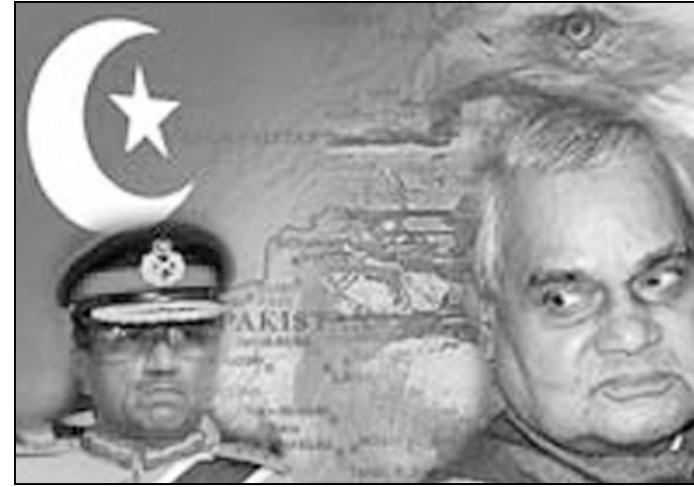


INDO-PAK

Is war the right option?

Every time there is an attack, Prime Minister Vajpayee, instead of doing anything about it, speaks in a tone of despair, says **Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr**



It is unfortunate that every time there is a terrorist attack, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government goes into a panic mode, and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee adopts the tone of a man in despair, who can only think in terms of an extreme response to the threat of terrorist attacks.

What Vajpayee has on mind - like his colleagues, Home Minister LK Advani and Defence Minister George Fernandes - is war. It is rather a premature response for a country, whose leaders boast that they have been fighting terrorism for 20 years.

This does not mean that the terrorist attack on Tuesday was not dastardly. Every terrorist attack is a challenge to the state, and every death - whether of civilian or soldier, whether man, woman or child - is tragic. What is needed after every terrorist attack is greater determination than ever to fight it much more vigorously than ever.

Instead, Vajpayee and his colleagues seem to have taken the easier option - readily point an accusing finger at Pakistan. It does not help. Even if it is the case that Pakistan is behind the terrorist attacks, it does not make sense to cry out aloud against the enemy, unless you mean to strike. It is possible that the Vajpayee government may be considering the war option, but it is not a wise one.

Indian leaders and policymakers will have to recognise that Pakistan-based Islamic terrorists striking in Jammu and Kashmir are not always the Inter Services Intelligence agents, and that the terrorists do not always take orders from the Pakistan generals. It has to be conceded that Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf does not really enjoy total control over the Islamic groups.

As a matter of fact, Musharraf finds himself in an unenviable position because after September 11, he is forced to take action against the terrorists, and his very survival

depends on being seen as taking determined action against the terrorists. Musharraf is caught in the crossfire between the United States and the Islamic terrorists.

It makes much political sense if Vajpayee were to sympathise with Musharraf's dilemmas, and even extend support and sympathy for the Pakistan president's fight against terrorism.

In the 1980s and in the 1990s, killings occurred at a time when it appeared that the political process was being revived. But a national government cannot allow itself to be swayed by the episodic massacres, tragic and horrible as they are. And that is what the government at the time did, though it appeared to be a namby-pamby government led by a sonnent P V Narasimha Rao.

Critics might say that Vajpayee is as soforic as Rao, but unlike Rao, who remained passive and silent in the face of worst provocations, Vajpayee easily turns bellicose in speech. It is not a sign of strength for a prime minister to speak of retaliation. What people want to hear from Vajpayee is a sober declaration of the determination of the government

to fight terrorists.

The ideal way of frustrating Pakistan's subversive and inimical stance is by effectively countering terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of the country. With the US turning against terrorism, it will be easier to outflank Musharraf and Pakistani generals by a vigorous domestic campaign, rather than through a direct confrontation with Pakistan.

Unfortunately, subtlety is a quality that is sorely missing in the dealings of the Vajpayee government. This government has specialised in inef-

fective over-reaction, making it less credible and more vulnerable in the eyes of the people.

After every terrorist attack, the people do not blame Pakistan for abetting terrorism, but blame the Indian government for its failure to check infiltrators and the terrorist attacks. Messrs Vajpayee, Advani and Fernandes will have to learn the simple lesson of adulthood: do not curse the enemy, tackle terrorism at home.

Courtesy: tehelka.com

INTERVIEW

"India has to accept Kashmir as a disputed territory"

Syed Ali Shah Geelani is known for his pro-Pakistan and pro-jihad views. A former chairman of the Hurriyat Conference, Geelani believes India should accept the disputed status of Kashmir and agree to tripartite talks for its resolution. In an exclusive conversation at his residence in Srinagar, he told **Basharat Peer** that the "ball is in India's court". Excerpts:

Recently two members of the executive committee of the Hurriyat Conference, Mirwaiz Omer Farooq and Abdul Ghani Lone met some expatriate Kashmiri separatist leaders and the chairman of the National Kashmir Committee of Pakistan, Sardar Abdul Qayoom, in Dubai. A controversy was generated by your comments on the meeting. Comment.

I did not debate the merits and demerits of the Sharjah meeting. After the meeting in Sharjah, the media asked for my reaction. I did not know about the participation of the Hurriyat leaders in the meeting. So I said that I did not have any knowledge about it. The two leaders had not taken me into confidence.

Mirwaiz Omer Farooq had said that peaceful talks were the only way out to solve the Kashmir issue and declared that militancy was not useful anymore. But reacting to that you had said jihad is the option.

I was speaking at a function in Srinagar and after the meet, the press asked my opinion about jihad. I told them that the order for jihad in Islam is a standing one. I did not talk about the specific context of Kashmir. But I was misquoted in that context.

But various Hurriyat leaders have been talking about the changed scenario post-September 11 and have been stressing on finding peaceful means to resolve the Kashmir issue. Do you see that change?

Some people have been saying

that things have changed after September 11 and we need a new approach. But for me, nothing has changed. In Kashmir the strength of the Indian Army has not changed. The custodial killings, rapes and arrests have not stopped. In this context we need to continue our struggle.

Do you mean the continuation of the armed militancy too?

Regarding armed militancy, one needs to understand its purpose. The militant movement has as its goal the resolution of the Kashmir issue. Every militant holds his life dearest, yet they are dying for the cause of Kashmir. But if that goal could be achieved through peaceful means why should the militants lay down their lives?

What needs to be done to resolve the issue through peaceful means?

India has to accept that Kashmir is a disputed territory and has to engage in negotiations with both Pakistan and the true representatives of the people of Kashmir for the resolution of the issue in the light of its historical background, the commitments made by Indian leaders and the resolutions of the United Nations.

The ball is in India's court. If India accepts, there would not be need for any further armed struggle.

It is being said that the government is trying to rope in the Hurriyat leaders to contest elections to show that some semblance of a breakthrough has been achieved on the eve of Prime Minister Atal Bihari



Vajpayee's forthcoming visit to Srinagar. Has anyone from the government approached you?

Yes. An officer heading one of the Indian intelligence agencies in Kashmir approached me on March 24. He knew me, as he had interrogated me when I was in jail in Jammu.

What did he offer you?

He said 'help me in the peace process'. I told him Kashmiris have all the reasons to want peace. But it is not in our hands but in India's hands to bring peace by agreeing to the disputed nature of Kashmir and agreeing to tripartite talks to solve the issue.

Did he talk about the assembly elections?

Yes. He wanted the Hurriyat Conference to contest. I told him it would not help. It would not solve

the problem. We have tried that method earlier in 1987, but it has failed. He left saying, 'I have failed to convince you.'

Why do they want you to participate in the elections?

It is not just me, but others too. By getting the Hurriyat to participate in the assembly elections, the Indian government wants to give legitimacy to the election process. But the Hurriyat stands by its decision of not participating in the assembly elections.

The Hurriyat Conference executive council members have been expressing varying opinions on various issues. What leads to this divided movement?

They will support and co-operate with anyone who supports their cause.

letter and spirit. Different members are expressing different opinions. Such behaviour encourages India to approach them individually and rope them in. Unfortunately, some leaders are getting influenced and making statements that they should not make. India is not to be blamed for this, we are.

You did not participate in the recent executive council meeting of the Hurriyat Conference. Are the differences you have with other members so alarming?

No, it is not that. You can see, I am not well. I have been under medical supervision for some days. That was the reason.

Is there any chance of the Hurriyat Conference transforming from a forum into a single organisation?

No. Because the parties that form the Hurriyat Conference have different mottos. For instance, the Jamaat-e-Islami has as its motto the propagation of Islam and the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front on the other hand is a secular organisation believing in an independent Kashmir.

The Pakistan-based umbrella organisation of militant groups, United Jihad Council, and Hizbul Mujahideen chief Syed Salahuddin has described you as the 'leader of the movement'. Comment.

They will support and co-operate with anyone who supports their cause.

Courtesy: rediff.com

NEPAL

Might is not always right

SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN

In sharp contrast to his conciliatory approach towards the Maoists in July last year, Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba is today in no mood for compromise. Rejecting outright a unilateral ceasefire offer made by the Maoists, he has laid down conditions for a return to the negotiating table.

The Maoists' offer comes in the midst of a sharp escalation in fighting between the rebels and government forces. Only last week, security forces killed hundreds of rebels in a major offensive on Maoist strongholds. The rebels struck back swiftly. In a counter-offensive they re-captured a security post in Gam, in western Nepal, on May 8. Around 250 rebels and 150 soldiers and police are reported to have been killed in that operation. The rebels had renewed an offer to return to peace talks a week earlier.

The rebels have warned that they will respond with a fierce and decisive battle if government troops do not respect their truce.

According to reports, the Maoists are offering a truce on the advice of human rights groups and NGOs which have been trying to convince them to return to the negotiating table. The Nepalese people are desperate for peace and the NGOs have indicated to the rebels that their persistence with the six-year-old armed struggle will alienate them from the people. Besides, given the international mood against terrorism, the cards are stacked in favor of the government, not the rebels. They have therefore been counselled to pull out before it is too late.

It is possible that the Maoists, having suffered severe reverses in recent months, need a respite from the fighting and might be looking to a ceasefire and talks to regroup. However, Kathmandu-based ana-

lysts argue that the rebel offer is not a tactical move but an attempt by a section within the movement to emerge from the underground into the political mainstream "to play politics in the center of power".

The government clearly is in no mood to play ball with the rebels, who are fighting to turn the country from a constitutional monarchy into a one-party communist republic.

Striking a particularly tough posture, Deuba, who was less than a year ago regarded as the only politician who enjoyed the confidence of the rebels and a firm supporter of a negotiated settlement to the problem, has now ruled out a ceasefire or talks. "No talks can be held until the Maoists surrender their arms and renounce violence," Deuba said.

Soon after becoming prime minister in July last year, Deuba announced a unilateral ceasefire that was reciprocated by the Maoists. Negotiations were initiated soon after. But after barely three rounds of talks, the rebels walked out of the process, accusing the government of refusing to consider their demands to replace the monarch with a republic and to set up a new constitution. Two days later, the rebels struck savagely, killing 40 soldiers and police personnel.

The government's response was equally tough. Emergency regulations were imposed, the Maoists were declared terrorists and the army called out to crush them. Since then, the fighting between the rebels and the security forces has escalated sharply. Around 4,000 people are said to have been killed since the Maoist uprising began in 1996 - it is believed that more people have been killed over the past six months since the breakdown of the talks in November than in the preceding five years.

Deuba, who staked his political future by entering into talks with the

rebels last year, was hurt with their return to armed struggle. This has led to a hardening in his posture. Reacting to their ceasefire offer last week, he dismissed it saying, "They are not serious, they are not sincere, they have betrayed Nepal before and we don't trust them anymore."

However, Deuba's rejection of the talks option at present has more to do with the international support he currently enjoys. India, Nepal's giant neighbor to the south, is providing intelligence information, equipment and training to Nepal to fight the Maoists. It has already given Kathmandu two helicopters for military operations in the mountains. During Deuba's visit to India in March, the two sides agreed to step up a vigil along the India-Nepal border to prevent Maoists from seeking sanctuary in India and to reduce the flow of arms into Nepal.

The Indian army chief, General S Padmanabhan, who is currently in Nepal, visited the insurgency-hit districts on Tuesday.

The editorial goes on to say that the people prefer dialogue with the Maoists "in order to restore peace" and reduce the number of deaths and to "give peace a chance".

Emboldened by the international mood against armed struggle and by the war against terrorism, Deuba is turning his back on a political settlement of the problem. The government's approach to the Maoist problem and the international community's response to the crisis in Nepal is a classic example of what is wrong with the war against terrorism. Military operations cannot alone solve problems with political and socio-economic roots.

The grievances that led to the Maoist uprising are socio-economic. The demands of the Maoists are socio-economic and political. By adopting a military approach to the problem, the government, with help from other countries, might be able to inflict losses on the rebels. It might seem like it has the upper hand in the operations. However, a military approach does not address the grievances that gave rise to the problem, but will keep the conflict simmering.

Courtesy: Asia Times Online

M ABDUL HAFIZ

SINCE her bid for power in 1999 when she failed to acquire required support in Lok Sabha and was ignored even by the Congress' secular allies, Sonia Gandhi virtually remained in political wilderness. It was an insult to her injury when Mr. Vajpayee the incumbent prime minister who marginally lost a censure motion in the House earlier, returned to power with more fanfare in a fresh general election.

Ever since Sonia Gandhi had been in the margin of India's national politics with more political woes added to her fortune. But now inspired by a series of electoral successes over last few years the Congress (I) under her leadership is gearing itself for a final push for power in more number of states and at the Centre eventually.

Acutely conscious about her historic responsibility as member of Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, the Congress (I) president is apparently positioning her party for the next general election due in 2004. It was Sonia's hunt for a suitable strategy that marked the conclave of 14 Congress chief ministers late last month in Guwahati. On taking over as party president in 1998 she searched for a similar strategy in Pachmarhi Convention of the Congress, but it did not click then.

Because Congress (I) was then out of power in most Indian states as well as in the centre and thus the outlook was far from promising. The editorial goes on to say that the demands of the Maoists are socio-economic and political. By adopting a military approach to the problem, the government, with help from other countries, might be able to inflict losses on the rebels. It might seem like it has the upper hand in the operations. However, a military approach does not address the grievances that gave rise to the problem, but will keep the conflict simmering.

The Guwahati meeting, on the other hand, was upbeat with chief ministers of the half of Indian states under Sonia's command and nearly 40 percent of the country's population now under state level Congress rule.

The Congress (I) already won the

state assembly election as late as in February last in Uttarakhand, Punjab and Manipur and just on the eve of Guwahati Conclave the party swept to power in the prestigious municipal corporation of Delhi -- considered a bastion of BJP - raising further the stature of Sonia Gandhi. Almost a political non-entity when she hesitatingly took over the party presidency, she now has for the first time started cracking the whip ostensibly in a mood to establish her authority in the party. The assertion of her authority was recently manifested through some of her moves in which she rather independently took decisions to effect changes within party hierarchy. She sufficiently displayed both her authority and independence of choice with regards to the selection of party candidates in Rajya Sabha election. It was in clear departure from her earlier practice of seeking advice from the party stalwarts.

This time she not only ignored powerful regional leaders and chief ministers such as Digvijay Singh of Madhya Pradesh, S M Krishna of Karnataka, Tarun Gogoi of Assam, Ajit Jogi of Uttarakhand and Vilasrao Deshmukh of Maharashtra in her choice of candidates from their states but also made them accept her nominees. This is one of the signs as to how much has been able to consolidate her hold over the party.

In the meantime, Sonia Gandhi has also come of age as parliamentarian and come out of her reclusive to improve her public relations that she was shy of. During the debate on the prevention of terrorism bill in the joint session of parliament on March 26 last, a confident Sonia Gandhi surprised everyone. The speech of Sonia Gandhi was unusually powerful -- and considered her best

speech so far in the parliament. She could effectively engage Prime Minister Vajpayee in a one-to-one debate and provoke the latter into making an unexpected intervention turning the entire debate into a Sonia versus Vajpayee battle. Sonia Gandhi concluded her speech with a warning to the Prime Minister: 'Your moment of reckoning has come.' Mr Vajpayee seemed visibly stung by Sonia's direct attack and dealt solely with Sonia's speech almost without touching upon the topic of the debate.

Significantly, according to commentators, Sonia's speech stood out against that of the Prime Minister. Hers was a passionate appeal to Vajpayee not to let political considerations bring into existence a draconian piece of legislation that had the potential to violate basic human rights. Vajpayee's speech, in contrast, lacked substance. And it focussed more on personal attack and had a self-praising tone about his own long stint in the parliament.

However, no issue - not even the POTO - has galvanised the opposition in the past three years as much as the oust-Modi campaign in the wake of Gujarat carnage. So overwhelming was the camaraderie that it ushered in a new political communion of sort. Obviously it provides most of the political mileage to the key opposition leader. So much so that CPI(M) leader Somenath Chatterjee threw open the doors of the People's Front to the Congress and even an estranged Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh walked into the office of Congress (I) president Sonia Gandhi for the first time in three years acknowledging her status as the leader of the opposition.

On her part, Sonia, in a rare public relation gesture, walked up to

Mulayam, Chatterjee and former prime minister Deve Gowda under full public view within the Lok Sabha and requested all of them for a strategy meeting at her office. She extended hand of friendship even to Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) of Sharad Pawar who broke away from Congress (I) on the plea of its president's foreign origin. Sonia's public relation offensive disarmed many of her critics and won her well-wishers.

This is the