

SRI LANKA

The (im)possible dream of peace

FEIZAL SAMATH

WITH peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tiger rebels starting next month, most Sri Lankans believe this is where the hard bargaining starts - but still hope and pray that the talks will not break up and end in yet another cycle of violence.

In the wake of the August 14 announcement that peace talks would begin in Thailand in mid-September, there has been no shortage of signs of hopefulness that the decades-old ethnic conflict in this South Asian island nation may be near an end.

A day after the announcement of the talks' date, thousands of pilgrims from the country's two main ethnic communities, Sinhalese and Tamil, gathered at an historic Roman Catholic church and prayed for peace and reconciliation. "No one will benefit by war. Not only people but the whole country and even governments are destroyed by war," Bishop Frank Marcus Fernando said in a homily, urging devotees to march towards peace. The church in Tamil-rebel controlled territory drew a record 400,000 devotees.

Thousands of members of the majority Sinhalese community, like the bishop himself, who celebrated the annual festival at the Madhu shrine off the northwestern coastal town of Mannar along with thousands of Tamils, a minority community fighting for equality in the distribution of education, land and jobs. "We want peace. We are tired of the war," says a Sinhalese woman, jostling with crowds to get near the bishop.

Unarmed members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas, as the Tamil Tigers are called, were also reported to have mingled with the crowds. It was the biggest-ever crowd in 20 years at the Madhu festival, which normally draws large crowds if not for the raging ethnic conflict since 1983. For much of the period between 1983 to end-2001, the north and east have been inaccessible to the majority Sinhalese southerners due to fighting.



Left: Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the LTTE, is seen in a 1993 file photo; right: Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (R) speaks as Foreign Minister Tyrone Fernando (C) looks on during a news conference in Colombo

Trincomalee which were no-go areas in the past. "I visited Jaffna when my daughter was an infant. Now an adult, she would like to visit Jaffna out of curiosity," says Sarath Cooray, a Colombo-based journalist who says the peace process is for once cutting across political ideologies and other divisive forces.

"There is no doubt that people want peace and the talks to start," says Cooray, a supporter of the opposition People's Alliance led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The alliance has said it supports the peace talks, despite angry squabbles between Kumaratunga and cabinet ministers of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Front (UNF) government, with whom is the president is at odds.

Previous peace talks and ceasefires in 1985, 1991 and 1995 collapsed as both sides

accused each other of reneging on promises and building up military might during the talks.

This time, the situation looks unlikely to end up in another bloodbath at least for the next six months. "I don't think both sides would get back to fighting even if there are serious



differences in the next six months. The situation has changed from past times when peace talks were on," explains Kethesh Loganathan of the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), a local think tank. "The prolonged negotiation period has enabled people to get used to a ceasefire and enjoy it. People-to-people contacts are also increasing between the north and the south. Southerners are also seeing for themselves the enormous destruction in the north.

"There may be hiccups once the talks begin, but I believe these would be overcome as both sides appear to be determined not to go back to fighting."

An unofficial ceasefire in force since December, when Wickremesinghe's UNF routed Kumaratunga's party at parliamentary

polls, was formalized in February by the prime minister and Tigers leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The truce came amidst growing public opinion for peace and a negotiated settlement led largely by a section of the business community, which was forced to play a key role after rebel attacks on the Colombo airport virtually destroyed tourism and exports.

"That was a wake-up call," said Jagath Fernando, deputy chairman of the giant John Keells group and leader of the business-peace Sri Lanka First lobby group.

World opinion, particularly after terrorist attacks in the United States in September last year, also put pressure on the rebels to negotiate a political settlement instead of continuing a war that has cost more than 64,000 lives.

The conflict has also ruined an economy that should be growing by 8 percent or more per year instead of an average of 4 percent. "There are great hopes and expectations tinged with worry," says K Kanag Isvaran, a top commercial lawyer. "It's like setting a date for surgery." Like many, he believes that this time around, there is greater commitment to peace: "You see the public mood and the yearning for peace. That is a good sign."

Says Cooray: "There has been a state of tranquility and now we are heading into the critical period. Now it is between peace and war. It is anybody's guess. It is like an adventure."

A mega trade exhibition in the beautiful port city of Trincomalee, with 400 local and foreign companies taking part, drew large crowds when it was opened by Wickremesinghe on Friday. "The town is packed and we have never seen such crowds before," says Sinniah Gurnathan, a journalist. "There is a huge military presence because several politicians are in the area but people are freely moving around without being questioned. There are no security checkpoints."

Inter Press Service

PIC OF THE WEEK



Foreign ministers pose during the inauguration of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) meeting in Kathmandu August 21, 2002. Pakistan said at the meeting on Wednesday it was not possible to bring to a complete stop the infiltration of Muslim militants into India Kashmir, a key condition set by India to end a military standoff between the nuclear neighbours. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Tyrone Fernando did not participate in this meeting in view of the voting on Wednesday in the no-faith motion debate against Interior Minister John Amararatunga.

NEPAL

Monarchy turns a page

SUMAN PRADHAN in Kathmandu

IT seems unlikely, but many of the doubts raised about the long-term viability of Nepal's centuries-old monarchy in the immediate aftermath of last year's royal tragedy appear to have been put to rest.

In the events following the slaying of 10 members of the royal family, including that of popular monarch King Birendra, the monarchy's future looked to lay in doubt.

The murders gave way to the swift ascension to the throne by King Gyanendra, Birendra's younger brother, which ignited a wave of public protests. At the time many feared that with his political beliefs still unknown, Gyanendra would not turn out to be the constitutional democratic monarch that his slain brother was.

Birendra, by contrast, is remembered as a democracy-loving monarch who in 1990 bowed to the popular will and allowed multi-party democracy to flourish in the Himalayan kingdom. Birendra will go down in Nepal's modern history as the king who oversaw the transition from absolute rule to a constitutional monarchy.

But in the past two weeks in Nepal there have been signs that Gyanendra and his son, Crown Prince Paras, have been accepted to a large extent by this nation of 23 million people.

"The monarchy is changing ... it is evolving. We don't see it anymore as unstable. The days of uncertainty are over ... the king is liked by everyone," said Raj Kumar, a bar manager in Kathmandu.

The occasion that underscored this fact was the birth of the Crown Prince's son on July 30. The latest addition to the royal family, Prince Hridayendra, is second in line to the throne after his father Paras, who until this time had fathered only a girl. "There is considerable relief in the royal household," says Narayan Wagle, a political commentator. "It puts the succession issue to rest."

In many ways, the royal and public celebrations that followed the birth of the child were a poignant reminder of royal traditions, of continuity in the face of upheavals. And also of the loss suffered by the ancient Hindu ruling dynasty.

Just over a year ago, on the night of June 1, the monarchy lost 10 of its members, including its most popular monarch ever, King Birendra. All of them were gunned down by Crown Prince Dipendra, shifting the royal succession to his uncle King Gyanendra, the only surviving male member of the family.

To make matters worse at the time, King Gyanendra and Prince Paras both seemed to have a public relations problem with being popularly accepted.

In perhaps one of the darkest moments of its history, it appeared that the future of the monarchy - arguably the glue that binds the diverse and multi-cultural kingdom - was in serious doubt.

But today, King Gyanendra reigns with increasing confidence and acceptability. Though some question his actions - particularly his impromptu press interviews airing his political beliefs - no one doubts that the new king has stuck to the letter and spirit of the constitution.

"The king has done a commendable job thus far," says a political analyst with the think tank Center for Nepal and Asian Studies on condition of anonymity. "Though the doubts have largely been put to rest, there is still some uncertainty about the future. The main question now is will King Gyanendra continue to remain aloof and be the strict constitutional monarch or will he try to rein in the politicians who seem too embroiled in their petty politics as the country slides downhill," the analyst said.

"The way Nepal has been run for the last decade leaves much to be desired ... I mean the politicians

literally took the country apart by their short-sightedness. It is trying times like these that throw up a strong leader. We certainly hope to find one soon," said Bibek Sharma, a local company executive.

That Nepal has been on a downward spiral since 1996 is no longer debatable. A stagnant economy, some of the worst indicators of development anywhere in the world, and an increasingly violent Maoist guerrilla uprising in the countryside have attracted the world's attention to the tiny country for all the wrong reasons.

Though the violence has been muted in recent months, thanks largely to a draconian emergency rule in place since last November, many fear that the Maoists are only biding their time before they come out in force again to disrupt mid-term elections slated for November 13.

"This is the time when the country needs strong, visionary leadership," says Dhruva Kumar, a political scientist with Tribhuvan University. "But so far, the political class has completely failed to put the country on the right path."

It is for this reason alone that some commentators see a much larger role for the monarchy - taking over when the politicians have been proved to be a failure.

But they also say that any move by the king to take control would almost certainly lead to disaster for Nepal's young democracy. Except for that one lingering doubt, things are largely smooth for the monarchy.

So smooth in fact that King Gyanendra's son Paras, who was officially declared the Crown Prince last year, is also being accepted gradually by his countrymen. The young Crown Prince, who has worked hard to refashion himself as a mature and responsible figure, is winning plaudits by embracing the environmental movement and other popular causes.

Indeed, since last year's royal tragedy, and specifically when it dawned that Prince Paras was next in line to the throne after his father, many in Nepal began calling for changes to the royal succession laws. The rules, made and guarded zealously by the palace, stipulate that only male heirs can succeed to the throne. Daughters have been left out of the loop.

At the time Prince Paras' image was the problem. Just a year earlier, his dalliances with alcohol and reckless driving had led to the death of a popular musician, igniting a flurry of protests against the young prince. With such an image, politicians and others wanted the royal succession rules to be changed so that the throne could be passed on to King Gyanendra's daughter when the time came.

Influential voices from both the Nepali Congress party and opposition communist groups raised the issue in parliament. But nothing ever came of it.

But things have changed dramatically since then. As Crown Prince Paras' public visibility grows - he attends to ceremonial duties and is also the chairman and patron of one of Nepal's best know environmental organizations - so does his acceptance.

However, the turning point in acceptance must have been the recent royal birth. Aside from the official holiday proclaimed the day after the birth, people also celebrated the occasion in a very special, and quirky, Nepali way - taking out adverts in newspaper pages congratulating the young royal couple for giving birth to a future king.

Inter Press Service

PAKISTAN

Musharraf losing war on corruption

SHAHEEN SEBHAI

PAKISTANI General Pervez Musharraf is definitely losing control over his friends, colleagues, relatives and subordinates in his loudly proclaimed war against corruption - the pivotal argument he gives to keep Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif out of politics.

As stories of what is going on under his wings slowly ooze out, the scale of shady deals, secret contracts and run-away projects are as astounding as any of the big whoppers of Nawaz Sharif (the Motorway or Yellow Cabs) or Benazir (Islamabad New City or Zardari accounts or Surrey Palace).

In all honesty, General Musharraf may not even be in the picture of what is going on, but it is simply not believable after almost three years of rule. He has trusted his uniformed colleagues with the understanding that they would not let him down. But in the murky materialistic world of Pakistani society, if you don't have enough money, you cannot get anything - power, clout, social status, women, property. So those under Musharraf feel the need to get some quick money before the current structure gives way to new faces and new realities, complicated realities with elected players of all hue moving center stage.

In this context, some of the corruption stories of the present regime are indeed disturbing and need immediate attention of General Musharraf.

The now too obvious deal with the Hariris of Lebanon to hand them the money-spinning Pakistan Telecom, the reported Rs 25 billion Golf Course deal by former ISI Chief and Railways Minister involving Malaysian companies, reports of one minister involved in getting a chain of petrol stations, the tragic death of another minister [Omar Asghar Khan] who took away the secrets of Musharraf's first billion rupee scam, the loss of billions poured into PIA by Musharraf's hand-picked Chairman (who was incidentally rewarded and sent as an ambassador instead of NAB [National Accountability Bureau] asking some questions about his PIA tenure), the total incompetence (or is it deliberate policy) of NADRA to deliver ID cards in time. The list may not end but all these matters cannot be dismissed as trivial.

These are matters which the future NABs will find as potent as Motorway or Yellow Cab scandals.

What is more disturbing is the reaction of the ex-ISI chief to Press reports on the Golf course deal. He said the contract should stay secret as it is "in the national interest". A Golf

course on government land with a five-star hotel is matter of supreme national security which cannot be discussed publicly. How is Musharraf going to explain this one?

Musharraf's attempts to keep big time corruption under control may have succeeded for his first year or two, but not any more. His weak-kneed Ad-Hoc Public Accounts Committee (PAC), set up under IMF/World Bank pressure, could not prosecute any one but it did at least one good job -- it brought the cases of the present regime before the public through the media. Why the media was allowed into PAC meetings is another story but it was one of the conditions of IMF and World Bank. Now there are reports that the PAC is being abolished.

Musharraf's top officials have been complaining that the



cases, which were brought before the PAC, were "normal routine audits" but were presented by the media as "corruption" and this was not acceptable.

This argument has no legs as it was the PAC where the Rs 25 billion Golf Course was first mentioned before some media representatives and the word got out. The retired army general who heads the Railways treated the subject with contempt before the PAC, saying he could not disclose any detail because "it would be scandalized in the media".

So the general was hiding a scandal from the public eye, and unfortunately, could not do so successfully. The cat was already out of the bag and in Musharraf's lap, infected with all the nauseating stink. It is to be seen what deodorant he uses now.

With Musharraf heading for unknown political turmoil in October, these scars of "his" government's corruption, unless he quickly distances himself and comes clean on all counts, will haunt the Pakistani leader for ever as they do other former rulers. Even the three-month brief stint of caretaker PM Moeen Qureshi got marred by one small mistake he committed - brought his own brother, a police official, to the Prime Minister's Secretariat.

Musharraf is known to have accepted recommendations of his own brothers and in-laws for top government positions. One former bureaucrat, who went to IFAD in Italy, has many of his batch mates now in key positions. It is not just coincidental. Finally the treatment of millions of poor, landless tenants in mainland Punjab by Musharraf, who exploited them to the hilt in the April referendum by promising them all their rights, is the biggest dark spot on his three-year rule so far. What is the difference between any previous feudals-dominated political or military Government of the past and this one?

In fact now that the army itself is the biggest landlord, the use of such brutal State power against defenseless women appears out of sync with the claims of General Musharraf, who is not a feudal himself. But does it matter anymore as he has not been able to stamp his mark on this shameful face of Pakistani society.

When history judges Musharraf, he will be remembered as a well meaning person who did not have the courage to take on the status quo despite being the most powerful person the country ever had. It would not be noted as a failure of his office, but his personal failure.

Public relations and image building apart, Musharraf has turned out to be a weak man inside the garb of a tough commando. His U-turns, his political wheeling-dealing with known crooks, his shady deals, his fingering of the [Pakistan] Constitution to such a degree that people almost forgot what his last amendment was, will all go as his negatives.

One time Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) General Zia ul Haq, the late [military] dictator who disappeared in an American C-130 in mid-air, was the butt of jokes during his presidency. CMLA then stood for "Cancel My Last Announcement". Musharraf's "constitutional" changes have created his own COAS jokes. The latest being: COAS stands for "Can't Oppose Amendments, Stupid!" - "Come Offer Anymore, Sir."

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BHUTAN

Growing with change

THIS week the government welcomed a new prime minister. For most of us the occasion symbolised the maturity of an important stage in the political reformation initiated by His Majesty the King, Lyonpo Kinzang Dorji being the last of the five ministers elected to head the government on rotation.

Most of us would not grasp the full implications when His Majesty the King expressed his satisfaction with the performance of the government since the devolution of power in 1998.

But, as short as human memory often tends to be, we remember the shock and alarm - and the pain - that reverberated around the country in 1998 when His Majesty the King devolved all executive power from the Throne to the council of ministers.

We do not need to remind ourselves that we are among the

evolution of a centuries-old system. That was why an emotional public pleaded directly to His Majesty the King himself not to change the existing system which has always worked for Bhutan.

Looking back, we spanned a long historical experience in a short span of time.

Political reformation, Bhutanese style, is a specially demanding challenge because there is no system to emulate, no similar situation to draw from. Bhutan is creating its own unique system of governance, an initiative which is as bold as it is risky. Political analysts would be hard-pushed to identify another similar experiment of this daring and magnitude.

The ravings of Bhutan's critics do not really surprise us. In fact we can hardly blame them. Deep down many of us, not least the ministers themselves, might have harboured our own doubts and insecurities in 1998.

But we now learn that, with every special lhengye zhungtsho sitting, formalities give way to substance, hesitation to confidence. Each session is becoming more professional and business-like in its far reaching discussions and decisions. A close observer of the lhengye zhungtsho would have seen a government grow and mature before the eyes of the nation.

We are also aware that the royal vision is not confined to the higher levels of the decision making process but penetrates deep into all sections of society. We are all directly affected.

We are all an important part of the political evolution. We are involved in a process of profound change.

As it has often been quoted down the ages, there is no looking back.

Courtesy: Kuenselonline of Bhutan.

First national flag designed in 1949

TSHERING GYELTSHEN

A booklet soon to be released by the centre for Bhutan studies (CBS) gives a brief account of the history of the national flag and the national anthem and explains how the dragon and the name "Druk" came to be associated with Bhutan.

According to the booklet, the first national flag was designed at the initiative of the second king, His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck during the signing of the Indo-Bhutan treaty in 1949.

This flag was square-shaped and had a green dragon embroidered horizontally. The dragon was painted green in keeping with the traditional and religious reference to it as yu druk ngoem (turquoise green dragon).

It was the first flag of such a design and was used only for one occasion.

The booklet says that the national flag was used for the second time when the late King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, visited eastern Bhutan in 1956. Miniature flags based on the first version were designed and fixed onto the saddle of every tenth horse of the royal convoy, comprising over 100 riding and pack ponies.

The flag was redesigned with significant alterations in the late 1950s when the Gangtok-based Indian Political Officer came to Bhutan. The green dragon was replaced by a white one and was placed diagonally, the colour of the lower half was changed from red to orange, and the flag became rectangular measuring nine by six feet.

In 1968, when the royal secretariat shifted to Tashichhodzong from Thapa, His late Majesty started the tradition of hoisting the national flag in front of government offices.

The national anthem was composed sometime in 1953 upon the advice of His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. The

lyrics and tune were composed taking the national anthems of India and England as references.

Dasho Gyaldon Thinley, the Royal Guest Master, wrote the original 12-line lyrics of the anthem, later shortened to six lines by Dasho Shingkar Lam and the present DDC secretary, Dasho Sangay Dorji.

Bhutan's first bandmaster, Aku Tongmi, had composed the original music of the national anthem. The booklet also contains the English translation of the national anthem, both the old and the later versions, and the code on the use of the national flag.

A researcher at the CBS, Sonam Kinga, who co-authored the booklet along with another researcher, Dorji Penjore, told Kuensel that the centre decided to publish the booklet because not many people knew about the origins of these two important national symbols. "There is a whole history behind it," he said. "We thought we should document it."

subject and the latter should tackle the drought. When the States sought monetary aid and assistance, relief is delayed on the pretext of verifying and assessing the damage. The most unethical aspect is the discrimination made on the basis of which party is in power in a State.

Every Congress-ruled State is complaining against the step-motherly treatment. In this hour of crisis it is the bounden duty of the Centre to ensure the life security of every farmer. He must get food to eat and money to meet the needs of his family. In several places, cattle have died for lack of fodder or pastures. It is a gigantic problem threatening the life of 60 to 70 per cent of the workforce in the affected villages.

The need is crisis management on a war footing. There are two aspects to the problem: providing immediate relief to the farmers and ensuring the rabi crop.

As it has become a national problem, a meeting of all political parties, NGOs and the corporate sector should be held to evolve a national consensus. An effective implementation of the food-for-work programme should be ensured. All repayments and recoveries from farmers, whether as land revenue or bank loans should be deferred. To save the cattle wealth, fodder and cattle feed should be supplied free to the affected States. To facilitate the rabi crop, the required quantity of inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and pesticides should be provided to farmers in all the affected States. The cooperative credit institutions and other banks should change their lending policies to facilitate loans to farmers.

The writer is a former Union Minister. This piece is printed by arrangement with The Hindu of India.

INDIA

Tackle drought on a war-footing

BALRAM JAKHAR

ANECDOTES are often interesting as also instructive. When I was in my teens, my father told me an anecdote, which is still fresh in my mind: "A person asked his son how many eyes a horse had, and the boy promptly replied: two eyes. But the father said: "No son, a horse has four eyes. Two eyes in the front and two on its back, which judges the competence of the rider".

The NDA Government at the Centre under the leadership of the BJP is riding the horse of power and administration. But it has miserably failed to give correct directions to the administration on how to deal with the widespread drought in the country. Admittedly, 12 States are seriously hit Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Goa and part of Uttarakhand.

I have extensively toured several affected States, particularly Rajasthan, which has suffered the most. Forty to 100 per cent of the kharif crop has withered. The water level in the wells has gone down. Moisture in the land has evaporated, threatening even ready crop. With reservoirs drying up power generation has been affected. The farmer and farm worker have no money and the daily wage-earner has been worst hit. The situation in some villages is so distressing that farmers may resort to suicide. While the Government claims that it will not allow a single person to die of hunger, it has been slack in monitoring the drought. The Centre is politicising the issue saying that agriculture is a State