

SRI LANKA

Yankees against the LTTE?

EKRAM KABIR

May be it would, when the situation reaches a point of no-return. But there's a moot point as to whether Sri Lanka is really of any strategic importance to wage war against possible targets in Central Asia. For, America hardly does anything from which it would not gain anything. However, in any event, whether the US is actively involved or not, Indian and Pakistani airspace would be needed to fight a war in Sri Lanka; Colombo would have to be its operational headquarters.

More importantly, the Americans may be hesitating to include 'Hindu' India in the visible war project are very likely to reject the offer made by a 'Buddhist' Sri Lanka that worked itself up into a frenzy over the destruction of that cultural treasure the Bamiyan statues in Afghanistan. Again, it may not make any political sense for the US in its planned offensive as a combined onslaught on non-Islamic objects.

There is also the security factor. Sri Lanka is already a high-risk war zone. None of its military bases, airports, harbours and seacoasts are safe. The government in Colombo is not able to protect even its one and only international airport adjoining a full-fledged military installation. In such a situation, the security factor would be a major impediment for the Americans to wage war from Sri Lanka.

In fact the American desire would be that the Tigers should attack the them and then face annihilation. But will this work out, because this is year 2002 and not 1987. "K u m a r a t u n g a" and "Wikremesardene" are not Junius Jayewardene. And the US is not India, and the LTTE has recently displayed diplomatic finesse far superior to the days of the Indo-Lanka accord in the '80s. Therefore, the Americans may not need Sri Lanka to the extent of offending India and increasing its own security burden to fight Colombo's battle.

Moreover the current US position on the LTTE was clarified by US embassy spokesperson Stephen Holgate's recent comments. He made it clear that the US position on Sri Lanka, namely that the ethnic problem should be resolved through negotiations and not war, remains unchanged. He also drew a clear distinction between the LTTE and Al Qaeda on this account. The LTTE is not involved in unbridled terror, and has specific political demands and is not averse to negotiations.

Looking at it from all directions, fighting a war in the region would put a negative impact in the South Asian region. In this backdrop, it would be wise for the Americans to pressurise the LTTE to reach a negotiated settlement.

But when the US comes to the forefront, people in Sri Lanka as well as in South Asia would expect a difference regarding the entire episode. Will America play an active role in salvaging the situation and help the Sri Lankan government to save the country from being divided as it did in many places across the world? Will the US get directly involved in the Sri Lankan mess, fighting a war against the Tigers?

Ekram Kabir is the Senior Newsroom Editor in Ekushey Television Ltd, Dhaka.

BHUTAN

Towards better understanding

ALTHOUGH it is unfortunate that many of us need to visit an exhibition to get a glimpse of traditional Bhutanese lifestyle it is always a little moving to see the real developments taking place within our own society.

The RNR exhibition in Thimphu this week displayed some academic initiatives of young professionals and more of the practical experiences of our farmers. The mix offered several lessons for viewers, both young and old, traditional and modern, and left us with many questions.

As a stall established by the Agricultural Machinery Centre and a private importer sold equipment by the truckloads, the observer was forced to wonder why there was an acute dearth in the market if there was such a high demand. Farmers snapped up a variety of basic farming tools which were either imported or designed by AMC. It was obvious that standard tools could be made very effectively in Bhutan with small modifications. Yet we are left mostly with the low quality standard tools sold by our hardware stores, tools which are not designed for the Bhutanese terrain.

As farmers from different parts of the country exhibited very successful personal innovations we also wondered why they have not been widely picked up. Some of our farmers are displaying technological intuition which might embarrass qualified engineers. Yet they remain largely unrecognised.

The exhibition included some farmers who are already benefiting from the sale of vegetables and other cash crops, there were communities like the Monpas enthusiastically trying to improve their traditional products. There were ambitious plans drawn up by the research centres. If some of the agriculture and horticulture initiatives bear fruit, there could be a transformation of the Bhutanese diet and even our lifestyle.

This year's exhibition was particularly interesting because we saw farmers presenting their own successes rather than laboratory tests and farming theories being explained by civil servants. The question is, does this spirit stand a

Courtesy: keunselonline.com

INDIA

International image vs local reality

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee tries to underplay the communal volatility of Gujarat with his hardselling of an international image of a tolerant and open India under the BJP dispensation, says **Venkat Parsa**

WITH violence continuing unabated for more than a month now in Gujarat - formerly the land of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, and since converted into a political laboratory for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee finds himself in a tight spot. The inability of the Narendra Modi government to gain complete control over the violence is just another part of the tale. The larger issue at stake is reconciling the new volatile situation with Vajpayee's bid to create an international image of a tolerant and open India under the BJP dispensation.

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi arrived in the Capital on summons from Prime Minister Vajpayee, in the backdrop of continuing violence in Gujarat. After a meeting with Vajpayee, Narendra Modi said there was "no talk of change of leadership" in the state. "Everyone is satisfied," he said after the meeting. Obviously, change of Chief Minister cannot be expected right away, when the Opposition pressure is on for the heads of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister L K Advani for failure to check the continuing violence. It cannot be considered till Prime Minister Vajpayee undertakes his visit to Gujarat, shortly. Far from rebuking Modi, the Prime Minister actually patted him on his back.

Modi is in the eye of a storm ever since the Godhra

massacre, followed by communal violence in Gujarat, that claimed over 600 lives, with complaints about his government's "position" in handling the continuing violence. Union Home Minister L K Advani was also present at the meeting. Recently, Advani had put up the strongest defence by complimenting Modi for bringing the situation under control within 72 hours. But there is a question mark over his continuance as Chief Minister of Gujarat.

In fact, Modi had shocked all civilised sensibilities with his statements like quoting Newton's Third Law of Motion in a virtual justification of the Gujarat carnage. The selective application of Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) in Gujarat, by invoking against Muslims and letting off the activists of the majority community, has set off an uproar. The manner in which the Muslims were targeted and their properties selectively destroyed has become a rare example of state-sponsored terror.

Prime Minister Vajpayee has announced that he would soon be visiting Gujarat "to personally take stock of the entire situation and ensure that the return of peace and normalcy is consolidated throughout the state." Modi said that the Prime Minister would be visiting Gujarat shortly for an on-the-spot assessment of the situation. He said he had requested Vajpayee to visit the state and he has agreed.

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is

expected to give in its final report on the Gujarat violence shortly. A severe indictment by the NHRC could put Prime Minister Vajpayee into considerable embarrassment.

Modi said the Gujarat government has sent its reply to the NHRC on Wednesday and he would not like to take cognisance of what has been said by the NHRC earlier. Besides the main report in about 135 pages, the annexures number around 265, they said, adding the whole document was in three volumes. The report deals with tackling of problems relating to minorities during the riots, measures taken for smooth running of state activities, including conducting examinations for school children, deployment of police and para-military forces, among other issues. The annexures enclosed with the report were on law and order, relief and rehabilitation and responses to the media coverage.

Leader of Opposition Sonia Gandhi, in her speech during the POTO debate in Parliament on Tuesday, referred to the remarks made by National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Chairperson Justice J S Verma that all that happened in Gujarat could have been "prevented" and that "people in the state were still living in an atmosphere of insecurity." Modi's latest pronouncement, holding Parliament and Parliamentarians responsible for the continuing riots in Gujarat, sent shockwaves in Parliament. At the Joint Setting of Parliament on

Tuesday, former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda took umbrage to Modi's remarks and wondered whether or it was tantamount to breach of privilege of Parliament.

The Chief Minister, who was accompanied by senior state government officials, gave a detailed presentation to the Prime Minister on the situation in the state as also on the relief and rehabilitation measures being undertaken by the state administration. He said the Prime Minister has assured him that the Centre would bear half of the cost of the Rs one lakh compensation being provided to the kith and kin of victims of the violence in the state.

Modi said, "No camp is being wound up. There are 101 camps in different parts of the state housing about 97,000 people from all communities. When they feel a sense of security, they would return home," he said. The Gujarat government has also requested the Centre to provide free-of-cost ration to the people in the relief camps. Emphasising that the situation in the state was returning to normal, the Chief Minister said that in the last one week, 3,500 Hajis had returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca and have faced no difficulties in the state. Besides, he said Muharram also passed off peacefully and some 1,000 tazia processions were taken out all over the state.

Courtesy: telhaka.com

PAKISTAN

The post-Taliban security imperatives

GENERAL (RETD) MIRZA ASLAM BEG

THE Coalition destroyed the Taliban hold over Afghanistan and formed an interim government, which through a traditional Loya Jirga, aims to determine modalities for transfer of power. Zahir Shah has been invited to chair the Jirga. Whether he would succeed and what are the prospects for a stable political order, peace and reconstruction, requires a dispassionate appraisal.

The US thus avenged the outrage of September 11, making Afghanistan a horrible example. As an appendage to the retribution, was the fulfilment of the strategic objective of control over Central Asian energy resources. Thus oil and geopolitics blend perfectly. Eric Margolis testifies the war "offered a golden opportunity to expand American geopolitical influence into South and Central Asia, scene of the Caspian Basin oil boom." This is the context in which to view the growing US strategic hold over the Indian Ocean, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and its resolve to stay in the region till objectives are achieved.

Russia, acting with prudence supported the international coalition, but in doing so, it gained a pound of flesh in the new Game Plan.

The Taliban who constituted a 30,000-strong hardcore fighting force, proved of no consequence against the high-altitude US aerial attacks. Some 2000 were killed, the rest melted into the local population. Around 15,000 merged into the Pashtun population in the South, after handing over eastern Afghanistan to sympathetic local Sardars and Mujahideen commanders. Afghanistan is now a highly fragmented polity and a hotbed of external influences and intrigues. Stability and peace appear remote possibilities. Afghan society is terribly ruptured on tribal, ethnic and political lines, and no cohesive force exists to bridge the cleavages.

The aim of a broad-based government is likely to face the delicate issue of powersharing on the basis of population of ethnic groups. According to non-Pashtuns, the Pashtuns are not more than 38 percent,

while the Shias constitute 29 percent, Tajiks 25 percent and Uzbeks 8 percent. However, according to the 1987 unofficial census by the Soviets, the Pashtuns are 67 percent, Tajiks 13 percent, Hazaras 8 percent and Uzbeks 4 percent. It is thus vital to determine the ethnic distribution, but the current situation hardly provides the environment for a census. This poses a major obstacle in forming a broad-based government.

The tribal and ideological Pashtun-non-Pashtun divide is dangerous. The Alliance favours liberal and secular values, whereas the Pashtun mindset favours tribal culture and adherence to Islam. Tajiks in Kabul with sway over eastern Afghanistan, and enjoy the blessings of Russia, India and Tajikistan. Dostum's Uzbeks at Mazar-e-Sharif enjoy the patronage of USA, Russia, Turkey and Uzbekistan. Herat and Bamyan under Ismail Khan and Khalili respectively are supported by Iran.

Though Pashtuns are deprived of Pakistan's support, the people of its tribal belt have affinity with them. From these territories, resistance against the Alliance has been initiated. In Paktika, Paktia, and Gardez heavy fighting took place. The Taliban, therefore, have regrouped for future operations. Pashtuns may support them as they have suffered atrocities by the Alliance, in viciously conceived ethnic cleansing.

For 25 years, Afghanistan has been the haven of several global spying agencies as highlighted in the appraisal by Steve Coll. "Afghans today have little basis to trust their own recent history; too much remain hidden. The country has become a cauldron of interlocking conspiracies, both real and imagined, a maze of fractured mirrors designed by warmakers who embraced deception as winning weapon." In Afghanistan, therefore, today there is bewildering mistrust, chaos and uncertainty, which the USA and allies find difficult to cope with. They are caught in their own self-proclaimed triumph of defeating the Taliban and destroying Al-Qaida. Then why the resistance and a new war? There is a frightening prospect of bodybags reaching the

USA. There is also no easy exit. By pounding bombs from high altitude, innocent people would continue to perish, but their souls would not be vanquished.

The growing desperation has led to the decision to augment allied forces. A tribal militia is also being raised, but of what size, is not clear. The Soviets had around 120,000 soldiers, besides 90,000 Afghan militia and yet had to face defeat. It is doubtful if the USA, allies and Alliance can muster that much, though the situation today is graver than in the 1980s. The prospect of restoring peace through military means is dismal.

Zahir Shah is expected to reach Kabul to preside over the Loya Jirga, but is disheartened: "I am so happy to see Afghanistan again, but I am afraid about the state I will find it in". His statement does not conjure up a happy state of affairs, and the despondency may impel him even to cancel his visit. If that happens, the interim government may not see the light of the day. The world community has donated \$4.5 billion for reconstruction, but the ground situation is disappointing. Warlords in their respective areas are busy amassing weapons. Drug trafficking and smuggling have roared back, facilitating the flood of dirty money, soiling the nation's psychosocial mosaic. Tribal values are on the wane, and the process of atomization is creating massive divides.

What has Pakistan gained by supporting the war against terror? Grave threat to national security has been averted; a new level of relationship has developed with the US, EU, and Japan, and has taken the sting out of Indian military and diplomatic intimidation. As for Afghanistan, the Pashtuns are alienated, nor is there warmth in relations with the Alliance. Trade opportunities with Central Asia are dim. The fighting in Gardez, opens up a frightening possibility of expansion of the area of conflict, adversely affecting the tribal areas. Pakistan is already being scapegoated for supporting Taliban and Al-Qaida, and Pakistan Army specially criticized for ineffective border control. How could 40,000 Pakistani troops control a 2400-km border,

while over 500,000 Indian troops cannot control a 400-km LoC? These harsh realities must be acknowledged, particularly after the wanton terrorism on the Protestant Church in Islamabad, which scared foreign missions, specifically the USA. Its decision to withdraw some diplomatic personnel is self-defeating, as this was precisely the terrorists' aim. The signal should have been one of resolve against terrorism, rather than retreat and blaming Pakistan for not effectively combating such acts. This has ominous bearing on Pak-US relations. In the dialectics of will the terrorists must not be allowed to feel encouraged.

Pakistan by force of circumstances has adopted indifference towards Afghanistan, contrary to the imperatives of centuries of history. A meaningful relationship could catalyse an era of peace, and it is short-sighted to sever it. Though there is only a flickering hope for peace through military means, the situation is so volatile it may take an unexpected turn for Pakistan. Pakistan must introspectively appraise its policies and adopt a new course. In such a calamitous situation, it would be immoral to abandon Afghanistan or maintain a safe distance. Pakistan has to get involved, with others, seeking peace in Afghanistan, by peaceful means.

The prospects of a broadbased government are dim. It is thus desirable as a first step to set up an Afghan Shooraa of the five emerging regions, ensuring representation from all. These regions are part of the Dushanbe Plan and have the blessings of the Six Plus Two. Why not accept the harsh reality?

The situation demands a paradigm shift from confrontational power politics. Neighbours like Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan must help extricate Afghanistan from its catastrophe. Powers like the USA, EU, Russia, China and Japan must promote a collective orientation to solve problems peacefully. The Afghan predicament can only change if global empathy is channelled. Homer said, "Light is the task when many share the toil."

Courtesy: The Nation of Pakistan.

NEPAL

Containing the Maoists

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

NEPALESE Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Dubea has just paid a visit to India. A main subject of his discussions with the Indian leaders was the activities of the extreme leftists Maoists in his country. The ultras in Nepal are believed to be operating in close concord with the radical leftists in some places in India like in the district of Shilliguri in the Indian state of West Bengal.

New Delhi has assured Kathmandu of its support and assistance in combating the extremists, who have kept the government in the Himalayan kingdom on the toes despite Kathmandu's success in eliminating them to an extent. India has been helping Nepal to combat the extremists ever since a state of emergency was declared in the kingdom several months ago to face the alarming situation caused by the operations of the radicals. But the menace seems to be still the major challenge of the Dubea administration even though the army has been pressed into the anti-Maoist drive in Nepal.

It appears that the government is struggling to wipe out the extremists who often offer olive branch for a dialogue but again harden their postures, saying things have to be settled in their terms even of talks take place to settle the problem. Consequently, the insurgency remains far from being resolved or eliminated.

The Maoist issue in Nepal has drawn the attention of international world. American Secretary of State Colin Powell paid a visit to the country some time ago to assure his country's support to anti-radical drive. The Maoists are bent upon dismantling the monarchy and set up a republic for the sake of what they say establish "people's rule" in the small but picturesque country. The United States, as the leader of the free world, has chosen to extend solidarity with the democratic government in Nepal in the fight against the radical communists. But several months after the all-out swing by the armed forces and support of such nations like the United States and vast neighbour India, to objective to rid Nepal of the activities of the radicals has not reached any decisive stage.

The declaration of emergency in the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal had not come as a total surprise although the present government of Prime Minister Dubea had initiated dialogue for a resolution of the long-drawn insurgency by the extremists.

Since July last year, hopes had arisen on the prospects of a negotiated solution of the vexed problem as the new government took a favourable posture towards the Maoists for a settlement of the problem through discussions compared to previous G.P. Koirala government. But rather unexpectedly the radicals ended the four-month long ceasefire with the government by a series of attacks on the government troops and police by killing many.

So much so had been the sudden intensity in their activities that Prime Minister Dubea met King

Gyanendra and discussed the need for urgent measures to contain the situation which was compounded by daring attacks in the army barracks as well.

Undoubtedly, the Maoists took the government by surprise by hardening their stance. After a relatively lull for a few months, the extremists felt that the new government was no different from the earlier one as far as their demands are concerned and broke off the truce. Army and policemen were the targets of attacks by the Maoists along with rich farmers and others. The government thought it was high time to go for extra measures to face the situation. The emergency was declared when the nation was preparing to host the seven-nation SAARC summit but the event later went off peacefully amidst strict security measures. After the summit, the extremists launched several daring attacks including one in which a large number of soldiers and police were killed.

The incidents had taken many by surprise as they considered the insurgency was on the wane. The ultras earlier announced formation of a 37-member central united revolutionary people's council as their central government. Their demands include a "constituent assembly" to re-draft the constitution so that the "Republic" can be set up. Needless to say, the government opposes these demands tooth and nail because acceptance would mean doing away with the present monarchy although the country has a parliamentary democracy with executive power vested on the prime minister and his cabinet.

Since 1990, monarchy is the ceremonial head with certain powers where as the elected government runs the affairs of the nation. Present government says it wanted to resolve the issue through talks but found no scope for that as the other side wants to dictate terms.

Following the massacre of a large number of the troops and policemen in recent times, the government has further intensified its drive as the army fanned out in all the radical-influenced areas. Certainly the Maoists are on the defensive and also on the run in many places. Often fights are taking place in different strongholds of the Maoists, who are also keeping the pot boiling by their activities even in the capital. This shows that rooting out the radicals is not an easy task despite successes in the operations. In view of the yawning gap on the positions of the two sides, chances of a dialogue appear slim.

The opposition communist party of Nepal is understood to be engaged in backstage efforts for a dialogue between the contending parties. But this is not producing results. It is possible that the intensity of the anti-Maoist drive may increase after the prime minister's visit to India. Nepal has reportedly asked for assistance like helicopter services from India for the purpose. At the same time the radicals seem to be in no mood to give up despite losses. Unfortunately, the problem remains the major headache for the Nepalese government amidst allegations by the critics that it is nowhere near a solution - either through a dialogue or by force.

CK LAL writes from Kathmandu

The sigh of the tarai

IT is getting increasingly difficult to tell the difference between the president of the Nepali Congress Girija Prasad Koirala and UML Secretary General Madhav Nepal. At every public platform these days they are spouting the same script: that a constitutional amendment rushed through the present session of the parliament will magically solve all the country's problems. They are like itinerant salesmen at Ratna Park peddling potions: "Babuji, Bhaiyaji, buy and apply Jalim Lotion; it is guaranteed to cure all your ailments."

At a colloquium organised by tarai intellectuals last Saturday, Koirala and Nepal were once again doing their dutiest insisting that the amendments they propose in the constitution will somehow address all the concerns of tarai people in addition to solving the Maoist problem. It was difficult to find how the cry of the tarai can be reconciled with the desire of the two main political parties to share power at the centre. The question of resolving the issue of citizenship of Nepalis of tarai origin was the one that concerned the audience. But, sadly, even though both leaders represent tarai constituencies, they failed to realise the magnitude and gravity of the citizenship crisis.

Like other pahari bahuns they couldn't control the urge to give a lesson or two to the eminent audience on the importance of being "a Nepali first, and then a madhesi". Predictably, no one was even amused, let alone inspired. People of the tarai, especially those who live in Kathmandu and endured the insanity of the Hritih Roshan episode, know only too well what it means to be a lesser Nepali in a country obsessed with the Panchayat-era project of militant Nepalinism. In fact the term itself is ethnocentric and inimical to democracy and pluralism.

The history of Nepal's mainstream cultural hegemony dates back to the Rana oligarchy when the values of the ruling class were forced upon the entire population. Minorities were either patronised or tolerated, but they were never accepted as equal partners in society. King Mahendra introduced an innovation to enforce hegemony by shifting from punitive to remunerative methods. The threat of punishment for a non-conforming population was coupled with rewards and benefits for those who agreed to be co-opted. This was the period when middle-class madhesis began to discard their dhotis en masse.

This elitist tactic of creating and exercising hegemony through a carrot and stick approach, however, had limited effect since it involved only those who had a direct stake in the state apparatus. The toilers of the tarai were left alone to shoulder the burden of cultural diversity as long as they didn't pose a threat to the ruling elite. It was the Nav-Ratnas of King Birendra's court that introduced a much more subtle, but sinister, method of creating a Nepali monoculture. Through the use of language and symbols, a consensus was sought to be

manufactured around the identity of the country's cultural elite. And it was peddled as a desirable Nepali identity through the use of religious practices, controlled education system and organised media.

This was the idolatry method of creating hegemony. Symbols were manipulated to persuade the victims that it was in their best interest to obey authority. Perhaps the main purpose of the project of Nepalinism was to establish the unquestionable supremacy of the crown in Nepali society. But the temple built to house the deity has acquired its own sanctity over a period of time, and a cult of Nepalinism continues to thrive around the ideological construct of Panchayat.

In this manufactured consent, an ideal Nepali wears mayalposh-suruwal, speaks Sanskritised Nepali with a bahun accent, prays to 33 crore Hindu deities, looks down upon the female of the species as lesser creatures, and treats every one else as the "other" that needs to be resisted in order to preserve the purity of the self.

If this description reads like a caricature, just ask any proud Nepali what it means to be one. It is this mind-set that needs immediate attention if Messrs Koirala and Nepal are serious about "the problem of citizenship of tarai people". And it can't be resolved by a hurried constitutional amendment.

A very large section of Nepalis of tarai origin face hassles getting citizenship certificates. And it is almost impossible to address the problem of fundamental rights without rationalising citizenship-related constitutional provisions first. But the core issue is the very concept of Nepalinism itself. It's the definition of this term that will determine the fate of plurality and democracy in Nepal.

Citizenship is a right that can't be denied to any Nepali, and the Kathmandu elite is not bestowing any favours on tarai people by raising this vexing issue with a sense of urgency. It's the moral obligation of all political parties to keep the promise they made to the electorate through their election manifestos. But the political class must also raise issues that are equally urgent, and perhaps even more important.

People of the tarai need equal and just opportunities to engage themselves in building a pluralistic Nepali identity. The languages of the tarai have to be saved from extinction. There has to be a change in the attitude of the cultural elite that makes the tarai atiredhoti-kurta, lungi-ganji or pajjama-kamijhi butt of poor jokes. Above all, madhesis need to be accorded the respect that is due to every Nepali in a democracy. The Nepali Congress and the UML can initiate this process without waiting for a constitutional amendment. More than the problems of the past or difficulties of the present, the constitution has to make allowances for the challenges that a society may have to face in the future. Any changes envisaged must give the disadvantaged including madhesisa greater say. It can't just be an alibi for leading political parties to share the spoils of office.

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