

Border skirmish

The need is to find a durable solution

THE latest exchange of fire between the Indian BSF and the BDR of Bangladesh, that took place at two border outposts in Satkhira district on Friday last, is further proof that matters are not being handled correctly in a sensitive area. It now appears that a negotiated settlement of any dispute between the BSF and the BDR is a thing of the past. If good neighbourliness is what the two friendly countries are supposed to work for, then they must find a solution, a durable one, to border skirmishes.

Rash and indiscreet moves have to be avoided to keep the situation under control. It is a matter of regret that New Delhi is often choosing aggressive diplomacy instead of dialogue and at times applying an overdose of it. The charges that Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani brought against Bangladesh a few days ago are an example of aggressive diplomacy being carried a bit too far. Such diplomacy cannot have any wholesome effect on bilateral relations -- it can only create mutual suspicion. The developments that followed Advani's comments were also far from positive. Obviously, it was not easy for Bangladesh to swallow the bitter pill, and still maintain a gesture of being totally unaffected by it.

But that was a kind of diplomatic manoeuvring where there was no possibility of any bloodletting. It hardly needs saying that exchange of fire is a different proposition. Unfortunately, the BSF men patrolling the borders with Bangladesh have the extremely dangerous habit of opening fire even when such action is totally uncalled for. The number of casualties on our side over the last ten years is pretty high, though Indians may have their own version of the incidents. The BSF can ill afford to ignore the truth that they are dealing with a friendly country, not a hostile one. They have to respect the international conventions in order to ensure peace along the borders. India, as the bigger neighbour, should show a greater sensitivity to the issue.

The problem cannot be left where it is for the simple reason that it will continue to embitter the relations between the two neighbours.

Pakistan's new dilemma

Will real democracy be restored?

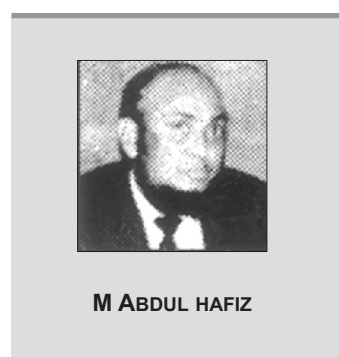
IT would be more than an understatement to say that Pakistan's military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf's latest move to hold onto power has disappointed us. He has behaved in exactly the same way as his military predecessors did in the past. All the hopes of restoring democracy and return of a civilian government seem to have been dashed. Awarding himself with sweeping powers to bring in laws and make amendments to the constitution which he suspended more than three years ago before reviving parts of it day before yesterday, only shows of General Musharraf's real intention to remain as the most powerful man in Pakistan's politics.

Theoretically the meeting of the 342-member National Assembly for the first time in more than three years shows the end of military rule. But sadly we have to say that in practice, it doesn't really mean the return of democracy as promised by General Musharraf in his many speeches to the nation since assuming power in a bloodless coup three years ago. No matter how hard General Musharraf tries to make the world believe that democracy has been restored and that he has fulfilled his promise, whether it is the democracy that people of Pakistan were expecting remains a debatable issue.

As expected, almost half of the elected MPs, mostly belonging to the opposition, have already protested the latest changes made in the constitution and rightfully so refused to accept him as the President as well as the Chief of Army. Some of them have even described the latest move as 'the transition from a direct military rule to a new system of military controlled democracy'. A lot in the future also depends on the international reaction to Pakistan's new political scenario.

It is most unfortunate that a proper democracy has eluded Pakistan since it got independence 55 years ago. There have been military interventions many times in the past and history says that there has not been a single instance of an elected government handing over power smoothly to another. Just as none of his military seniors could emerge winners in restoring democracy in Pakistan, we urge General Musharraf to take a lesson from the past and refrain himself from the power play, at least for the sake of real democracy in Pakistan.

Indo-Pak relations beyond military de-escalation



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AFTER almost a year's eyeball to eyeball confrontation with Pakistan Indian troops have begun withdrawing from the international border according to October 16 decision of the Union Government of India. Defence minister George Farnandes told Press Trust of India that the "redeployment of our forces deployed along the international border with Pakistan will be completed in a two-month time frame" -- ending what was considered arguably the most ill-conceived military manoeuvre in Indian military history. Intended to 'punish' Pakistan at least with a 'limited' military action for its continued 'cross border terrorism' in Indian Kashmir the much-vaunted 'Operation Parakram' seems to be ending with a whimper after having failed to achieve its objective. While there are sighs of relief at the development all over the world, the Indian public, baffled at this ignominious retreat, is nervously trying to find out what was it due to. The Indian public finds it all the more intriguing because as late as August last the defence minister George Farnandes ruled out any possibility of pull back and told the troops near Srinagar that there was no question of a troops' withdrawal, "until the situation returned to normal".

Moreover, when seen in the context of what impelled it, the collapse of Operation Parakram could not but come as a damper to common Indians. Speaking in Washington early this year Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister L K Advani clearly put up four-point agenda for any de-escalation. Pakistan, he said, had to hand over 20 key terrorist suspects, issue a

terrorism in Kashmir. The casualties in the terrorists' ranks were also quickly replenished by sending across the fresh cadres to maintain at least a constant level of terrorism in Kashmir. Indian military's forward deployment, as a coercive posture also did little to deter terrorists' attack against the recent election process. Eighty-four political workers-participants in the election were

could send in more number of well trained and equipped terrorists now directly recruited from Pakistan as well as Afghanistan and west Asia thus reducing dependence on locally recruited cadres. In recent years the number of foreign nationals crossing the LoC exceeded those of ethnic Kashmiri recruits. The Indian intelligence estimate showing less number of infiltration

India observed this time maximum caution and averted a full blown war which could snowball into a nuclear confrontation and has now taken a wise step by calling it all off. New Delhi had begun the troops mobilisation in the wake of the terrorists' attack on Indian parliament in December last and therefore it has been in the fitness of things that India first started the de-escalation

SAARC Summit in January. Although there was no indication that Mr Vajpayee would use the occasion to take up bilateral issues with Pakistan, the visit was nevertheless seen as a move that could serve to initiate a thaw. Whether or not the visit will materialise regrettably the old Indian refrain persists -- that there will be no negotiation with Pakistan until Islamabad stops 'cross border terrorism'.

Both India and Pakistan have traversed a long meandering path to resolve their differences and fought several wars to settle their scores making in the process the issues of their disputes intractable and bruised themselves and their psyche irreparably. The estimates of the cost of 'Operation Parakram' run between Rs 2000 crores and Rs 5000 crores for no gain whatsoever. Pakistan also must have incurred similar expenditure and damage during the confrontation. The friends of both India and Pakistan have welcomed the decision to end the military stand off and they expect the two sides to follow this up with meaningful dialogue to resolve other issues including the Kashmir dispute which is at the core of their mutual acrimony and antagonism. The political landscape is changing in the region following the elections in Pakistan and Indian Kashmir offering new opportunities to pick up the thread of talks from wherever it was disrupted. The war or conflict of any sort is never an alternative to negotiations for making bridges among the nations. In a modern war there is no real winner. Even if there is one he is also ultimately a loser. Let the next SAARC summit be the forum where this realisation may dawn on the leaders of the region.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

Both India and Pakistan have traversed a long meandering path to resolve their differences and fought several wars to settle their scores making in the process the issues of their disputes intractable and bruised themselves and their psyche irreparably... The war or conflict of any sort is never an alternative to negotiations for making bridges among the nations. In a modern war there is no real winner. Even if there is one he is also ultimately a loser. Let the next SAARC summit be the forum where this realisation may dawn on the leaders of the region.

categorical and unambiguous renunciation of terrorism, close down training camps for terrorists in Pakistan-held Kashmir and most importantly stop the infiltration of men and supply of arms into Kashmir. 'Operation Parakram' he said, was intended to act as a mailed fist behind a coercive diplomacy. The results were indeed disappointing and showed how little effect the mailed fist, in fact, had. Today when almost half a million Indian troops are trudging back to their barracks almost all the conditions laid down by Advani for any de-escalation remain totally or partially unfulfilled.

Pakistani President did make copious promises and publicly wanted to end infiltration into India-held Kashmir but under the influence of variety of events and pressures continued with his country's long standing policy of encouraging

It exceeds the previous high of seventy-five such killings during 1996 election. It is an irony that despite the supposed success of India's coercive diplomacy, Pakistan-backed terrorists felt free to act the way they wished.

The collapse of 'Operation Parakram' has however revealed some unsavoury reality for the military strategists of India. The most disturbing fact is that India's conventional superiority no more operates as a deterrence for Pakistan's sub-conventional offensive in Kashmir. Pakistan, aware of the fact that its nuclear capability will deter any Indian response to her low intensity war, can now carry on with impunity the hostilities that were unconceivable before the nuclear genie was out in 1998. It is significant that since the Pokhran II and Chagai explosion in 1998 Pakistan

for training in Pakistan confirms the changed trend.

At the height of Indo-Pakistan stand off Pakistan could call India's cards and discovered that its much hyped hand contained no aces. Pakistan took full advantage of it knowing fully that India's maneuverability, despite its overwhelmingly superior force, was sadly limited in a nuclear environment. Now with the change of guard in Srinagar the new government could face a significant escalation in cross border violence which never fully stopped. And it would be violence to which the concerned security establishment has yet to consider how it might respond after having exhausted most of the alternatives to deal with the phenomenon.

However, unlike in 1962 when India clashed headlong with China and courted humiliating defeat,

process. As already promised by Islamabad Pakistan too will begin pulling back its troops to peace location.

Now that the troops' disengagement has been set in motion one eagerly hopes that things will not remain confined only to military part of de-escalation process and the two governments will make serious moves for a wider process of normalisation of relations. It is historic opportunity that the SAARC summit is due to be held in January next and it is earnestly hoped that both the governments will seize this opportunity to infuse a new life in the checkered relationship of the two embittered neighbours. Late in the last month there was some good news when Indian defence minister George Farnandes announced that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee would visit Islamabad to attend the

necessarily remain so in an eight-day dispute." When asked by journalists if the Government was prepared to ban the strikes, Mr Prescott replied: "We are prepared to look at everything." The Prime Minister Tony Blair, however, told on BBC1's Question Time programme: "I don't think you can take away people's right to strike." But at the same time he went on to add: "The priority is public safety. If public safety ultimately requires that the Army crosses picket lines then that is what will have to be done." And the militant leader of the Fire Brigades Union, Andy Gilchrist, hit back by claiming that conditions attached to the Government's current 11 per cent offer would mean "sacrificing the fire service" which was "utterly unacceptable."

As the 48-hour strike drew to an end at 6pm on Friday, and the striking firefighters began returning to their duties, Mr Gilchrist congratulated the members of his union for successfully seeing the strike through and expressed the hope that the Government will see reason and that they will not have to strike again next week. He added he was "committed to more Government talks" and that there was still time to halt action planned for next week. The Prime Minister Tony Blair called the planned eight-day stoppage "deeply irresponsible", adding that further strikes would "put more lives in danger."

All said and done, however, there is an air of general misgiving that the public will soon find themselves stuck between the fire and the frying pan.

Fire service on strike

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

FIREFIGHTERS all over Britain ceased work and walked out en masse for the first time in twenty-five years at 6pm on Wednesday, 13th November. By 9pm the same evening, a 76 year old woman died in a house fire. Another man aged 80 suffered the same fate later that night. And a third man, also an octogenarian, died in a fierce blaze at his flat situated less than a mile from the nearest fire station. Four more people -- a mother and her three children -- died in a fire at a farmhouse in Wiltshire, although striking local firefighters left the picket lines to go to their rescue. Well, these were direct casualties of the 48-hour fire strike which ended at 6pm on Friday the 15th, but large numbers of people in many parts of the country encountered enormous difficulties as normal life was severely disrupted with schools, hospitals, other public services and private companies taking safety precautions. On Thursday and Friday London Underground was obliged to shut its deepest stations, particularly those with no staircases and served only by lifts, and had to cancel a number of services as more than a hundred Tube drivers refused to operate trains on grounds of safety in the absence of regular fire crews. Thousands of commuters were thus left stranded for hours while buses and taxis struggled to negotiate through streets jammed to capacity with traffic.

The strike was called by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) which is demanding a 40 per cent pay rise for

its members. The basic annual pay for firefighters at present is £19,800 which is slightly higher than a hospital nurse's pay but significantly lower than that of a police constable. A 40 per cent hike would raise a firefighter's pay to £28,500 an hour or just about double the national minimum wage. The FBU claims that this is perfectly reasonable and is not willing to settle for less. On the other

table and the strike action.

The government deployed the armed forces to tackle the emergencies arising out of the firefighters' strike. But the military personnel are not as well drilled in firefighting operations as the fire brigades, nor do they have access to the latest sophisticated equipment. They did their best to respond to emergency 999 calls during the strike period, but

the country and some blazes were even suspected to have been started deliberately. On any normal non-strike day there is an average of 200 hoax calls, but the number of such calls on the strike days nearly doubled. In the London area about a quarter of calls were hoaxes. The police and the other emergency services condemned the hoaxers and warned that bogus callers would

which would almost certainly turn the general public against the strikers -- and believes that it is now in a much stronger bargaining position and is confident of making the government concede its demand. It is now trying to force the government's hand by threatening a series of eight-day strikes, the first of which may be launched as early as Thursday, the 21st or Friday the 22nd of this

LONDON LETTER

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hand, the government claims that it does not have sufficient resources to meet the FBU's demand unless it can divert funds from such vital services as Education or Health, which, arguably, would not be a wise thing to do. Initially the government offered a 4 per cent pay rise to the firefighters, which was summarily turned down by the FBU. Following further negotiations, this offer was increased to 11 per cent, subject to certain conditions, over the next two years. This latest offer too falls far short of the FBU's demand, resulting in a stalemate at the negotiating

they were clearly not in the same league as regular firefighters. The scale of the task they faced was highlighted by a huge blaze in a fireworks warehouse in Manchester. Soldiers equipped with old fashioned fire tenders known as Green Goddesses were unable to reach the top of the building because their ladders were much too short. The problems of the 19,000 military personnel standing in for striking firefighters were also greatly compounded by hoax callers. Hundreds of bogus call-outs, many more than usual, hampered fire cover across

be traced and arrested for endangering lives. A spokesperson for the Crown Prosecution Service said: "In the current situation, where firefighting capabilities are greatly reduced, hoaxes could lead to death, serious injury or serious damage to property as fire crews are diverted from real emergencies" and the CPS will do its utmost to ensure that "hoax callers are brought to justice."

The Fire Brigades Union seems to be pleased with the outcome of the strike -- especially as the number of casualties was not terribly high,

month. The Government, however, does not seem to be in a mood to relent. It has already warned the firefighters that it was ready to bust the strike if they go ahead with next week's planned eight-day stoppage. Ministers do not rule out ordering soldiers to cross picket lines, to seize equipment, recruiting an alternative firefighting force, or seeking a legal block on further strikes. The Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott told the House of Commons: "All options are under constant review. What may be acceptable for 48 hours, does not

Lest we forget

Moulana Bhasani -- the leader of the oppressed

ENGR. M INAMUL HAQUE

M OULANA Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani is that great leader who first expressed his dream of an 'independent East Pakistan' at the Kagmari Conference in 1957 and then after 13 years observing the unpardonable indifference of the Pakistan Government, on the victims of 12th November cyclone declared our country as 'independent East Pakistan' on 23rd November 1970. In 1971 he was the Chairman of the Advisory Committee of the Mujibnagar Government in exile. He is such a legendary figure in the whole subcontinent that, he will live in the hearts of the common people whose rights he fought for during his entire life.

Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani was born at Dhargara village near Sirajganj town in 1885. In 1917 Bhasani attended the meeting and was highly attracted by the lecture of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das at Mymensingh. In 1919 Bhasani joined the Indian National Congress. In 1923 when Deshbandhu formed the Swaraj Dal, Bhasani worked for organizing this party. In 1924 he went to Assam and organized a big congregation of peasants at Bhasan Char. After this congregation he was named as 'Bhasanir Moulana'. In 1932 he organised another big congregation of peasants at Sirajganj, and became famous all over the country. In 1937 the Assam government introduced the repressive 'Line Law' against the migrating Muslim peasants. Moulana Bhasani formed 'Assam Chashi Mojur Samiti' and organised agitations against this law in Dhubri,

Goalpara and other areas.

In 1945-46 there was a 'Bangal Kheda' drive to evict Bengalee from Assam, which erupted riots. Moulana Bhasani toured to Mangaldai, Barpeta and Guahati areas to save the Bengalees. After creation of Pakistan he returned home and settled at Santosh of Tangail. He was elected to the State Assembly of East Bengal as a member of the Muslim League. He was first to demand right of speaking in Bangla language and spoke in Bangla in the Assembly. On the 23rd June of 1949 the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League was formed under his leadership. In 1950 he was arrested and sent to jail under Public Safety Act. Here he came across with the communists. During this time a Hindu Muslim riot broke out in the country. In Rajshahi Jail, a large number of communist inmates were killed by firing in the Khapra Ward. Moulana Bhasani went on hunger strike in jail protesting the killings. He was released when his health deteriorated.

Khawaja Nazimuddin, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan termed Moulana Bhasani and HS Suhrawardy as agents of India on the 16th February, 1951. At the start of the historic language movement, Moulana Bhasani became a central leader of the 'Sarbadaliya Rastrabhasa Sangram Parishad'. Moulana Bhasani was a leading figure of the Jukto Front formed in 1954 in East Bengal. At this time the front leaders AKM Fazlul Haq, Moulana AHK Bhasani and HS Suhrawardy were very popular. The Jukto Front led by this trio captured 228 out of 237 seats in the election and gained absolute majority in the Assembly. But differences emerged between Moulana Bhasani and his partners on the forma-

tion running of the government. On 30th May 1954 the Central Government dissolved the Jukto Front Government of East Bengal on charges of failure to check the communist disturbances. An unprecedented repressive measure on the people followed afterwards.

Before dissolution of the Fazlul Haq Ministry, Moulana Bhasani left for London on 25th May 1954 to attend the International Peace Conference in Germany. The Pakistan Government put obstruction to his visit labeling him as a 'communist' and put embargo on his return to his homeland. After removal of this embargo Moulana Bhasani returned home from Kolkata on 25th April 1955. At this time, East Bengal was being increasingly deprived of its due share in economy, and its people were being increasingly suppressed by the Government of Pakistan. Arriving back home, Moulana Bhasani opposed Pakistan Government's policy of leaning towards the Anglo-American global axis. And it is in this context, that he mentioned twice, on 17th June 1955 and 15th January 1956, the possibility of creating 'Independent East Pakistan'.

Moulana Bhasani called for a council session of the Awami League on the 7th and 8th February, 1957 at Kagmari. It was a large congregation of intellectuals and political leaders from all over the subcontinent. At this congregation he told the audience that, if West Pakistan did not halt its repression of East Pakistan, then the wing would soon say good bye to West Pakistan. Moulana Bhasani severely opposed the policy of Suhrawardy led Pakistan Government for signing the treaties of SEATO and CENTO, and left the Awami Muslim League and formed his National Awami Party.



Moulana Bhasani: Dedicated to the cause of the poor

Moulana Bhasani led the historic 1969 mass movement, which forced President Ayub Khan's military government to fall. On 12 November 1970 when a severe cyclone hit the southern coastal areas of Perozpur, Barguna, Patuakhali, Bbhola, Lakshmipur and Noakhali a million people died and more were affected badly. Moulana Bhasani visited the areas but found total indifference in the attitude of the govern-

ment. Returning to Dhaka he said in a mass meeting on 23rd November, "They West Pakistan just don't care for us" and declared 'Independent East Pakistan'.

Moulana Bhasani fought uncompromisingly for the oppressed people during his whole life. When Bangabandhu declared at the race Course public meeting, 'Ebarer Sangram Muktir Sangram, Ebarer Sangram Swadhinatar Sangram' on the 7th March 1971, Moulana Bhasani extended his support to that at the Paltan Maidan public meeting on 9th March 1971. At the time of War of Liberation, the leftist forces of the country in exile formed the 'Bangladesh Jatio Mukti Sangram Samannoy Committee' under his leadership at Belehata, Kolkata. On the 9th September 1971 the Bangladesh government in exile formed the 'All Party Advisory Committee' under Moulana Bhasani's leadership. The other members of this committee were Moni Singh, Mozaffar Ahmed, Monoranjan Dhar, Tazuddin Ahmed and Khondokar Mushtaq Ahmed.

After independence of Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman used to take advice from Moulana Bhasani to run the country. Moulana Bhasani spoke for the need of strong opposition to establish real democracy in the country. On 14th May of 1973 at a public meeting he declared to go for hunger strike to bring the prices of food, cloth and consumer goods down. He was compelled to break his fast on 8th day of the hunger strike as his health condition deteriorated badly. In April of 1975 India started unilateral withdrawal of the Ganges water through Farakka barrage. On 15th August Bangabandhu was assassinated. The relation

between India and Bangladesh became cold. In 1976 Moulana Bhasani took a long march programme to resolve the Ganges water dispute. 18th April he wrote a letter to Mrs Indira Gandhi on this issue and led the historic long march on 16th May. But after this event his health deteriorated. Moulana Bhasani died at Dhaka Medical College Hospital on 17th November, 1976. The year after in 1977 the Ganges Water Treaty was signed between India and Bangladesh.

Moulana Bhasani, the original dreamer of an independent Bangladesh, the lifetime crusader against oppression on the masses, the great leader of the common people, was hardly recognised or revered properly by any government till now. But he was the only leader whose name is uttered with equal respect by the leaders of all political parties. Moulana Bhasani was like Mahatma Gandhi who did never sought power but fought side by side with the oppressed people. Moulana Bhasani was like Ho Chi Minh who did unite all parties under his umbrella during the Liberation War. On the occasion of his 26th death anniversary, that passed off yesterday, I put forward the followings proposals to the government for due remembrance of and paying due honour to this great personality:

1. The Open University of Bangladesh be renamed as Moulana Bhasani Open University.
2. The Ramna Garden of Dhaka be renamed as Moulana Bhasani Uddyan.
3. The Moulana Bhasani Road from Shahbagh be extended down to Shapla Chatter.
4. The proposed Ganges Barrage be named as Moulana Bhasani Barrage.