

NEPAL

Maoists in Shangri-La

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

THE doors are closed but maybe they are working inside. Big offices are scared of the Maobadis." Only six months back the taxi drivers of Kathmandu rarely talked politics but things have changed and dramatically. People react to the word with both hope and fear. And confusion too. Who are they? Some say they are "angry shadows" but the death tolls and the fact that almost half of the country is under Maoist control are hard facts of Nepali life.

The Maoists are on the verge of ensuring that governing Nepal is almost impossible unless they have a role, either as partners or more audaciously as the guys in charge. They are literally knocking at the Kathmandu Valley gates demanding to be let in into the valley of state power. September 21 has become the symbol of that entire phenomenon. On that day, the Maoists will hold a rally in the city itself near the Open Air Theatre ground. This will be what may truly be called a "Show-down".

The present Nepalese Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba is a veteran of "peace talks" with the Maoists in his own and previous governments. Deuba is considered a moderate but he is dealing with a situation nobody is sure who controls. The Maoists have also effectively taken advantage of the trauma caused by the Narayanhiti Palace massacre that killed the last and ushered in the present monarch. "Nothing like this had ever happened before in our history. We don't now how to deal with such incidents." The perplexity is still sitting in the voice of Deepak Shrestha, who runs a general store in the Patan part of the town. He sports short, middle-aged hair, a reminder of the mourning days when he shaved his head as part of ritual grief.

Whatever certainty the shadows of the awesome Himalayas are swallowed by the relentless jaws of gory realities, especially violent deaths - royal deaths, commoners dying in insurgency crossfire, policemen dying defending the state and Maoists dying in the pursuit of their red dawn.

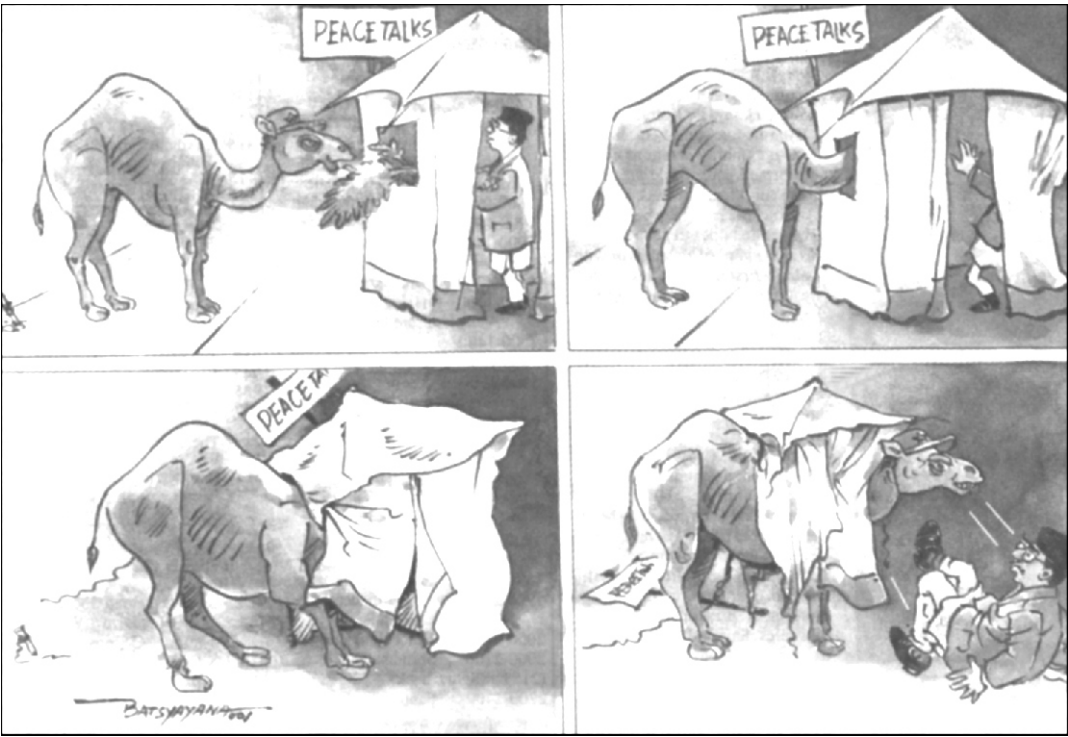
Reforms cause pain

On September 5, the PM Deuba tabled the Land Reforms Bill, a landmark in Nepalese politics as it proposed limiting both rural and urban land ceilings. The conservative parties walked out but all realised that unless the bill was granted the respect it claimed, the Maoist thunder was likely to swallow much of the existing rhetoric. Asset Ceiling Bill is coming next many say and one of the most sensitive and personal issues for a Nepali, the right to have a drink and then another. The Nepalese are still drinking and buying liquor from corner shops but the message is clear. Even liquor is under preview. It's a huge social and political message.

But social reform has a political cost. This talk in Kathmandu's upmarket watering holes points to a conflict. "I will be happy to give away my useless Terai (plains on the Indian border) lands. But will Deuba give up his house in Kathmandu. Why not at least a couple of floors?" He was a member of the official party but the pain of land loss is obvious. But the debate has a wider implication. Bishal Bahadur Tamang, a hill migrant living in Kathmandu, says, "At least the rich of Nepal are no longer so complacent. Suddenly they aren't feeling so safe."

And the Maoists have tapped into this vein of resentment. The inequities of the Nepalese society so visible fuel this politics. The discrepancies between the great wealth of a few including those linked to the palace, the powerful Rana clan linked to royalty and business and the post-democracy elite networks versus the poor of many shades have sparked conflict.

"The Nepali ruling classes confidence was shattered by the Royal massacre. It was so unexpected that the platform of certainty on which every ruling groups rests has been shattered." Prittee works for an international NGO but she will be leaving Kathmandu soon for work abroad. If the Royal family can kill each other, anything can happen, she feels like so many others. And this has given rise to the quiet panic. Many children are being sent abroad and capital is flying to distant sanctuaries. Nepali Times, Kathmandu's leading English weekly in one of its



columns is emphatic. "The uncontrolled situation of the past week may be a harbinger of the days to come, when no one is in charge and citizens are left to fend for themselves."

Hotel doormen, peace scholars and crack-downs

Tourism has been a serious casualty. The Indian airlines hijack, the royal palace massacre and the Maoist threat have made the sector yelp in pain. Hotels are offering unheard of concessions and rooms with breakfast and dinners thrown in are common. Even Soaltsee Oberoi, the success symbol of Nepalese hospitality industry, is offering cut rate stays while the doormen's smile, gets more and more wan.

The tourism industry really has to care and on September 14, they even organised a peace rally. Is there a space for them in the history that is happening? Just ordinary people trying to make a living? The Maoist argues that wellbeing for all is also their agenda except that they want it stretched to all, including the famished ones. The ones who never got a chance they say, till they raised their red voice. Others disagree saying that Maoists too are like other politicians and once in power will steal like the present crop of elite.

I talked to a group of peace scholars and activists who had assembled in Kathmandu to discuss such issues. On a field trip to Sindupulchowk, an area penetrated by the Maoists, they met some of them. Clearly, the Maoists had come out looking and sounding good. Many of them had found the Maoists articulate and their message sensible. In the politically dead-end climate of South Asia, radicalism does often seem like a solution. Only most Nepalese in the session weren't so enthusiastic. "I come from one of the liberated zones. My parents are still there. I can tell you that it isn't so rosy. There is much repression and suffering. You have to understand Nepali society more deeply to understand what the Maoists are doing. And if that is a real solution or not." More silence and even more confusion.

The pressure to get tough on the Maoists is mounting and for the first time, the government has started to clamp down, albeit in a small selective way. Raids have been conducted and arrests made within the first weeks of September as the rally date loomed closer. Contribution or "toll collection" and holding "People's Tribunal" - courts run by Maoists dispensing swift "justice" - are facing resistance. And the army, mobilised to ensure peace while the government talks to the Maoists opened fire in Rolpa, a place close to where the talks were held. On September 9, police raided the office of the All Nepal National Independent Students Union-Revolutionary (ANNISU-R) - the Maoists student open front. The ANNISU-R protested that it was an attempt to disrupt the September 21 meeting.

Devendra Parajuli, as the secretary of the Central Mass Gathering Organisations Committee, is responsible for the rally. In an interview carried by the Kathmandu Post, he said that the rally was constitutional and they had no intention

of scuttling the peace talks. Expecting around 200 to 300,000 people, he added, "We have arms, hence will attend the programme but please be sure we will not come out with any ammunition... Rumours are widespread that the Maoists are going to gherao the Singha Durbar (Secretariat) and the Royal Palace. But these are rumours."

Revolution, foreign aid and daru

This is a real showdown. Even 50,000 armed Maoists will send a chill down the present power structure's spine and make most wonder whether Nepal's future sky will be royal crimson or Maoist red. Kanak Dixit, Editor of Himal Khabarpatrika feels that the problems of Nepal are structural and a mere change in leadership will achieve little. "It means redesigning the governing process and that includes the ethnic and caste structure. It means a vision beyond the political."

That is a common refrain. Mere Leftist leadership is hardly enough. In fact various Leftists parties do populate the parliament and for short stints, they have even run the government but now find themselves outpaced and slightly left out by the Maoists. The move for the various splinter groups to gather together has begun but no real commonality is noted. Only a crisis sparked by the Maoist rise created new allies out of old enemies.

Another assessment came from an anonymous long-time Nepal resident drinking a Bloody Mary at a deserted hotel bar. "The Maoist movement is actually coming to an end. They know that it's not possible to go beyond their present stage. They were zero power when over-ground. They went underground and become powerful and now want to come over-ground again. Then, they will have power that they never had when they went to the hills. If they participate in any elections, they will sweep to power especially if the opportunists Leftists support them. Everyone will give one chance to them."

But why won't they take the country to communism?

"Nepal can't survive without foreign aid and Indian support. And Comrade Prachanda (Dahal) the chief and Dr. Baburam Bhattarai the deputy are both smart enough to know that. They have openly met in Silguri so the Indians are tolerating them. Their families are in the States so the connection is clear. Should they come to power, things will change but not all that. This isn't the Chinese or the Bolshevik revolution. It's about rice and dal and daru."

And he took a long drink.

As we left him to his daru (liquor), it was clear that things were happening much beyond such simplistic equations and as it happens, one is never sure what is happening except that the times changing.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Daily Star staffer who has spent a long time in Nepal.

PAKISTAN

Afghan refugees in Pakistan

The Taliban authorities did little to meet displaced Afghans' humanitarian needs. Although members of the Taliban's Ministry of Martyrs and Refugees were active in the coordination of relief activities in most localities and sometimes helped provide security, they rarely contributed resources to the relief effort. The Taliban appeared to devote all of its available resources to its war effort while leaving humanitarian relief for its population affected by war and drought to the international community.

Sharif Atiqur Rahman

EVER since the terrorist attack on key US financial and military symbols, the whole world is expecting possible effects of this unprecedented event on the global scenario. From the most developed to the least developed countries all are busy in analysing the social, economic, political or military implications of this incident from their country perspectives. Amidst this, the issue that remains less discussed and less emphasised is the plight of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Pakistan was hosting 1.2 million Afghan refugees in different refugee camps, while another 800,000 unregistered Afghans were living mainly in the main cities of Pakistan Rawalpindi, Lahore and Karachi. Following the last week's terrorist attacks on the US, hordes of people have been leaving major cities in Afghanistan in fear of an expected US retaliatory strike. Before Pakistan has closed its border with Afghanistan, Pakistan faced another influx of Afghan refugees.

Conflict began in Afghanistan shortly after a communist government seized power in 1978. That sparked an exodus of Afghan refugees into Pakistan and Iran. The influx mushroomed after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. In the early 1980s, exiled Afghans launched an armed opposition to Soviet rule that turned Afghanistan into a major Cold War battleground. The US and its allies provided both military assistance and humanitarian aid to strongly Islamic opposition forces known as *mujahedin*. The conflict between the *mujahedin* and the Soviets continued throughout most of the 1980s and ended only after Moscow, under heavy domestic and international political pressure, agreed in 1988 to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. There were more than 3.25 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan at that time.

The Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989, but significant numbers of refugees did not return home until the *mujahedin* ousted the Soviet-installed *Najibullah* regime in 1992. More than 1.4 million Afghans repatriated that year. Repatriation slowed beginning in 1993 because of infighting among the various insurgent factions.

In subsequent years, infighting among the various *mujahedin* factions deterred many Afghans from repatriating, creating hundreds of thousands of new refugees and internally displaced people. In the mid-1990s, the radical Islamic *Taliban* faction gained momentum and seized control of southern Afghanistan and Kabul. In the late 1990s, opposition forces continued to battle the *Taliban* in north-eastern Afghanistan and other areas. By the end of 2000, through continued offensives, the *Taliban* gained control of more than 90 percent of

Afghanistan. The *Taliban* offensive displaced tens of thousands of people. In addition, the worst drought to hit Afghanistan in 30 years also contributed to forced migration. The refugee population in Pakistan swelled from a little above 1 million in 1994 to 2 million in 2000. Another approximately 1.6 million Afghan refugees were living in Iran, India, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Pakistan's Attitude Hardens

After receiving and hosting Afghan refugees for more than twenty

refugees between 1978 and the late 1980s; the government's belief that many of the Afghans who have entered Pakistan since mid-2000 are victims of drought, not refugees.

Pakistan's economy is under a variety of sanctions by various countries over the nuclear issue. Pakistan's current foreign debt amounts to US\$38 billion. In fact, Pakistan is living through one of the toughest times it has ever faced. Its resources cannot stretch any

find and provide food and shelter for what appeared to be thousands of Afghan refugees on the move out of Afghanistan and within the country. UNHCR has sent several experienced emergency managers to Pakistan, where emergency planning meetings are underway this week. UNHCR has more than 500 staff in Afghanistan and five key neighbouring countries Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

As an emergency measure, UNHCR has sent 2,000 tents to Quetta from its stocks in Peshawar. UNHCR has a total of 9,300 tents in stock in Pakistan, enough for more than 50,000 people. And it is attempting to tap whatever contingency stocks it has and is talking with international relief agencies, such as the Red Crescent. UNCHR is also evaluating existing stockpiles of relief items around the world, putting more staff on standby and taking all the other preparations necessary should this turn into a major refugee emergency. A Crisis Group has been formed involving the main UN agencies that will be working together should there be a major emergency.

If there is any further outbreak of violence in Afghanistan, Pakistan will definitely face with further refugee influx. Besides its political, law and order problems, Pakistan's economy will be in for another setback because of fresh influx of Afghan refugees fearing an US attack. Mass Afghan population movement to Pakistan is likely to place an overwhelming burden on the Pakistan authorities and aid agencies.

The *Taliban* authorities did little to meet displaced Afghans' humanitarian needs. Although members of the *Taliban*'s Ministry of Martyrs and Refugees were active in the coordination of relief activities in most localities and sometimes helped provide security, they rarely contributed resources to the relief effort. The *Taliban* appeared to devote all of its available resources to its war effort while leaving humanitarian relief for its population affected by war and drought to the international community.

The unstable situation in Afghanistan means that prospects of durable solutions for Afghan refugees are poor. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers stated referring to last week's tragic events in the US, "A convincing reaction to what happened is needed," but it is also "important to be aware of the plight of the Afghan people and give weight to the humanitarian sequences."

The author is a researcher. Views expressed here are author's own.

years, Pakistan has firmly pulled up the welcome mat. Government officials no longer recognize newly arriving Afghans as refugees and wants most long-term refugees to return home. This change in attitude, and subsequent actions by the Pakistani authorities, has caused widespread concern among Afghan refugees and has placed thousands of refugees at risk.

Pakistan officially closed its border to new Afghan refugees on November 2000. It said that it would permit entry only to Afghans with valid passports and visas (documents that refugees fleeing the *Taliban* would be unlikely to have). Pakistan did not, however, strictly enforce the border closure.

Although Pakistan's actions were not as grave as they could have been, they clearly represented a significant shift in its long-standing policy of welcoming, albeit reluctantly, Afghan refugees. The Pakistan government was labelling all new arrivals "illegal immigrants." It continued to refuse UNHCR permission to create new camps to accommodate arriving refugees, and it insisted that Afghan refugees must return home.

Government officials say that their change in attitude has been influenced by a number of factors:

- Pakistan's worsening economy, which they say makes it impossible for the government to continue assisting refugees;
- dwindling international financial support for the refugees, which officials say has burdened Pakistan;
- social problems that the Pakistan government says are caused or exacerbated by the refugees' presence;
- the ending, in 1988, of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, which caused the flight of most "long-term"

BANGLADESH

Election 2001: No more a festival

M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE general election, it is told, has always been a festival in a democratic polity. More so in a country like Bangladesh where democracy practically begins and ends with an election. It is only when the people can exercise choice in sending their representative to the parliament and participate in the formation of the government, even if indirectly. Left with a week for the election for eighth parliament those festivities are yet to be experienced. Instead an eerie sense of an impending danger grips the populace as a formidable phalanx of contestants are arrayed against each other for election 2001. They as well as their leaders have so far exchanged accusations, recriminations and threats which will be brought to a crescendo in next few days. Amidst those heats and hypes an anxious public would keep their finger crossed so that the final day passes off peacefully.

However, there are reasons for concerns. There were reasons for concerns even in the past the experience of which has seldom been savoury. But this time the seem to have touched the nerves of the people because nothing much is left in our electoral politics now except crude bout of black money, muscles power, terror and firearms. Ever since the caretaker government came into office in mid-July there seems a new spate of political violence involving all these tools of intimidation. Even the deployment of paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles could not tame the monster. A special Police-BDR joint drive to arrest the listed criminals has been of little avail. Most of the arrested criminals so far, it is alleged, were released from the court on bail with the pressure and patronization of the political parties.

In some sensitive areas, like Feni, a war-like situation prevails with an ex-MP leading his gangsters in a menacing posture. After a failed effort of restoring order there it is back to the shadowy criminals who are now absconding only to re-surface at an earliest opportunity.

With not much substance left in our politics the election, the only symbol of democracy for the common people, has now become an instrument for capturing seats by hook or by crook. By the next week the contestants will let loose their hidden powers in a desperate bid to win. What is there in it of festivity?

Fear stalks the countryside with not even a semblance of security available there as the country is seething today with no less than a quarter of a million of illegal weapons. They include sophisticated AK-47, G-3, M-16 automatic rifles and the likes. The special drive for their recovery launched by the caretaker government met with an abject failure. If the culprits preserved there for the whole duration of political governments why should they hand

them over to a short-term government? It is not for nothing that these weapons were acquired over the years. These are already in the field and likely to come into play by the next week, as the stage is set for holding the polls. These weapons will surely be used to scare away the unwanted voters, capturing the polling booths or simply wield them as a show of strength for impressing upon the electorate.

Even as the army is deployed it will be pitched against the gun-totting goons a proposition unbecoming for army's status. Then again the professional soldier will find them too elusive a target to combat. This is primarily the job of the police who are better accustomed to electoral crimes or crimes as a whole. The army can produce little more than shock effect for the criminals. But then danger remains for post-election violence when the army is withdrawn.

There will be winners in the election but nation, on the whole, is loser as the country's higher seats of learning remain shut for months. A fresh glow has descended on the campuses, particularly Dhaka University which was open for only 18 days after the caretaker government had been sworn in. Compared to other universities, crippled with violence and strikes, the case of the DU is most disheartening as it has chance of reopening earliest before the election day. Nobody knows if the uncertainty will not persist even after the election. The entire student community of the DU is held hostage to student organizations which are in fact, the extension of two major political parties. The leaders of both the political parties have little compunction in prolonging the crisis while their armed cadres in the garb of students are engaged in a never-ending struggle for dominance in the campuses. Can this sad spectacle be a source of festivity on the eve of the election?

The most dampening aspect of this election is however its zero-sum prospect. People know that the consequences will be the same irrespective of its outcome. It will be the repetition of the same poor performance, the replay of the same rhetoric and jargons and the continuation of same lawlessness, corruption, terrorism and administrative ineptitude whether the BNP wins or the Awami League returns to power. So this great democratic event does not either enthrall or inspire the common men howsoever much the media tries to build up an election atmosphere and the hired canvassers of the politicians chart their election slogans day in and day out.

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SRI LANKA

Let there be peace

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE GOVERNMENT OF PRESIDENT Chandrika Kumaratunga in Sri Lanka is seeking to revive the stalled peace process after a gap of more than three months. The government held a meeting with the Norwegian facilitators in Colombo last week. Foreign minister Laxman Kadirgamar had a meeting with John Westborg. Since the talks took place after the government succeeded in reaching an understanding with the Marxists in the parliament for support to the minority People's Alliance (PA) government, it appears that Chandrika's administration is attaching importance to the revival of the peace efforts. As the threat to the minority government has disappeared for the time-being unless unexpected fresh crisis arises, the government said it would now concentrate on chances of ending the civil-war with the militant Tamils who are demanding a separate homeland in the north of the island state.

Since early June this year, the peace moves took a back seat while the coalition government was reduced to a minority in the 225-member house through a series of defections. President Kumaratunga said several months back that her government was actively considering to enter Norwegian-backed talks with the Tamil insurgents for ending long-drawn civil war in her country. She told the nation in an address marking the 53rd anniversary of the independence that there was "somewhat favourable" response from the Tamil secessionists over the peace talks and the government

was prepared to utilise this "window of opportunity" for a settlement of the nearly two-decade long inter-cine war in Sri Lanka.

Her response at that time had come after Norwegian peace envoy Eric Solheim held talks with her in an effort to break the impasse. The war is continuing for more than 18 years with no sign that LTTE is going to achieve the objective or the government has been able to crush the militancy. It is a see-saw affair when the fortunes swing sides with the war situation.

The unending civil war has put the small but otherwise relatively prosperous nation in South Asian at a crossroads where it is fighting to maintain country's integrity and also political stability. President Kumaratunga won a second mandate as president last year and vowed to end the conflict either through military actions or peace efforts. She said the country cannot afford to live with a conflict of such a magnitude which has so far claimed more than 62,000 lives on the both sides.

The desperation in both sides has made occasional efforts for peace a futile exercise. There is no let up in the civil war as both government troops and the Tamils militants are claiming successes in the battles. The Tamils after losing their stronghold Jaffna to the government side in 1995 in the 18-year-old war, emerged with stunning success when they came close to recover it early this year. They took the strategic Elephant Pass and then moved towards main Jaffna but were halted by a reinforced government side. A stand-off persists in the area with

both sides occasionally claiming gaining grounds. But President Kumaratunga said that her forces are regaining in the area following setbacks suffered earlier.

Sri Lankan parliamentary elections took place in last October when the ruling PA retained its majority in the 225-member house but it succeeded in forming a government only after going into alliance with small parties including a Muslim political organisation which gave the government a deadline to settle the civil war or would withdraw support from the government. Smaller parties which helped form the government by the PA withdrew support some time ago reducing the government into minority in parliament. It was an embarrassing situation for the government. Finally, government signed an agreement with the Marxist Peoples Liberation Front, the third biggest group in parliament, in exchange of conditional support for one year. The group comprising Sinhalese and the leftists is largely against the peace moves and opposes giving concessions to the Tamil rebels.

Militant Tamils, who had so far shown scant interest to any settlement through dialogue, are also softening their attitude. They are not totally opposed to foreign mediation for a peace formula like the Norwegian efforts but keeping on insisting that nothing short of independence will satisfy them. However, this is only expected that both sides will stick to their known positions unless the stances are changed either in the negotiations or in the war front. The Tamils are attaching conditions like a cease-

fire by the government before any dialogue begins. The government was unwilling to announce such a cease-fire but after the talks with the Norwegian envoy, it showed readiness to consider such a possibility although there has been no commitment in this regard.

In view of the softening of the approaches by both the sides, it is plausible that the government and the political leadership of the Tamil rebels may enter into talks even though there are still obstacles on the line up to the dialogue. In the past whatever progress could be made towards peace talks was obliterated at the last stage due to positions adopted by both sides and one accused the other for the setback. This time too it appears that the Marxist group which signed accord with the government for support in the parliament may oppose the peace moves since it is against giving independence or major concessions to the Tamils. However, the government says that the accord would not stand on the peace efforts.

In any case, the revival of the peace process is a good sign and it may provide another opportunity for progress in the direction of a dialogue between the government and the militants. Both sides should demonstrate spirit of accommodation to facilitate the dialogue although the road to talks and positive outcome is bumpy. Two sides cannot afford to see that the lovely small but prosperous South Asian country bleeds till white.

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