

SRI LANKA

The simmering Muslim factor

SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN in Bangalore

EVEN as the Norwegian facilitators are struggling to get the Sri Lankan government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the negotiating table, another complicating dimension has been added to the peace process with the eruption of violence last week between the island's Tamils and Muslims.

speaking Muslims and Hindu-Tamils in the east that violence broke out last week. Eastern Province is an explosive mixture of Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims. It was once a predominantly Tamil province. However, state-sponsored settlement of Sinhalese has led to an alteration of the province's demography.

Under the Federal Party and later the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the Tamil nationalist movement sought to build solidarity among all Tamil speakers by avoiding references to symbols drawn from Hinduism. Yet, in choosing symbols from the Dravidian past, the Tamil nationalist parties ended up excluding the Muslims, who had very little in common with the legends with which the Hindu Tamils identified.

mine the Tamil struggle - "irritated" the Tamils, as they saw it as a threat to their political goal. "It was as if the SLMC was sabotaging Tamil aspirations," writes D B S Jeyraj in the Sri Lankan weekly newspaper The Sunday Leader.

would have the right to return to their homes as part of the peace process. Notwithstanding the LTTE's recent accommodation of Muslims, harassment of Muslim traders on the ground continues. It appears that the Tigers continue to collect taxes, and the Muslims resent this extortion.

INDIA

The reshuffle

ZAGLUL A. CHOWDHURY

MAJOR changes have just been made in the ministry in India and also in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the driving force behind the multi-party ruling coalition in the country. The changes were expected for sometime past and hence have come not much as surprise to any quarter.

There is confusion about the extent of the worsening health of the prime minister on which the national and international media also debate but there is little doubt that Vajpayee is not in best of his health although he is fit enough to perform his responsibility.

Mr. Advani is known as a hawkish senior leader of the BJP while Vajpayee is a liberal one, who would like to keep the "communal" ideology of the party at the minimum so that the rainbow ruling coalition of 22 parties can work in concert following a common agenda.

Reducing nuclear danger

PRAFUL BIDWAL in New Delhi

ONE of the salutary lessons from the scary India-Pakistan standoff (which has still not ended) is that the political and military leadership of neither country can be trusted to desist from nuclear brinkmanship, even downright nuclear adventurism.

brink of a nuclear catastrophe during the six-month-long eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. Although the more overt of the nuclear threats made since the Parliament House attack originated from Pakistan, especially during May, Indian leaders too delivered intemperate statements beginning with Defence Minister George Fernandes (in December) and army chief S Padmanabhan (January this year).

There is reason to believe that threats were not empty, but backed by serious ground-level preparations in the form of bombs/warheads being readied for delivery within a time-frame ranging from minutes to some hours.

kept at some distance from one another -- at least till such time as it has a substantially large arsenal, with a capability to attack mainland China.

that in the USSR. The norm was "launch on warning". The danger of unauthorised use grows directly in proportion to the dispersal of nuclear weapons (to protect them against strikes) and decentralisation of command.

INTERVIEW

"Nepal should not be allowed to be a failed state"

Last week's London International Conference on Nepal was a closed door meeting between senior officials from the US, India, China, Russia, Japan, France, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, Finland, Denmark, Australia, the United Nations and the World Bank.

Question: It was originally designed as a small, high-level meeting. How did it become so big?



Andrew Mitchell: In essence, the initiative originated in an idea of the British Development Secretary, Clare Short, who identified, rightly I think, the need for a form of concerted international thinking around the challenges posed by the current crisis.

lived through the process of restoring peace and security to Afghanistan. And we recognise that it is better to choose to resolve difficulties than to be forced to address catastrophes.

Q: We hear that the British International Development Secretary Clare Short reiterated her concerns about Nepal's weak governance and corruption, and called for "radical reforms". What kind of reforms are we talking about, and do you think the message sank in?

A: Excellent. It was a positive, constructive encounter. Every delegation shared a very real, very direct concern for the welfare of the people of Nepal. There was a genuine willingness to explore new thinking, new ideas. The Nepali delegation, led by Dr Shankar Sharma, played a strong and constructive part. It really could not have been better.

tion and weak governance. These are genuine weaknesses, and have provided the fertile ground in which the conflict has taken root and flourished. Clare Short's view is that radical reform is needed to prioritise delivery of services to poor people. And that issues of corruption, exclusion and poor governance need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

A: Yes. This was indeed discussed. The meeting expressed its solidarity with all the victims of the conflict, and recognised the needs in particular of those bereaved, dispossessed and displaced by the conflict. The meeting expressed the view that the conflict represented a threat to the human rights of the citizens of Nepal, and recalled the obligations on both parties to the conflict to ensure respect for human rights, international humanitarian law and the safety of civilian non-combatants.

Another measure is to disassemble the warhead by separating the HE from the fission core. This will increase the time it would take to launch a nuclear attack, and thus lower the probability of an accidental initiation of nuclear war.

Such NRRMs have now become imperative. But their role should not be exaggerated. NRRMs can make South Asia less unsafe in nuclear terms. But they cannot make it nuclear-safe. This can only happen if it becomes nuclear-free -- i.e. it eliminates nuclear weapons.

President and aspirants

M ABDUL HAFIZ

WITH less than a month to go before the tenure of K R Narayanan ends on 24 July next the conflicting perceptions and interests stand in the way of major political parties and formations agreeing on the choice of a successor.



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