

This scheme may fare no better than the National Literacy Mission the only national mission to be run by voluntary labour on a shoestring allocation per head. We should not tax the Literacy Mission for not achieving more: the miracle is that it has achieved something.

Let me now present the other side of the coin. The only substantial Union funding for primary education has come under Operation

Blackboard. In West Bengal, whose ruling ideology should favour grassroots social infrastructure, the first round of grants remained unspent when many other states were utilising the second.

The recent election manifesto of the state's Left Front promises universal primary education in the next five years. To make good this promise, we must reverse the trend of the last

few years, when no new state-funded schools have been set up; when children cannot attend middle school because such schools simply don't exist where they live; when a good proportion of primary schools still operate with one teacher or none out of one room or none; and when in secondary state-funded schools, the teacher-student ratio has been doubled to an appalling 1:80 or more.

Faced with this situation, the state has abdicated its responsibility for new schools and new teachers. These will now be provided, if at all, by local panchayats, employing teachers with lower qualifications on temporary contract at the princely sum of Rs 1000 a month.

One could not have done better if one set out on purpose to devise an egregiously class-ridden state school system, to supplement the entrenched difference between fee-paying and state-run schools in the first place.

A recent directive consigns all new colleges into the same financial and administrative vacuum: they will employ unviably few teachers, again on part-time contract basis, while charging students up to liter-

ally 100 times more fees.

New courses in existing centres will be similarly run and funded, though academically on the same footing as older departments with large fully-salaried staff and paltry fees.

From the opposite end of the political spectrum, this scenario has been fully imposed on certain other states. There, most colleges are privately run. Contrary to popular impression, they do not pay their teachers more often far less, and on unfair and humiliating terms.

Vast sums are collected by way of capitation fees. A handful of institutions use the money well and provide admirable facilities; very many siphon off the funds, sometimes simply defrauding their clientele. Owing to an exacting work culture, shading off into virtual authoritarianism, many of these places provide a reasonably competent training within their limited scope; many others, equally, do not.

In these other states, however, such a set-up is declared and planned for. In Bengal, it is springing up by default: the authorities are officially generating it, yet they will not politically own to it or bring about concomitant changes in the system

as a whole.

They will not work out a rational and consistent fee tariff, staffing pattern or infrastructure for all the institutions, but create a thing of shreds and patches. They would eat their political and financial cakes, yet have them both.

No state in the country has a planned, balanced educational structure. Some have achieved a fairly stable, formally productive system, even if enshrining serious inequalities and, more often than not, eschewing truly serious academic endeavour.

Other states cannot ensure the bedrock elementary education that would empower even half its children with the means to a fulfilling life at whatever level. I would place my own state betwixt and between. We should distrust any act or edict that lets economic competition invade the realm of common support and security. We should particularly abhor a dispensation where this mindset seeks unholy wedlock with the sordid uncompetitive dictatorship of the petty ruling class. No brave new world was ever born this way.

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