

NEPAL

The Government-Maoist dialogue

ZAGLUL A. CHOWDHURY

The Maoists in Nepal have recently offered olive branch by expressing its readiness for a dialogue on their present insurgency to topple the government and establish a Republic in the landlocked impoverished country which is otherwise a lovely land of enormous scenic beauty. The overture follows intense fighting between the government troops and police with the radicals in several places of Nepal in recent times in which both sides suffered heavy losses. The offer of the Maoists also comes close on the heels of visits by King Ganeyndra to two west neighbours - India and China where he evidently discussed the Maoists issue that has convulsed Nepal for last few years but has taken an alarming turn in recent times.

The magnitude of this problem is so serious that a state of emergency had to be declared in the country late last year and the last SAARC summit took place in the country a few months ago amidst state of emergency. However, nothing destructive happened during the conference as the ultras were possibly not at all keen to disturb the regional summit and the Kathmandu government also took strict security measures in addition to excellent arrangements for the event.

But there has been no slackening in the

activities of the radicals and they launched daring attacks in their areas of influence killing a large number of the soldiers and the police. The Maoists too suffered big losses as both sides stepped up their operations. However, the government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba says that strength of the radicals is on the wane after massive operations by the security forces. Mr. Deuba, who took over from former premier G.P. Koirala, also of ruling Nepali Congress, had initially favoured talks with the radicals as he adopted a comparatively less hawkish approach to the Maoists. Some contacts were established brokered by the main opposition communist party but the talks made no headway and the cease fire collapsed. The radicals took up arms again and there has been no let up in the fighting since last several months.

Earlier, the PM paid a visit to the United States where he discussed the menace of the radicals with president George Bush and expectedly Washington as the powerful democracy assured all support to democratic government of Nepal against the hard line communists.

The visits of the King to India and China and that of the prime minister to the United States resulted in tough posture of the government leading to bigger actions by the army and the police against the Maoists. This may

be a reason for which the radicals offered dialogue. Many believe that China may be the Maoists activities in Nepal but Beijing has made it clear that it is an internal matter of Nepal with which China enjoys good ties. Still, some quarters believe that the radicals must be drawing some sustenance from the giant communist neighbour.

The government has turned down the offer of dialogue, saying that the ultras must first surrender their arms, a demand which the Maoist are highly unlikely to accept. True, the radicals may be on the defensive and this could be a reason for their softening of their attitude but they can not afford to be seen as almost a spent force since laying down the arms would only give such an impression. Besides, the Maoists are aware that the government is somewhat weak now because it is an interim administration that till continue till the next polls. The parliament was dissolved at the advice of prime minister Deuba, who has been asked by the King to continue until the new government comes in following elections.

The development has caused further problems within the ruling Nepali Congress as the faction led by Deuba's rival G.P. Koirala, who is the chief of party, expelled the premier for taking this decision without consulting him and the party. The party is currently plagued

by internal squabbles and the radicals know about this situation of the ruling political organisation. Last year's Royal Palace massacre leading to the killings of King, Queen and the crown prince also delivered a big blow to the country. It is possible that the Maoists had stepped up their activities considering all these weaknesses of the government. Now that may have offered talks but they cannot probably accept the conditions of the government for dialogue.

On the other hand, the Deuba government ill afford for demonstrating softening of the policy particularly when opposition as well as Koirala faction are accusing it of failure in dealing with the radical issue. Besides, all sides concerned have also an eye in the next general elections. In this situation, the meeting ground for initiating a dialogue appears slim. Despite a lull in the activities of the Maoists in last week, there is hardly any encouraging sign of an environment for talks.

Consequently, the dialogue is not on the cards while Nepal seems set to continue with the radicals' problems, unfortunate though for a nation experiencing political instability along with other problems.

WEEK IN REVIEW

Bangladesh

ON 25 JULY, an unannounced eviction drive in Mirpur by Bangladesh's Department of Housing and Settlement left an estimated 50,000 people homeless. According to media reports, more than 400 security police officers and state security personnel arrived at the settlement in the morning with bulldozers to clear the land. The controversy dates back to 1986, when 130 families were given plots of land totalling 13 acres. Over the past 16 years, illegal settlements sprung up in the area, leading the original inhabitants to seek legal redress. Under Bangladeshi law, authorities are required to give seven days notice before carrying out an eviction.

Nepal

TRIGGERED BY HEAVY monsoon rains, floods and landslides in Nepal claimed more than 200 lives after the four heaviest days of rain recorded in 30 years. Outside of Nepal, another 100 lives have been reportedly lost in South Asia to weather conditions in recent days, and authorities estimate that 5 million people in the Indian north-east have been affected by severe flooding. Meteorological research published recently in the journal Science says that South Asian monsoons will grow increasingly more intense, due to rising levels of greenhouse gases and higher temperatures in northern latitudes. Despite the recent heavy rains, northwestern India and parts of Pakistan are suffering from the worst drought in more than a decade.

Sri Lanka

SRI LANKA'S peace process appears to have been put on hold indefinitely, with government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leaders still unable to reach an agreement on a round of peace talks in Bangkok. Originally scheduled for June, the talks have been indefinitely postponed, and the Norwegian peace monitoring mission has thus far received more than 400 complaints of violations by the two sides since the ceasefire was signed in February. Some commentators have argued that LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran is stalling until prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe lifts the government-imposed ban on the LTTE, a

move which might prompt similar actions by India and the United States. According to The Economist, the US government froze an estimated USD 4 billion in LTTE assets as part of its 'war on terror'. Since the outbreak of violence in 1983, more than 500,000 Sri Lankan Tamils have emigrated, dropping their portion of the country's population from 12 percent to 8 percent.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe met US president George W Bush at a White House meeting on 24 July to discuss security issues; the visit marks the first time in 18 years that a Sri Lankan leader has made a White House visit

Pakistan

PAKISTAN'S MAINSTREAM political parties united in their opposition to the proposed constitutional changes announced by president general Pervez Musharraf, terming them detrimental to national solidarity. The conference, attended by representatives from 12 parties and organised by the Awami National Party Sindh, included representatives from such ideologically diverse groups as the Mutahidda Qaumi Movement, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), and the Pakistan People's Party. Criticisms focused on the formation of a national security council, which participants charged would provide a cover for military control of the polity and thwart development, and the legal power of Musharraf to amend the constitution. Representatives of regional parties, notably Sindh and Balochistan, also criticised Musharraf's plan for weakening state autonomy at the hands of a strong Islamabad.

India

SEVENTY-YEAR-old APJ Abdul Kalam took the oath of the office of the Indian presidency on 25 July to become India's 12th head of state. "Today our country is facing challenges such as cross-border terrorism, certain internal conflicts and unemployment", Kalam said in his inaugural address. "To face these challenges, there must be a vision to ensure focussed action of one billion citizens of this great country with varied capabilities... We will work for it. We cannot emerge as a developed nation if we do not learn to transact with speed". The Indian presidency is a largely ceremonial

role, although it does carry some limited political functions. Kalam is the third Muslim to be elected to the position.

Headlines

Bangladesh's main opposition Awami League announced that it would not field a candidate in the upcoming presidential election

India voiced its disapproval of the sale of six C-130 aircraft to Pakistan by the US for an estimated USD 75 million

Student protests at Dhaka University paralysed the campus for a second consecutive day on 25 July

Life in Srinagar ground to halt on 26 July after demonstrators took to the streets to protest the alleged statement of Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader Acharya Giriraj Kishore that twenty verses from the Quran regarding the treatment of non-Muslims should be deleted

In Colombo, parliamentarians passed a controversial new tax law, replacing Sri Lanka's Goods and Services Tax with a Value Added Tax

Indian and Bangladeshi border forces exchanged fire for 30 minutes on 24 July near Benapole over a dispute arising from the murder of a local civilian.

President of the Nepal Congress Party (NC) and former prime minister GP Koirala threatened to launch a "struggle" against the government of former NC member Sher Bahadur Deuba if the supreme court ruled that Deuba's break-away NC faction could keep the party symbol in the scheduled upcoming elections

Renowned professor and Bangla scholar Syed Ali Ansan died in Dhaka this week; he was 83

The British Commonwealth announced it would send election observers to monitor Pakistan's scheduled October parliamentary elections

The Hindi cinema industry has reportedly posted a disappointing year to date, with losses industry-wide now totalling INR 150,000,000

Shiv Sena's Kerala wing announced it was considering legal action against state chief minister A K Antony for including the Hindu right party in a list of terrorist organisations.

INDIA

Assam's annual sorrow...



G VINAYAK

HARI Nath, a lower division clerk in Assam's Public Works Department, was reliving the nightmare of two years ago. In 2000, Nath and his family, who stay off National Highway 31C in Assam's Kamrup district, had to take shelter in a relief camp after surging waters of the Nona river entered their house and threatened to touch the roof. On July 22, 2002, the Nath family was back on the road after the Nona river, fed by incessant rains in the catchment areas in adjoining Bhutan, breached the embankment near their house and flooded the village.

About 400 kilometres away, Balen Pegu and his family of six are sheltered in a relief camp in Dhemaji district, contemplating their future after the surging waters of the mighty Brahmaputra washed away their house just a week ago.

It is the same elsewhere in the state. Reports say floods have affected at least a million people in

14 of the state's 23 districts, almost an encore from last year.

Consider the dismal statistics: 21 of Assam's 23 districts routinely suffer from floods, while districts like Dhemaji and North Lakhimpur remain flooded for nearly three months, the number of people frequently affected is 3.6 million while the standing crop area damaged is over 200,000 hectares.

In the current floods, the number of dwelling units damaged is over 200,000 and 18 lives have been lost. The total estimated damage to public and private property is Rs 18 billion.

Yet, cold statistics never convey the misery that the people go through, and have been going through every year since 1950. Assam, perhaps the only state with a full-fledged Flood Control Department headed by a Cabinet minister, faces floods from the mighty Brahmaputra, one of Asia's biggest rivers, and its tributaries every year. Yet, little is done by way of preventive measures and even elementary

steps like stocking food grains for the monsoon season is marked with indifference. This year, for instance, against the normal practice of building up a buffer stock of nearly two million tonnes of food grains in the region, the authorities have stored just about one million tonnes.

In 1981, the Brahmaputra Board, whose purpose is to implement schemes to harness the mighty river, was set up. All that it has done in the last 21 years is prepare a master plan that envisages building two massive multi-purpose dams on the Dehang and Subansiri rivers, tributaries of the Brahmaputra, in Arunachal Pradesh and smaller dams on the other tributaries. At current estimates, the two mega-dams alone will cost a huge Rs 250 billion to build.

The master plan has simply gathered dust. For 11 years, the Board was without a chairman until it was revived in 1995 with appointments to some key posts. And political rivalry between the neighbouring states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur has prevented construction of the dams that could help in controlling the floods.

Roads crisscrossing the north-east are most affected by the annual floods. The state government, which receives huge funds to repair the national highways, often diverts the money to other areas, thus leaving important national highways in a state of constant disrepair, hampering smooth communication. This means that the northeast, which imports essential commodities worth almost Rs 15 billion per annum from other parts of the country, is perpetually short of supplies.

A major reason for the floods becoming an annual feature is directly linked to the massive deforestation, which is actively encouraged by the extremely powerful and influential timber lobby across the northeast. Timber from the north-east is among the most valuable and sought after in the country.

Indiscriminate deforestation has led to massive amounts of topsoil coming loose in the rains. Thus, the soil, instead of soaking up the rainfall, flows down into the river and in turn causes the riverbeds of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries to rise. Engineers at the Flood Control

Department, Assam, have estimated that nearly 27.3 billion tonnes of silt has accumulated in the Brahmaputra river between 1950 and 1997. The riverbed off Dibrugarh, in upper Assam, has risen by as much as three metres!

What, then, is the solution? Assam has tried several schemes over the years but most of them have been ad hoc. For instance, the network of embankments and dykes spread all over the state can partially take care of the rising waters. The problem is that nearly 70 per cent of the state's embankments, running into a length of some 4,448 kilometres, have lost their capacity to prevent floods and strengthening the embankments would require a massive inflow of funds.

"Most of the embankments in the state have outlived their utility since all of them were built in the 1960s," said Captain P K Das, secretary, Flood Control Department. "To strengthen them would require a lot of money, which the state government does not have at the moment."

Adds another official in the Flood Control Department, "Thanks to the Centre's enthusiasm in deducting interest on the central loan assistance meant for us, we end up getting measly sums every year."

The figures speak for themselves. Between 1974 and 1996, the Centre sanctioned Rs 3.41 billion as central loan assistance, but after deducting interest at source, Assam got a mere Rs 1.98 billion! "We cannot control the floods with our own resources, which are already in bad shape. Most of the funds meant for rural development are being utilised for ad hoc flood damage repairs. And the Centre continues to say that it has no funds to implement the Brahmaputra Board projects despite having declared floods as a national problem," the official complained.

As of now, there just does not appear to be any immediate solution in sight for the perennial problem and the havoc wreaked by the floods, save for responding to them. Thus, every year, we see the Indian Army, reviled and much-resented in the rural areas in normal times, becomes the saviour of the people, launching massive rescue missions with several dozen boats and thousands of troops involved to ferry

people from marooned places to safety; the civil authorities worry about the inevitable outbreak of epidemics; food shortage becomes acute as most of the standing crop gets destroyed; and several stretches of National Highways 31, 37, and 52, which also link the rest of the northeastern states to Assam, get washed away.

Then, after the waters recede, marginal farmers like Balen Pegu in the worst affected districts such as Dhemaji ponder their plight. In the post-monsoon period, around the end of September, all that Pegu will see of his paddy field is that it under knee-deep slush and sand. Pegu and his family of six would have barely survived the floods and would have to struggle to survive the flood-induced poverty. Pegu, a small-time farmer who ekes out his living by cultivating a small patch of land, will wonder about what he could do for a living and for his family in the coming months.

The receding waters bring their own set of problems. With miles and miles of roads having disappeared and several bridges washed away, no vehicles can reach Pegu's village. When the area is flooded, as it is now, at least the boats run by the Army can bring in the essential items. Now even that does not happen.

"I do not know where my next meal is going to come from," laments Pegu. And he is not alone. Several thousand families in Dhemaji and the adjoining Lakhimpur district live on the verge of starvation. As the local legislator in the state assembly, Dilip Saikia, observes, "Every year the floods ruin the people in more ways than one. While the immediate danger is always of water-borne diseases spreading to a vast section of the population in the absence of safe drinking water, the long-term problem is starvation deaths since no land in the area is suitable for cultivation in the post-monsoon season."

The Brahmaputra is known as the Borha Luit or the Old Red River or the Bor Noi, meaning the Big River, but many in Assam prefer the nickname, the 'River of Sorrow'.

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BUTAN

The Dzongda



THE conclusion of the National Assembly marks the beginning of yet more unprecedented developments all over the kingdom. Amidst this profound change there is a critical figure who, today, has every reason to be in deep thought over his own role in national development: the dzongda.

If the dzongda did not have too much to say in this year's Assembly discussions, it was perhaps because there was too much to reflect on. The implication of the overall change and the magnitude of his responsibility is just beginning to dawn on all of us.

The dzongda came to the 80th session of the Assembly as the chairman of the DYT. He returns to the dzongkhag as an observer. In the past, central government authorities stood in line to wine and dine the dzongdas to the tune of RAPA dancers. Today they are not sure whether they will attend the next session of the Assembly.

This is one of the most dramatic symbols of change we have seen in the process known as decentralisation to us, as democratisation to the rest of the world. As the Bhutanese system takes yet another step towards the royal vision to devolve power from the government to the people, the people are now empowered, through the DYT and GYT chathrims, to tell the government how their villages, goags, dzongkhags, and towns should be developed. Significantly, they will also decide on the allocation of the national budget.

The reactions of the dzongdas themselves range from disillusionment and indifference to enthusiasm and elation. Even as some are relieved that they are technically absolved of blame in case of wrong decisions by the DYT or GYT, others are acutely concerned over the increased risks which the people would have to take because of the enhanced responsibilities. As one said, if you put a knife in the hands of a young child he might make something useful or he might injure himself.

While the responsibilities of the dzongda are spelled out in the DYT chathrim the ground realities leave his actual role rather broad and, perhaps, a little vague. They also tell us that the Assembly gave them mixed signals and the central government provided no clear directives at all. Meetings with the central ministries have not been reassuring in terms of extra staff for the dzongkhags' new responsibilities, especially accounting requirements.

If the past image of the dzongda was one of patangs slapping against massive calves, it is now more and more of chingta-drinking professionals. And this new image seems to go with the new times. To the thinking dzongda, his role has become more critical than ever. Critical because the change is very real, because the people have been truly empowered, and because things can go wrong.

While the dzongda has always been a bridge between the government and the people, he now needs

to monitor the dzongkhag's progress more closely than ever and offer a range of advice as well as support services. In the words of the Druk Gyalpo, he is there to serve the interests of the Bhutanese people.

The dzongda is acutely aware that the people will change. While most Bhutanese are new to the latest developments in power politics, with some regions being more naive than others, some are already shrewd politicians, more astute than the most seasoned dzongdas. Another trend which is likely to emerge is that the educated population who are based in the urban centres, including civil servants, will take much more interest in rural development and rural politics.

As a "special guest observer" at the DYT the dzongda is required to transmit the essence of His Majesty's vision of decentralised governance to the people with more clarity than ever before. One told Kuensel: "To start with, we really have to understand this vision ourselves first."

In that sense the dzongda's job has not changed, although the working environment may be drastically different. "Until now we were part politicians, part administrators, part planners, part bureaucrats," one said. "Right now it is difficult to say what I am but it certainly is an honour to take part in this critical juncture of Bhutanese history."

Courtesy: Kuenselonline

SRI LANKA

Benefit of having impartial SLMM presence

JEHAN PERERA

SINCE the signing of the landmark ceasefire agreement in February this year, the government and LTTE have been contesting each other and seeking to get an advantageous position over the other. The ceasefire agreement has ended the fighting between the government and LTTE but it has not ended the fundamental clash of goals which continues to fuel the tensions between the two sides.

These tensions manifest themselves in many ways. The recent incident in which the LTTE held two international monitors virtually hostage on a boat at sea is one example. It is likely that the LTTE vessel was carrying on board items with a military purpose and did not wish the monitors to record this violation of the ceasefire agreement.

The incident over the international monitors was a serious one that threatened the entire fabric of the ceasefire agreement. The monitoring of the ceasefire agreement by the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission with its international members is a crucial component of the peace process. There is no doubt that the presence of the international monitors has helped to maintain the peace on several occasions when the ceasefire could have been shattered. The presence of the monitors on the scene enabled the aggrieved party in each of those incidents to complain to an impartial authority rather than to take matters into their own hands.

The incident occurred when the navy spotted two fishing trawlers off the seas in northern Sri Lanka. When the boats refused to halt the navy called for the services of the SLMM to board one of the vessels that the navy had

managed to bring to a halt. However, when the international monitors boarded the vessel, the LTTE crew on board did not permit them to search the vessel to the satisfaction of the naval personnel. Instead, the LTTE cadre suddenly started moving the trawler to land while preventing the international monitors from leaving the vessel and forcibly took them to land.

The LTTE's initial reaction to the strong protest by the SLMM was characteristic. Instead of admitting fault or being contrite for violating the ceasefire agreement, the LTTE attempted to take the moral high ground.

Their leadership issued a statement accusing the navy of firing at the LTTE vessels, and claimed that the LTTE had taken the international monitors to land for their own safety. Most of the Tamil media gave wide publicity to the LTTE's version of the incident.

Some civic and religious leaders also joined in trying to give credibility to the LTTE story that was totally contrary to the version given by the international monitors themselves.

The LTTE's response and the supportive environment provided by sections of the media and civil society were a replay of what has often happened in the past. When the LTTE engaged in some act that would earn it condemnation, it would justify that act as being in the interests of the Tamil cause. It would take the position that it was right in what it did. It would also expect its supporters to say that it was right in what it had done.

An example would be the assassination of Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam, the internationally respected constitutional law expert and human rights activist whose third death anniversary fell this week.

Among his many accomplishments in Sri

Lanka, Dr. Tiruchelvam was a national list MP of the leading Tamil political party and a co-architect of the most progressive piece of draft legislation pertaining to the devolution of power still seen in this country. When Dr. Tiruchelvam was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber, there were many in the media, politics and civil society who sought to justify the killing. They argued that he was a collaborator with the government, which made him part of the enemy who could (and even should) be eliminated. Invariably the LTTE's version of events and justifications would prevail, as hardly any Tamil would wish to be bracketed as a supporter of the enemy's version of events.

The positive side of this incident is that the LTTE demonstrated flexibility in adjusting quickly to the new reality and apparently has succeeded in patching up its relationship with the SLMM. In the past few months of ceasefire, the SLMM has been playing a vitally important role in preserving peace between the government and LTTE.

The physical presence of the SLMM and the ability of the two sides to complain to them, and to have an impartial third party listen take down their grievance, has served to defuse tensions. There have been several occasions on which serious disputes have arisen between the two sides. But so far the presence of the SLMM has helped to reduce tensions and resolve the problems without either side resorting to violence.

The presence of the SLMM has made an objective assessment of the situation in the north and east possible in a way that was not practically possible prior to its entry into the Sri Lankan peace process. Hopefully the LTTE will learn a lesson that its interpretation of events, and of the ceasefire agreement, will

not be the only valid one in the future and that it cannot always get validation for what it has done.

While the LTTE expressed its regret over the incident involving the SLMM monitors, it also requested the SLMM to ensure their freedom of movement at sea. However, as this matter was not dealt with in the ceasefire agreement, it is beyond the mandate of the SLMM to make a ruling on the matter. What the SLMM can do is to persuade the government and LTTE to negotiate on the matter. According to news reports the government is now considering the matter positively.

It is likely to agree to some limited rights of passage under supervision by the international monitors. But any concession of absolute rights of passage at sea to the LTTE would be a major one for the government to make. It is unlikely that the government will do so ahead of the Bangkok peace talks. This is another reason why the LTTE needs to show flexibility in getting the peace process to the negotiating table in Bangkok.

A degree of flexibility on the part of the LTTE with regard to the fulfillment of all provisions of the ceasefire agreement would be constructive at this time. Both the government and LTTE need to realise the peril they are putting the masses of people into by their rivalry. They need to find a point of accommodation so that the interests of the people of Sri Lanka, and specifically of the north and east, come first rather than their own desires for power and control.

Jehan Perera is the Media Director of the National Peace Council in Sri Lanka; and this piece first appeared in the Island of Colombo.