DHAKA TUESDAY FEBRUARY 26, 2002

Historic opportunity for peace in Sri Lanka

Parties concerned better carefully steer the process to positive outcome

FTER nearly two decades of a separatist war in Sri Lanka waged by the LTTE against the majority Sinhalese establishment, a process of national reconciliation has begun in earnest. For the first time the prospect for peace looks real and achievable. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has signed a deal with the LTTE facilitated by the Norwegian peace mission reflecting a major headway in terms of resolution of one of the most intractable ethnic conflicts the world has ever known. The contracting parties have agreed to a ceasefire and continuation of talks until olive branch is spread across the island state.

What distinguishes the present deal between the LTTE and the government from the ceasefire agreements struck earlier on is obviously the emphasis being laid on political negotiation in place of militaristic or tactical approach to conflict resolution. President Kumaratunga since her ascension to power as the head of the People's Alliance Party tried out her devolution package with the LTTE but with little success.

Since this got entangled with military campaigns against the separatist Tamils in the north and the east the ethnocentric conflict grew virulent by the day.

At the same time, it must be stated that a war fatigue had set in across the board so that an undercurrent of a popular urge for peace was raring to surface at the right moment. And what proved propitious was that Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader of the Opposition United National Front (UNF) beat President Kumaratunga's ruling People's Alliance in the elections to win a majority in parliament. Since becoming the Prime Minister of the country on a platform of negotiated settlement of the Tamil question, Wickremesinghe has kept communicating with the LTTE through the Norwegian mission to blaze a peace trail. While Ranil's tenacity is praiseworthy that of the Norwegian peace mission for the last two years against stunning odds is even more so.

The gains achieved on the peace mission should not be allowed to fritter away through any inter-party stand-off between the UNF, led by Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and the People's Alliance headed by President Kumaratunga. Both the UNF and the PA are wholly Sinhalese parties. If they can weld a common position on negotiated settlement with the Tamils, it will be the most authentic approach to spreading an olive branch to the LTTE. However, the key to a durable peace deal being held by the LTTE we urge its leadership to seize the new opportunity for peace and forge it with the government with unwavering determination.

After 64,000 deaths, blighting of some sparkling social indicators of progress, a few billion dollar in lost tourist revenue, and an enormous stifling of the national talent for excellence in various fields, Sri Lankans across the board should be wizened to embrace peace and reconstruction. We, in the SAARC region, eagerly look forward to equilibrium returning to the troubled lives of our South Asian brethren.

Indian state elections verdict

Performance mattered more than ideology

HE elections in India indicate that the ruling BJP has experienced a relative setback and other parties have gained at its expense. Old foe Indian National Congress (INC) will probably form government in Uttranchal and Punjab where BJP or its ally ruled. The critical Uttar Pradesh has produced a hung parliament with at least three parties claiming major seat shares. But BJP has lost the top position to the Samjabadi Party (SP). However Bahujan Samajbadi Party, an unhappy ruling ally of BJP may form a coalition government there. But the electorate has judged the parties on the basis of performance and the war hysteria whipped up by the BJP hasn't worked. This appears to be the consensus of Indian political observers that economic performance, stability and a better law and order situation are the critical incentives if elections are to be won.

In Uttar Pradesh, it was also noticed that caste and communal groupings play a major role in electoral make-ups. One has to see if this becomes a stumbling block to effective political decision-making. However, in UP and Bihar the rise of the Yadavs in particular and numerous backward castes has been well documented. Both SP and BSP draw their prime support from these groupings.

Uttar Pradesh is also the state which is home to the "Ramjamnabhumi" issue and that issue is again resurfacing in earnest. Bharitiya Hindu Parishad (BHP)activists have declared that come what may they will go for construction of a temple at the demolished site although the Indian PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee has declared that the final decision will be handed down by the Court. In the wake of the electoral loss, one hopes that matters will not be complicated by elements wishing to take advantage of the situation with no party having a clear majority.

Public opinion is always more concerned about bread and butter issues and one wishes the politicians would learn this lesson. Indians have shown that they have a more mature democracy although contrary tendencies are also there. Politicians everywhere should learn what the people want and design their politics accordingly rather than hope to bring people to their own ideas, which have less to do with public

President Bush's Asian tour: Its significance



HARUN UR RASHID

HE dominant underlying feature of the US President's visit to Japan, South Korea and China appears to seek cooperation in its unfinished task of eradicating global terrorism. Although Taliban regime has been eliminated from Afghanistan, the fight against terrorism is not over because the Al-Queda network scattered over 60 countries appears to be under hibernation and may become active at any moment.

Added to this fight against terrorism, the President is anxious to sell his idea why he called Iran. Iraq and North Korea to constitute an "axis of evil". Many countries in Europe and Asia are not comfortable with the US stand in respect of these countries. South Korea's Nobel Laureate President Kim Dae-jung who relentlessly pursued "sunshine" policy of reconciliation towards communist regime of North Korea seemed to have been placed in an awkward position. His political and personal stake in bringing the North Korea's leader Kim Jong-il to South Korea has been seriously jeopardised.

The itinerary of the President seems to be perfect as he first went to the US's strongest ally in Asia, Japan, then to another ally, South Korea and finally to a nation which the US considers as a "strategic competitor", China.

The visits to these countries conveyed a strong message of virtues of free market economy, democracy and human rights. In case of Japan, President Bush encouraged Japan's Prime Minister

Japan as the dominant economic power in the region. In the existing world of competition and globalisation, a country's prospects depend increasingly on what it makes of the opportunities and challenges confronting that country. It seems that Japan is not able to exploit the present economic envi-

If past practice is any indication, Koizumi's ability to undertake reforms seems to have been diminand stick" policies towards North Korea were enunciated during the visit, it is doubtful whether North Korean leadership would respond positively to the US' proposal. North Koreans may compare Bush's mission to President Ronald Reagan's single-minded goal of eliminating communism from the globe.

Incidentally the President's tense visit to South Korea coincided with the long birth day party (60th birthday) of the North Korean leader

Russia and China do not wish to see American supremacy in an essentially "multi-polar" world.

Although China has earned praise from the US for its support of war on terrorism, it does not endorse alleged repression of Muslim Uighur activists in Xinjiang as a measure of counter-terrorism. Bush cannot ignore the alleged human rights abuses in China and the human rights issues separate the two nations. Furthermore China

breaking trip to China, President Bush hoped to extract a commitment from the Chinese that would have explicitly prohibited the export of military-sensitive equipment to nations that Washington regards as threats to international security. Media reports indicate that the President failed to reach agreement with the Chinese leaders on this issue. The two sides reportedly clashed over Taiwan. However for the time being

'national interests" propelled both the US and China to a policy of peaceful co-existence and dialogue. Both the nations need each other for economic interests. China happens to be a huge potential market for the merchandise from the US and so also the US market is for Chinese goods. China's hostility can complicate further North-South Korean issues and exacerbate nuclear arms race in the subcontinent.

During the visit, one may discern from the statements of President Bush that US policy towards North Korea and China continues to oscillate between toughness and sweetness. His robust advocacy of free market economy and human rights may not escape the notice of China and North Korea. The US is talking tough, partly because it has won the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan at the quickest possible time which very few imagined. Whether other countries like it or not the US will continue to call the shots

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh

BOTTOM LINE

One may discern from the statements of President Bush that US policy towards North Korea and China continues to oscillate between toughness and sweetness. His robust advocacy of free market economy and human rights may not escape the notice of China and North Korea. The US is talking tough, partly because it has won the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan at the quickest possible time which very few imagined.

Koizumi to undertake economic reforms and in South Korea and China he tried to soothe their concerns of the tough direction of the US foreign policy in Asia

Bush and Koizumi have known each other in other earlier meetings and are reported to be getting on well personally. Japan earned praise from the US for the dispatch of Japanese warships and tankers to the Indian Ocean. However the US President appeared to be concerned with Japanese weak economy. If the Japanese economy is flat or in a permanent recession, Japan's political and strategic role in the Far East will be seriously weakened, much to the discomfort of the US as "giant" China may replace

ished by the mishandling of a popular Foreign Minister Tanaka, daughter of a former Prime Minister, Media reports indicate that 60 per cent of the Japanese now think that Koizumi may not be able to carry out reforms as inertia has consistently plagued the task of reform. Some analysts say that the President's visit played into Koizumi's domestic agenda as the President supported reforms and expressed full confidence in Koizumi's ability to deal with the situation.

In Seoul, the President's visit was welcome with dampened spirit as his "axis of evil" phrase has seriously damaged the reconciliatory mood between South and North Koreas. Although "carrot Kim Jong-il. About 10,000 young people in Pyongyang staged what the North Korean media described as a gymnastic display "under the banner of armed-based policy". The official Press Agency in North Korea (KCNA) said that the display made an epic depiction of the revolutionary exploits of Kim Jong-il with his "army-centred politics for scores of

In China, it appears to be a different ball game for the US President. Chinese leaderships had warned in the past few weeks of "serious consequences" if the President took military action against Iraq. Beijing has voiced concerns about a re-emergence of US 'unilateralism' in the world. Both competitor" in the region. It seems in the eves of most of the US Congress. China has supplanted the former Soviet Union and they fear that a rising and assertive China may acquire military muscle to threaten US' strategic interests in the Far East. One best selling novel -- Dragon Strike -- seems to have captured the mood by depicting a future war between the two nations over South China Sea.

remains to the US a "strategic

Furthermore the US does not seem comfortable with China for sale of arms and other sensitive equipment to States in the "axis of evil". During a 30-hour working visit to Beijing marking the 30th anniversary of President Nixon's ground-

Ambassador to the UN, Geneva

Bringing government closer to the people

WAHIDUDDIN MAHMUD

RTICLE 9 of our Constitution, as amended in 1977, says: "The State shall encourage local government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers and women," Although there are now elected Union Parishads (UPs), and there are reserved seats in them for women, the spirit of the constitution in conceiving local government as the vehicle for genuine empowerment of people at the grassroots level is far from being realized. We seem to have unending debates about the structure of local government, such as in respect of the ideal number of its tiers, the role of MPs, the election procedures and the sources of funding and so on, but little in concrete has been done by the successive governments. In fact, we have less effective local government now than we used to have during the period of the British colonial rule.

It is therefore encouraging that the newly elected government has set up a cabinet committee to look into the matter of local government. At least it shows that the government is serious on the matter. The committee can draw up on the recommendations made by a number of previous committees and commissions as well as make use of the experience already gained from many past experiments in this field. It is equally encouraging that a civic initiative has been launched under the leadership of Professor Muhammad Yunus to articulate public opinion on this issue

It is generally agreed that, for genuine empowerment of local government, the local authorities must have more resources and more involvement in local development activities along with full control over their own finances and person-

nel. So far, they have been denied this by the central government. One concern is that the empowerment of local elected bodies will only shift the undesirable traits of our national-level politics to the local level. These bodies, instead of being truly representative, may only promote various kinds of brokerage and rent-seeking and even outright criminal gang-type activities that undermine poor people's access to needs and rights. The experience of the 1980s with the system of Upazila Parishads shows how corruption and patronage can engulf newly established local government institutions and how in the guise of supporting 'decentral-

such organisations and through other means, the strategy should be to promote over time direct community involvement in the management of public facilities and services and in the planning of local development projects. Some concerns have been raised, and rightly so, regarding the alleged involvement of NGOs in national-level politics. But no one would perhaps object to NGOs playing the role of public interest watchdogs at the grassroots level (in addition to their usual role of acting as service delivery agencies). In fact, they can be the catalytic agents for building communitybased organisations or can themselves act as such organisations in between him and the Upazila chairman. In theory, MPs should be mostly concerned with national policies and programs, and local councils with local matters for which they are responsible. In practice, the MPs have had always a role in the affairs of their respective constituencies, which calls for a realistic compromise. The root cause of this envisaged turf battle presumably lies in the fact that the control over the delivery of public services is viewed as a means of fostering patron-client relationships and thus creating vote banks. Much of the wastage in public resource management at the local level, such as the alleged large leakage of

know how the allocated funds are utilised. Needless to say, this will greatly help in improving the quality of service delivery. But such an arrangement will not be to the liking of political leaders who derive their power from clientilism or to the central government functionaries who benefit from lack of public accountability.

The inability of local government to deliver effective services is also due to many other institutional weaknesses. The existing UP councilors and their support staff lack the necessary management and financial skills, and awareness of the social and economic development potential of local communities.

Truly representative local government bodies are likely to be better positioned not only in

ensuring improved quality of service delivery (such as primary schooling, primary healthcare, sanitation, etc), but also in charging user fees according to ability to pay.

ization' new patterns of dependency can be promoted between the central government, the local elite and the rural poor.

Those risks are there. But if at all we are to set examples of accountable and representative governance, we have to start at the grassroots level. It is at the local levels that the general public directly feels the brunt of misgovernance and corruption whether in local courts, land record offices, police stations or primary health clinics. The misuse of public funds in the implementation of local projects directly affects community welfare. Efforts at strengthening the 'voice' of the general public in demanding better governance have therefore the best chance of success at the local community level.

The risks may be thus mitigated to some extent if a way can be found to better articulate the "voices of the poor", say, by encouraging community-based civic organisations to track the performance of the local bodies and hold them accountable a kind of 'social auditing'. By using

industries could use this motive

power for small mills and water

pumps; buying the discarded

engines at throwaway prices. The

pollution factor outside the cities for

isolated single use would be tolera-

ble for a couple of years. It is a pity i

50,000 engines have to be scrapped

at one-stroke.

interacting directly with local authorities on behalf of the poor. Another means of ensuring

accountability of local government is to find mechanisms for enhancing transparency and people's right to information. Displaying publicly at local site information about funds allocated to the local authorities, and for what purpose, can be a very effective means of ensuring transparency. In the case of projects under rural works programme, the project details (e.g. regarding the volume of work to be done, the area to be benefitted, the mandays of work involved, etc) are supposed to be displayed at the project office or site. But, now a days this is rarely done. Again, while local bodies should be given delegated control over their finances and the management of their staff, they must be made subject to clear rules and

In the current debate regarding the establishment of elected Upazila councils, one of the contentious issues is about the role of the MP and the envisaged tension

resources in the rural works programme, is the result of the above system. It also partly explains many weaknesses in the implementation local development projects. For example, disproportionately more funds are allegedly allocated for constructing new local roads rather than for the maintenance of the existing ones; the former is perceived as public service rendered by the local MP while the latter as only the routine work of the concerned government agencies. Once the local bodies can be

made more responsive to the felt needs of the common people through greater community participation, representation and empowerment, the scope for the above kind of turf battle will be greatly reduced The elected leaders, whether MPs or Upazila chairmen, will not be then seen to be distributing spoils and privileges among their respective clientele. People will then demand services as a matter of right through their participation, say, in parents' associations or healthcare users' committees. They will like to

organisations like Khan Foundation have done commendable work in imparting training to UP councilors. There is also a great physical and psychological distance between the lowest administrative level where professional government services are found (generally at the thana headquarters) and the village community where the needs exist. The NGOs can ideally fill this institutional vacuum by creating a threeway link among UPs, the government service agencies and the NGOs themselves. At present, however, because of their shortage of resources and limited scope of activity, UPs lack the capacity to collaborate effectively with NGOs.

In the recent years, however,

The sources of raising funds by the local government agencies are very limited. Nonetheless, there is room for resource mobilisation by ncreasing fees collected at the bazaars and from businesses, and by leasing Khas land and water bodies. New sources of funds will be linked with the envisaged expanded role of local government. If local

planned and implemented by local government bodies, then a substantial chunk of the spending under the Annual Development Plan will have to be put at their disposal. Besides being in a position to achieve improved project implementation by ensuring beneficiary participation, local government bodies may also be better able to charge fees from project beneficiaries. In fact, the willingness of beneficiaries to pay charges can itself be a test of worthiness of the projects Similarly, truly representative

development projects are to be

local government bodies are likely to be better positioned not only in ensuring improved quality of service delivery (such as primary schooling, primary healthcare, sanitation, etc), but also in charging user fees according to ability to pay. Household expenditure surveys of rural households show that these households spend substantial sums of money on both healthcare and education, but the distribution of such spending is highly unequal among income groups. This shows that, in the provision of public services, there is scope of at least some cost recovery in an equitable way, provided fees can be charged discriminatingly based on household income. Community participation, preferably through local government involvement, is essential for such a scheme to work.

Lastly, there is no reason why, like NGOs, local government bodies cannot be eligible for direct donor funding. This will create a healthy competition among these bodies. and also between them and NGOs, in proving their aid worthiness. The idea is certainly worth a try, at least on an experimental basis.

Wahiduddin Mahmud is Professor of Economics, University of Dhaka. The article is based on his comments made at the Round Table Conference entitled "Ensuring Local Governance at Grassroots Level" organised by Khan Foundation, February 17, 2002.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDIT

Calling a spade a

The Finance Minister talks in real term. Perhaps this is so because he is more of a technocrat than a politician. He speaks from experience of having held this post a record numher of times. He thinks that 50 per cent of the government servants are surplus to run the government (including the loss-making SOEs). The system loss in the civil service is

too high, and the human efficiency is too low, as less number of persons can manage the present workload. The government should not do business (and incur losses year after year), but act as a facilitator and regulator to ensure that market competition is maintained in a healthy manner, without political interference and nepotism. The WTO is not conducive to state busi-

Dhaka

spade

Some questions What's wrong with remaining in 'power' as the opposition for five years and serve the public interest and check the services of the regime? The house is a neutral place, according to the speaker, and an official platform for airing public arievances

How come this hartal culture

continuing for ten long years? What's wrong with the politicians, and what is right with the voters? Who will reform the political culture if not the politicians? Do they wish for outside volvement and interference?

Why is the image of political leadership is so low in Dhaka? Why don't the two ladies bury their egos and work mutually? This personality cult has become a national bug, and the sycophants simply love it carrying the pedestal on their shoulders. y are our leaders so dependent on their followers? Get out of the vicious circle and destroy the negative structures built up inside the minds. Today we are hostages to poor leadership, and the critics are looking the other way.

Abul M Ahmad

Shopping bag-- free The manufacturers and distributors

of consumer goods have a unique opportunity to boost their advertisement by giving away free of charge as a gift, different sizes of bags (with hand straps) with the products.

The shoppers would carry it for them free of charge to homes and different locations. This is the cheapest way to make the ads travel and the consumers happy.

Dhaka

2-stroke phase out

The disposal of the 2-stroke engine



Going, going and going on...?

vehicles would be easier if some second-hand market can be found for acceptable, stationary (not mobile) open, outdoor use outside limits, during its remaining short lifetime of a couple of years. May be small cottage and small

The exchange proposals should be viable enough to break down the mental resistance to violate the regulations. Nobody is mentioning if there is a helpful role, which can be played by the former huge machine tool factory which, is now operating under the defence wing. Why import each and every item when we can make some components here?

Maulana Sayeedi's secularism

Maulana Sayeedi gave a Fatwa stating secularism as kufri. Where did he get this idea? Is it mentioned in the Holy Quran or in the Hadit? If it is not anywhere of these two, then I must say that he is misguiding the nation in the name of Islam.

Maulana Saveedi must have heard the speech of Pakistani Presi dent General Pervez Musharraf, Our government should also discourage the so-called Islamic fanatism and communalism. Islam is the religion of tolerance, the religion of all ages Due to misleading and exaggerated fatwas, the Muslims all over the world have become the suspects of all the

Prophet (SM) practised coexistence. He made treaties with others. The Surah Ka'feru cleaerly states 'La'kum Dini'kum Walia'din meanting 'your religion is yours and mine is mine'. Secularism only allows the spirit of what is described in the Surah. Bangladesh is an example of religious harmony. A handful of extremists should not be allowed to mislead our innocent people.

The question of reforming the Madrasa education in the country has become a general demand. The learned High Court Judges who declared Fatwa as acts of some illiterate maulvis and questioned their source of education should give their verdict in this matter as well. We should also look into the matter and bring necessary changes in our Madrasa education. People should be taught real Islam.

Shafiqul Islam Dhaka

"English as second language" In his letter (February 18) Mr. Akbar

Hussain has attributed the "lower quality of education in Bangladesh is directly responsible to the Bengali medium education system". His conclusion is totally wrong and misleadina

The need for learning English as a second language should be emphasised but not over emphasised. Every one should learn English because English is the lingua franca of the global village. It is also the primary language of contemporary science and technology. Therefore maintaining a high standard of learning English is crucial to our economic competitiveness

However, we should not mix up quality of education with one's competence in English. The languages are the vehicles with which we com-municate. The subject matters, concepts, and the skills that we learn in our schools using these tools are more important than the tools with which we learn.

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

We can't separate the "form" and "content". But we should remember that the contents are more important than the forms. It has been internationally recognised that the young children in particular and students in general learn most effectively in their own mother tongue, without the barrier of a second language. Making English (or any foreign language including Arabic) mandatory at the early childhood level would impede creativity in our children and the nation will ultimately suffer.

There are more than 200,000 Bangladeshis in USA. Very few of them have problem in finding job because of their poor English skills. The main obstacle in finding a good job for the new immigrants from Bangladesh in USA is that they don't have the required technical skills in demand. Understandably, a person with Masters and Bachelors degrees in subjects like history, political science and economics or sociology will not get a professional job in their respective fields without further training even if he/she has a excellent command in both spoken and written English. I have seen a few Bangladeshis in USA who have gotten excellent job offers within a veek after their arrival because of their excellent training in math and computer programming even if their nglish skills were poor.

Indian immigrants do much better than ours, only because the Indian universities produce world-class engineers, scientists, doctors and managers.

At the end, I want to point out that for some of us who live abroad 'hidden Bangladesh bashing" has become a norm. These are not very conducive to our national progress We can contribute, only if we try to understand in depth, the problems that our nation is facing and seriously think of a solution unique to Bangla desh not on heresies or on extempore. We also have to understand the dynamics of our social change and the zigzag path our history, social and economic development

Abdul Jalil Pramanik Pearl River, USA