SOUTH ASIA

SRI LANKA

The simmering Muslim factor

SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN in

VEN 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.

Clashes between Tamils and Muslims in eastern Sri Lanka have left seven people dead and at least 50 injured. Curfew was imposed on the worst affected districts of Batticaloa and Amparai in a bid to quell the violence and to prevent it from spreading.

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious society. The Sinhalese, who constitute the overwhelming majority on the island, are, however, predominantly Buddhist. Tamils, who are the largest minority on the island, are a majority in the Northern and Eastern provinces. They are mainly Hindu but a significant number are Christian.

Muslims constitute Sri Lanka's third-largest ethnic group. Unlike the Buddhists, Hindus and Christians on the island, the Muslims draw their identity from their religion. They are scattered all over the island but are found mainly in the east. They speak the language of the area in which they live but the culture and political aspirations of the Muslims who live in Tamil areas are quite distinct and do not converge with that of the Tamils. It was between Tamil-

speaking Muslims and Hindu-Tamils in the east that violence broke out

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. Today, while Trincomalee district - the northernmost of the three Eastern Province districts - has a large section of Sinhalese, Batticaloa is predominantly Tamil, while Amparai is mainly Muslim.

Eastern Province has seen some of the worst fighting over the past two decades, not only between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan security forces but also mass killings of one community by another. It is not uncommon to see entire villages - Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim - razed to the ground in the east.

What or who actually set off the bloodshed and arson last week is still unclear. The Muslims have blamed the LTTE while the LTTE has pointed an accusing finger at "Islamic extremists". The unrest began in Muthur, near Trincomalee, after Muslims called a general strike in protest against alleged extortion by Tigers. The unrest quickly spread to other parts of the province.

Tamil-Muslim suspicion has existed for decades - Muslims accuse Tamils of "collaborating" with the Sinhalese during the anti-Muslim riots of 1915 and Tamils believe that Muslims have betrayed the Tamil cause by voting for Sinhalese parties.

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 leg-

ends with which the Hindu Tamils

identified.
With the rise of Tamil militancy, Muslims distanced themselves further from the Tamil cause. Muslim extremism increased. There were reports that money from the Middle East was pouring into the hands of Muslims to help them arm themselves against the Sri Lankan forces, who were then being trained by the Israelis. In fact, it was believed that the LTTE, too, was receiving weapons from the Israelis at that time.

Tamil-speaking Muslims do not support secession of the Tamil areas from Sri Lanka. An independent Tamil Eelam is not in their interests as they will not only be a minority there but also lack the bargaining power they currently have in Sri Lankan politics (the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, or SLMC, is part of the ruling coalition today and was a part of the previous government as well). The SLMC demand for a territorially non-contiguous Muslim majority council comprising all Muslim areas in the northeast - a demand that was "tacitly promoted" by the Sri Lankan government,

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.

In 1990, the LTTE drove Muslims out of Northern Province. About 65,000 Tamil-speaking Muslims were forced to relocate to other parts of the island. Having failed to win the support of the Muslims, the LTTE decided to evict them. Massacres of the Muslims followed.

"Taraki", a columnist well informed in Tamil affairs, wrote in the early 1990s that the LTTE's post-1990 anti-Muslim policy was a result of the Tiger leadership deciding to go along with the advice of its eastern cadres that the LTTE would have to respond to the demands of Tamils in the east to defend them from Muslim attacks.

Since then, it appears that the LTTE has realized the shortsightedness of its strategy, for Muslims are an important part of its logistics network, and that suffered. It resulted in the LTTE being branded as a Hindu group by some sections, which it was not. Besides, there was a realization that addressing the Muslim question was a key to a political solution of the crisis.

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Soon after the LTTE and the Sri
Lankan government signed a
ceasefire agreement in February,
the LTTE leader Velupillai
Prabakaran and the SLMC leader
Rauf Hakeem endorsed a deal, a
key component of which was that
those Muslims who were evicted

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 extor-

While it is possible that the eruption of violence last week was sudden and spontaneous, the possibility of it being planned cannot be ruled out. Analysts hint that sections opposed to the peace process could have initiated the violence. Sections within the Sri Lankan security forces are against negotiating with the LTTE. The Muslims, it is said, feel excluded in the current peace process. They fear that in a rush to do a deal with the LTTE the government will ignore Muslim concerns. They fear that their rights will be undermined in a set up dominated by the Tigers and if the Northern and Eastern provinces are merged as per the LTTE's demands.

There are Tamil armed groups who are opposed to the LTTE and resent being sidelined in the peace process. It is believed that within the LTTE, too, the eastern Tigers are opposed to negotiations. Whether the LTTE's eastern cadres are

fueling the violence is a moot point.

The outbreak of Tamil-Muslim violence draws attention to the fact that the government cannot expect a lasting peace by appeasing the Tigers alone - it will have to look into Muslim grievances as well.

Courtesy: Asia Times Online

ΙΝΝΙΔ

The reshuffle

ZAGLUL A. CHOWDHURY

AJOR 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. The elevation of Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani to the position of deputy prime minister was being talked about for a long time and speculations in that direction gained currency in last few months because of a deteriorating health condition of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who is the main strength for the BJP and the coalition in power.

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. Obviously in such circumstances, the question who would step into the shoes of Vajpayee is a timely and relevant one. The almost simultaneous reshuffle in the government and the party may be not unexpected but it underlines that the hard liners have been given more importance. It evidently gives the impression that the BJP may be deliberately seeking a distance from its liberal image and getting closer to the Hindu nationalist policy.

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.

The BJP has to forge alliance with several smaller and regional parties both before and following the last general elections for the simple reason that it would allow it to form the government of which BJP is the main constituent. But in such a government, the BJP cannot dictate terms since a kind of consensus is required on important decisions. The ruling multiparty national democratic alliance (NDA), as such, follows the coalition agenda in running the government and not the BJP programmes as many BJP men would have liked. The liberal and saner sections within the BJP feel that this is best way to keep the party in power because without the support of the allies BJP alone do not command the required majority for forming a government.

Besides, they are of the view that the moderate image of the party will endear it to all communal sections whose support is also needed for the purpose of winning polls and conforming the secular character of the country as far as possible. But the hard liners are opposed these policies as they favour to promote the causes of Hindu nationalism. And some of the leaders of this section including Advani, another senior minister Dr. M.M. Joshi and new BJP chief V. Naidu are seen as those who have consolidated their positions in the changes in the government and the organisation.

There is no denying that the BJP experiences inner problems on several sensitive issues on communal lines like supporting or opposing the construction of a Hindu temple on the ruins of a mosque as being pursued by the religious extremists like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad or on the issue of dismissing the chief minister of the BJP-run government in the western Gujarat state. If the moderates prevailed on the first issue, the hard liners certainly had their say upheld as chief minister Narendra Modi remains unaffected despite calls for his ouster by the opposition. Many civil society bodies and also saner section of the NDA alliance. He was largely seen as encouraging the violence. Needless to say, several components of the NDA believe in secularism.

The elevation of Advani to second position in the government and that of Naidu as the party chief will embolden the hard liners both in government and the BJP. The new deputy prime minister is viewed as a successor to Vajpayee as prime minister on due course although the party denies that there is any succession plan. The BJP-led NDA suffered setbacks in the several state assembly elections in recent times and the BJP was under pressure from the hard liners for revamping the party before going to at least ten state assembly polls in the next year and national polls in 2004. It remains to be seen whether the party will be benefited by the changes in the BJP leadership that brought more hawkish to the top.

Influential section of the party feels that it was under the leadership of Advani as the BJP chief several years ago the party rose to a consolidated position from relative obscurity and argues that it is time to rely on same spirit to rejuvenate the party. The moderates do not see eye to eye to this line of thinking as they feel this may alienate the party from the minorities and less communal people. The new faces in the ministry are mainly the BJP and not from other coalition partners.

Film stars Binod Khanna and Satrugna Sinha have been made ministers as they are considered to be close to Advani and Naidu. But the expansion of the ministry may bring strain the NDA many of whose partners will see the developments as lessening of their importance in the alliance and may not approve the likely tendency in the BJP-dominated government of calling shots in hard line policy on key matters.

However, the swapping of the important foreign affairs and finance ministries between Jaswant Singh and Yashwant Sinha has little to do it as such in the context of efforts to increase influence of the BJP and its hawkish section. But the dropping of some ministers including Maneka Gandhi from the government is being interpreted as reducing the influence of secular forces. In any case, the hard liners in the BJP and NDA government look like set to exert more influence in the coming days.

Reducing nuclear danger

PRAFUL BIDWAI in New Delhi

NE 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. More than a billion people in South Asia once again came close to the

INTERVIEW

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

"Nepal should not be allowed

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. Britain chaired the conference. The

five-member Nepali delegation was lead by Shankar Sharma from the

National Planning Commission and also included the prime minister's wife,

Arzu Deuba. The Charge' d'Affaires Andrew Mitchell of the British Embassy

in Kathmandu, who attended the London meeting, tells what happened.

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. (The second possibility arises from one interpretation of India's current nuclear doctrine, of keeping warheads and missiles separated and

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).

There were reports too of special surveillance of each other's missile dispositions, and in the Indian case, of a rudimentary (but perhaps unreliable) command and control system having been put in place. There were also training exercises to fight in an NBC (nuclear, biological and chemical weapons) environment -- with equipment whose utility is extremely doubtful. But let that pass.

The point is, the nuclear danger was, and probably remains, very, very, real. As this Column suggested on May 16, on the basis of a US official's (Bruce Riedel's) testimony, Pakistan had prepared to launch a nuclear strike on India during the 1999 Kargil war. It seems far more likely that both countries made similar preparations in the more recent -- and potentially far grimmer -- conflict, involving the largest military mobilisation anywhere since World War II.

where since World War II.

There is an important lesson in this for everyone -- including, I venture to say, supporters of nuclear weapons and advocates of deterrence. There is an urgent need for nuclear risk-reduction measures in South Asia -- simply because we must do everything possible to prevent the use of nuclear weapons whether by miscalculation, accident or design. Even hawks will agree on the first two, unless they are certifiable imbeciles.

The likelihood of a nuclear conflict is higher in South Asia than anywhere else in the world. Nuclear weapons are most likely to be used in wartime or near-wartime conditions. That's when mutual suspicions and tensions are greatest. This condition applies, with a vengeance, to India and Pakistan, which have been at a hot-cold war for 55 years. Today, they are going through a particularly ugly phase in their rivalry.

Mind (Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament), a peace group set up in 1983 in Bombay and then re-established in Delhi and Bombay in 1998, has proposed some highly realistic and modest nuclear risk-reduction measures (NRRMs). They are meant to address four potential risks, which are especially high in South Asia These are: (a) use through miscalculation because of faulty information processing or flawed technologies; (b) unauthorised use: (c) accidents, fires and explosions in the vicinity of nuclear weapons; (d) rumours of imminent use, and hence, panic behaviour in crowded urban centres

The first of these dangers is often underestimated. But it bears recalling that miscalculation, misperception and technical glitches are extremely common in the handling or management of nuclear weapons systems. For instance, during the Cold War, just between 1977 and 1984, there were 20,000 false alarms, of which 1,000 were serious enough in the US to have to go to the next higher level of command for evaluation.

This happened despite the fact

that the US and the USSR had invested something of the order of \$900 billion in command and control systems designed to prevent mishaps and errors in information processing. The probability of miscalculation was high, but there was very little time to take remedial action — barely two to four minutes in the case of a critical Presidential decision in the US, and not even

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. This could acquire worrisome proportions in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, where fundamentalists have penetrated the armed forces. (There are also reports of the army's inclination to disperse nuclear weapons.) Not to be dismissed is the possibility of nukes falling into the hands of vengeful or terrorist sub-state groups.

The third danger pertains to a

The third danger pertains to a South Asian speciality: propensity to accidents and fires. India and Pakistan have extremely high rates of industrial and military accidents -- roughly 10 times than the world average. Such accidents can ignite the high explosive (HE) lens or "trigger" surrounding the nuclear core of a bomb. This vulnerability increases when nuclear weapons are kept on high alert and especially when rockets are liquid-fuelled -- as are the Prithvi and the Ghauri.

Not to be dismissed are panic behaviour and stampedes. In South Asia, rumours can play a huge role. They are, typically, only poorly or belatedly (if at all) countered by our governments.

All this calls for several NRRMs. Arguably, the most important is dealerting or taking weapons off the state of instant readiness for use. The most radical — and most recommended — form of this is to separate the warheads from the delivery vehicles and place them at a distance from one another. Incidentally, both India and Pakistan have endorsed resolutions at the UN (the latest one being A/56/24C of November 29, 2001) calling for dealerting.

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.

Equally important are transparency and verifiability of NRRMs and the translation of certain doctrines into practical measures on the ground. For instance, India and Pakistan can both take technical measures to provide warnings that an unwarranted launch is being prepared, and at the same time provide enough time for this to be checked. This could prevent a panic-driven launch. India's No-First-Use pledge and its "minimum nuclear deterrent" doctrine should logically rule out tactical/battlefield nuclear weapons and a huge triadic (land, sea and air-based) arsenal.

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. NRRMs are no substitute for disarmament.

NRRMs or kindred confidencebuilding measures have another limitation. They become most effective when located in a cooperative context and based on a predisposition to trust. But that is n o excuse for NOT beginning a process to negotiate NRRMs for the safety and security of South Asia's peoples, and as a step towards the region's complete denuclearisation.

The writer is one of India's most widely published columnists. Formerly a Senior Fellow of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, he is a winner of the Sean MacBride Prize for 2000 of the International Peace Bureau. This piece first appeared in The News of Pakistan.

President and aspirants

M ABDUL HAFIZ

ITH 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. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress (I) which are two most influential political blocs in determining who the next president will be - remain divided with their parties' own peculiar considerations. As a result a contest seems more than likely with a colourful array of aspirants seeking election to the highest constitutional post of India.

The Congress (I) favourite KR Narayanan deserves, according to the party, a second term by virtue of his outstanding track record as the principal trustee of constitutional value. As Congress (I) spokesperson puts it, Narayanan 'has performed his constitutional norms with excellence, while never exceeding his brief'.

BJP did not quite agree to this view. To BJP, Narayanan 'was not in tune with the party', although few would subscribe to the idea that the president of the republic had to define his worldview in terms of a party's ideology. With the Congress (I), the left and at least one of the former prime ministers i.e., V P Singh stating their position unequivocally, Narayanan enjoys a higher degree of committed support than any other presidential aspirants.

In the meantime, Narayanan is learnt to have agreed for a fresh term only on the condition of consensus about his candidature while according to Congress (I) President Sonia Gandhi who met him late last month, Narayanan has 'an open mind' in seeking another term of office.

Although a subsequent Vaipayee-Sonia meeting did

not produce a consensus on the issue there are elements in NDA who favour Narayanan's continuance in Rastrapati Bhavan as there are elements in opposition camp who oppose the idea. For example, the Samajwadi Party which has reasonable numerical clout in electoral college has, according to party spokesperson, 'strong reservation' about Narayanan who dismissed Romesh Bhandari as Governor of Uttar Pradesh for the latter's alleged tilt towards SP leader Mulayam Singh. The Bahujan Samaj Party (SP), even with its avowed agenda of Dalit empowerment has almost decided that its newly crafted alliance with BJP in Uttar Pradesh is more crucial at this juncture than ensuring the continuity of its Dalit compatriot in power.

Apparently, there is a sharp polarisation over a second term for Narayanan. The BJP considers Narayanan as its opponent who opposed the party's programme to revise the constitution and more unforgivably thwarted the first of three miscued efforts by the BJP and its allies in Bihar to dismiss a legitimately constituted state government.

The Congress (I) and the left are angry at the manner in which BJP seems to be creating a situation in which there will be presidential contest and a self-respecting Narayanan will be obliged to bow out of it.

However the other names that have emerged so far conspicuously failed to enjoy any broad-based support. With the general mood favouring a consensus and Vajpayee authorised by the NDA to take a decision, the prime minister's task was expected to be relatively easy. But it was rendered complex with the first name proposed, that of Maharashtra Governor P C Alexander. The choice did not enthuse most of the NDA partners whose indifferences are attributed to the fact that he was Principal Secretary to two prime ministers and witness from close quarter to the functioning of executive authority.

Since taking up his gubernatorial assignment Alexander is believed to have developed certain proximity to Shiv Sena chieftain Bal Thakeray. It is alleged that he did not use his power of counsel when in 1998 BJP-Shiv Sena government summarily rejected the meticulously recorded findings of the Sri Krishna Commission of inquiry into 1992-93 Mumbai riots. Although once an intimate of Gandhi dynasty, Alexander is believed to have fallen from the grace of Congress (I) because of these reasons.

The influential Telegu Desam Party is learnt to have favoured the vice-president Krishan Kant who was the governor of Andhra Pradesh before his elevation.



Another name likely to be sponsored by the TDP for consideration is that of the current Andhra Pradesh governor, Rangarajan, a distinguished economist and former governor of the Reserve Bank of India. In spite of Rangarajan's distinction, Krishan Kant will be TDP's first choice for a variety of reasons.

First, the last three occupants of Rashtrapati Bhawan have all served out 5 years internships as vice-presidents. Secondly, of all vice-presidents in independent India all but only two have been elevated to presidency. These factors may well become decisive if the deadlock persists. Since becoming vice president Krishan Kant, a politician of old socialist school, has cultivated fairly sound equation with BJP. He could be acceptable to Congress (I) while SP also has nothing against him.

The names of Karan Singh, scion of the ruling dynasty of Kashmir and I M Singhvi an eminent jurist also are in circulation as possible presidential contestants. The opinions on both names are sharply polarised. Karan Singh may find favour with Congress (I) but the BJP will find it hard to field the man who opposed Vajpayee in Lucknow Lok Sabha contest in 1999. Singvi's image with both Congress (I) and BJP is that of an opportunist. He struck an alliance of convenience with the BJP to gain a Rajya Sabha seat after enjoying the favour of Congress (I) in all preceding assignments.

The star candidate this time will, however, be APJ Abdul Kalam, the country's space scientist, whose name has been discreetly circulated by sections within the BJP. Apparently disinterested Kalam himself, till recently a pivotal figure in India's missile programme, seems deeply embarrassed. At a public function in April last he brushed off questions about his preparedness for the post. Teaching students science, he says, is his greatest joy which, to his mind, can not be replaced by anything else. Kalam obviously prefers the easy informality of laboratory to stiff ceremonial atmosphere of Rastrapati Bhavan.

Yet none - no party or individual is likely to oppose him. While the BJP has a high stake in him to wash off its stained hand after Gujarat, others including Congress will have genuine respect for his candidature to shore up the battered image of secularism in India by elevating a Muslim to the country's top post. It is a different question whether Kalam, a reluctant scientist, can at all be roped in to participate in the event.

MAbdul Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

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. She envisaged a small, private, international brainstorming meeting, which would develop cre-

Question: It was originally

designed as a small, high-level

to be a failed state"

ative thinking on responses to the crisis. But the crisis deteriorated very rapidly in the early part of the year, particularly as a result of the Maoist attacks on development and civilian infrastructure. We saw the impact on civilians, on the ordinary people of this country, becoming a real and direct issue. And so we saw the need to accelerate, and to widen and deepen the initiative. We discussed this with our Nepali friends, and with our partners. And we ended up with the London meeting.

Q: Which you attended. What was the overall atmosphere inside?

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

could not have been better.

Q: But were there differences in approach between Nepal's immediate neighbours and the

western powers vis-à-vis the insurgency? A: This, I think, was the most significant achievement of the meeting. Our first priority was to explore the thinking of partners on the core issues around the conflict. We were encouraged by the discussions, which delivered broad and unanimous agreement on the key priorities. These were reflected in the Chairman's Statement We condemned terrorism and expressed support for the Government of Nepal's efforts to combat Maoist violence. We noted that the conflict posed a threat to regional stability, and the human rights of the people of Nepal. We discussed possible assistance to a future peace process. And we noted the need for an integrated approach to security, reform and development, stressing the urgent need to tackle poverty, exclusion, poor governance, discrimination, corruption, livelihoods and

human rights.

Q: Your Foreign Office Minister Mike O'Brien said after the meeeting last week that Nepal must not be allowed to become a "failed state". Did the partici-

pants see signs of that happening?

A: That's right. We believe it is imperative that the international community should coordinate its efforts to assist the government of Nepal in its struggle against terrorism. Nepal should not be allowed to become a "failed state". I realise that this is strong language, and an horrendous prospect. We may be a long way from this prospect today. But the dangers exist. We have all

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

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: Clare Short said that there was an urgent need to address the underlying issues of corruption, discrimina-

lying issues of corruption, discrimination 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. We believe that there must be a peaceful, political resolution to the crisis in the country. And we ardently hope that such a resolution will be possible. But we believe that, even if there is such a resolution, unless the underlying issues of corruption, exclusion and poor governance are addressed, the problem of conflict will re-emerge in some form, at some point in the future.

Q: And did the issue of human rights violations

come up?

A: 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 noncombatants. We also discussed the central role of civil society in monitoring and developing responses to the

Q: How about concerns of some delegates that the insurgency may be a broader threat to regional security?

A: Yes. The meeting expressed its concern at the possible impact of the conflict on wider regional stability.

I think we all recognise that a deepening conflict is a very negative influence in regional terms.

Q: The UK chairman of the meeting called for "the strongest possible political leadership" in Nepal.

What kind of leadership was he talking about?

A: We all recognised that strong leadership was a pre-requisite. This was not a coded reference to any particular political construct. That is a matter for Nepal and the Nepali people alone. But I think we recognise that Nepal needs the focussed guidance of enlightened leadership if it is to plot a course out of crisis. This is in the interests of all of the people of Nepal. Now, more than ever, is a time for stable governance.

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