

Syria in the eye of the storm

BRIGADIER GENERAL M. SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN (retd)

FORMER Lebanese Prime minister, a self-made billionaire, was buried amidst thousands of his followers chanting anti Syrian slogan. Hariri along with a dozen others were killed on Monday, February 14, 2005 apparently in a suspected suicide bombing on the Beirut water front that his farm reconstructed after 15 years of a devastating civil war (1975-90) that saw ruination of a city that could be termed as Asian Paris.

Hariri's rise to the pinnacle of power and accumulation of wealth was no less an amazing tale that could only rival episodes of the Arabian Nights. If not tremendously popular within his country, he had international standing particularly with Paris, Washington and Riyadh. He was a personal friend of French president Jack Chirac. He was Lebanon's post second civil-war prime minister for 10 years.

To his supporter and mourners Hariri's death viewed to be the end result of deep-seated conspiracy. The mourners on the street chanted anti-Syrian slogan pointing finger at Damascus for Hariri's death. Whether or not Damascus was involved in such crude and gruesome plot to kill, echo of the chant emanating from Beirut streets could be heard in Washington DC. The neo-cons in Washington must have noted the mood in Lebanon to conform their resolve for a 'regime

change' in the last Citadel of Arab nationalist socialist regime run by the only surviving Bathist in the strategic corner of old Levant, north east of Israel.

Whether Syria was involved or not with the assassination of Rafik Hariri is not what matters within the Washington's circle of hawks, but the process of regime change within Syria seems to have been set in motion. No wonder Damascus, feeling the heat more than ever before, was quick to forge some kind of unity with Iran on facing the immediate onslaught in the form of sanctions if any. Damascus indicated its willingness to pull back troops further to the Syrian border. But the Lebanese opposition, Washington and Paris demand full withdrawal as per UN resolution.

Be that as it may, on Damascus-Tehran understanding, much to reassure rest of the world, Iran stated that their stand was not against any power but to workout a joint strategy if economic sanction was imposed against them at the behest of Washington. At least that's how Tehran explains the recent announcement of closer co-operation after the Beirut bombing. Point to note here is that Syria, Iran and Iraq were on the list of 'rogue states' during Clinton administration, then identified as 'axis of evil' by George W. Bush but North Korea was included dropping Syria from immediate list for obvious reasons. Washington did not want to cluster its list with Muslim countries alone but

never removed 'cross hair' of the sight from Damascus.

Since the invasion of Iraq, USA has been accusing Syria of non-cooperation and sheltering Iraqi Bathists who had eluded US arrest. The rhetoric increased in almost daily accusation of Syria's unwillingness to rein in the Iraqis. Damascus

non as stabilisation troops turned into strength for the Muslims fighting the Maronite Christians and their factions.

End of the civil war came with the national elections under Syrian presence, main Christian faction boycotting. Syrian backed Elias Hrawi was elected as president and, in 1992, the

to move for UN resolution 1559 that called for end of Syrian 'occupation' of Lebanon. UNSCR 1559 was a major setback for Syria and must have encouraged Israel. It also gave reasons for the opposition to unite against the Syrian presence. Though Hariri never placed himself as opposition

But the Shia Muslims would like to see the back of a Shia force. Periodical conflict with Israel indicates the willingness of Hezbollah in engaging Israel to fight a direct battle.

However, whether Syria is responsible or not is debatable but Washington has enough tools to twist Syria if not with

The other big beneficiary is Israel. For Israel, withdrawal of Syria would mean weakening of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Regime change in Syria would ensure end of hostility for Israel and supremacy of the Jewish domination in the region. The other group, which is not out of the doubt, is right wing Phalangist Christians, who, as report reveals, maintains close links with many neo-conservatives in Washington. For certain they know that fingers would be raised towards Damascus. Therefore, one would remain sceptical while raising an accusing finger on any regional power unless an enquiry is held. But fact remains that Syria is likely to come under tremendous international pressure to withdraw from Lebanon now that the US has been taking the UN route. Damascus understands that well.

has been rejecting such finger pointing. Though earlier, persons like Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz denied in the Congress that Syria was in the US hit list, calling back its Syrian ambassador for consultation and earlier delivering stern message to Bashar al Assad may signal a change in that stand.

Since the Lebanese civil war, that involved all faction of the Lebanese religious and ethnic groups including the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation) in exile, and Israeli defeat, Syria maintains around 15,000 troops along the border inside Lebanon. Syria, that sent around 3,00,000 troops in Leba-

selection of Rafik al-Hariri as the Prime Minister was completed. Both men proved to be dependable allies of Syria. Hariri cultivated not only personal closeness but business ties with Syria. Of late it is said that Hariri became big critic of Syria. He broke with Syria when he resigned last year as prime minister and spoke of Syrian interference in their internal affairs. Rightly or wrongly he was flabbergasted as Damascus allegedly pressed to extend the term of present pro Syrian president Emile Lahoud suspending the constitutional limit. Syria denies such allegation.

It was also alleged that Hariri had encouraged US and France

leader but his stance on Syria might have emboldened the opposition demand. At least that was observed in the streets of Damascus on his funeral day. Lebanon is scheduled for parliamentary election in May. No doubt that present anti-Syrian frenzy would be a political capital for the opposition.

Apart from the internal politics, in the eyes of US and Israel, Syria is also seen as the main conduit through which Hezbollah, that was formed by the more militant pro-Iranian Shia members than AMAL of the 70's who were considered to be moderate, operates. Tel-Aviv is still engaged with Hezbollah who does not recognise Israel.

full-fledged invasion but by applying other means to effect a regime change. There is already the 'Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act-2003' that provides enough power to the US president to take action against Damascus. US trade sanction is already applied.

But the question remains, who could be benefited from Hariri's assassination? Suspected list though suggest Syria's name, but Damascus would be the biggest loser if any shred of evidence of involvement were found. At least Bashar is aware of that. It would be rather suicidal for Syria to have even consented in an act

like these. Yet Syria remains in the hook. Syria is under intense pressure from the Lebanese opposition that seems to be directly supported by the US. Syria knows it well. Would Damascus rock its boat when it is already facing the storm over Iraq? One may have serious doubt. Damascus is not likely at all, if it ever did, to fashion any assassination employing suicide bombers, the method that seems to have been used.

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It is hardly unlikely at this juncture that the US would open a second military front in the Middle East but may apply other options. One such option could be putting more pressure on Damascus, in US terms, to be

more proactive in closing its border and cease support to Iraqi insurgents allegedly sheltered in Syria. It may also put more sanctions and promote anti-Syrian factions like Washington did with INC (Iraqi national Congress) and Ahmed Chalabi. Whatever the options the US may choose to apply, it seems that Washington is ready to twist Syria's arms. That may add to more regional instability even affecting entire Muslim world, which is witnessing rapid spread of extremism.

However, the fast unfolding events in the Middle East do not suggest that crises are few, but are rather multiplying as events unfold, particularly in the so-called Crescent area. Unfortunately, these are those Middle Eastern countries which, according to Israel, are in a position to challenge Tel Aviv's ambition in the region. These are Muslim countries.

One may like it or not, but the US is already viewed in the entire Muslim world as anti Islam. This perception would not improve if the US hit list includes more and more Islamic countries. One cannot condone presence of foreign troops in another sovereign country, be it in Iraq, Lebanon or West Bank under any pretext.

All kinds of occupation have to end without any exception should the world body sincerely want to establish peace in the region and world at large

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A devastated coast line of Sri Lanka

PHOTO INTERNET

Post-tsunami Sri Lanka: Divisions remain

MOHAN K TIKK

When the tsunami waves struck Sri Lanka on the morning after Christmas, it was felt that the sheer magnitude of the tragedy might help bring the two estranged parties in the ethnic imbroglio closer together. Such expectations were further enhanced by President Chandrika Kumaratunga's address to the nation wherein she called upon all sections of the Sri Lankan society to rise to the occasion as one man. She also urged those involved in the relief and rehabilitation work to perform their functions without any bias for class or community among those affected.

But the ensuing events do not seem to have adhered to that script. Among other things, the government controlled Sri Lankan Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) made it worse by rushing to broadcast an utterly speculative report suggesting that the LTTE chief, Velupillai Prabhakaran, and his intelligence chief might have died in the tsunami attack. Though SLBC recanted later over this piece of irresponsible journalism, the damage had been done.

Then came the weekend visit by the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, to some of the tsunami affected parts of the Sri Lankan coastline. He visited the Hambantota district in the south and the Trincomalee harbour in the north-east. By the time he left the island, Annan was already promising to come back again to be able to visit the other parts of the coastline that had been equally hit by the sea waves. Such an assurance had become necessary since many Tamils living in the north-east were left with the feeling that their sufferings had been underplayed during this high profile visit.

Several Tamil opinion leaders expressed their disappointment over the UN Secretary General's inability to

visit places such as Batticaloa, Amparai and Mullaitivu which were among the worst hit parts. This gave rise to speculation that the Sri Lankan government had kept the UN Secretary General from visiting the Tamil majority areas. According to one newspaper report, the government was opposed to Annan visiting the LTTE controlled areas lest the Tamil Tigers would extract political mileage out of it.

Whether it was considerations of local politics, security or the paucity of time that had determined the UN Secretary General's itinerary, it was not a happy note for concluding the visit. However, Annan appeared cognisant of such sensitivities. "I am hoping to come back", he announced at the end of the two day visit, "and see all parts of the country and be of help to accelerate the peace process." If Annan were to play a role in giving a much needed push to the peace process, most Sri Lankans would feel amply rewarded.

Thus, the expectations that the tragedy wrought by the tsunami waves might help bring the two ethnic communities in Sri Lanka closer together do not appear to be coming true. Further, the Tamil Tigers have charged the government agencies of neglecting the Tamil areas under its control in terms of distribution of the relief supplies a charge the government has been quick to deny.

On the other hand, the Sri Lankan government has regretted that the Tamil Tigers have not responded positively to its invitation to participate in the national level committee on disaster management set up to oversee the relief and rehabilitation programmes. It is possible that the LTTE turned down the offer lest its participation be seen as compromising their demand for autonomous control of the relief and rehabilitation and reconstruction works in the Northeast.

That, however, does not mean that the LTTE are totally starved of resources for relief and rehabilitation. The Tamil Relief Organisation, which the LTTE runs as an NGO, has thrown itself vigorously into the relief and rehabilitation work ever since the first tsunami reports came in. The TRO has been reasonably well funded with donations pouring in from expatriate Tamils. Many medically qualified Tamils working abroad, too, have returned in the wake of the tragedy and have been actively engaged in volunteer work in the north and east.

In several respects, the TRO has been functioning better than any government agency engaged in relief, rehabilitation or reconstruction work in the island. This, in fact, is another argument advanced by the LTTE in support of its demand for autonomous control. It says that its record in relief and rehabilitation work is far better than the government agencies, which are usually lacking motivation and are inefficient.

The government, on the other hand, has argued that the LTTE would divert the funds, meant for relief work, for more belligerent uses if given the same. That should not be an insurmountable problem to overcome. It could be taken care of if proper monitoring mechanisms were put in place. But what is lacking here is mutual trust and confidence in each other's intents and instruments. The two sides would need to overcome these before expecting to move any further on the road to reconciliation.

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SECURITY OF SMALL STATES

Georgia-Russian Federation unequal relations

DR. MUHAMMAD RAFIQUIL ISLAM RIAD

In fact, it is Edward Shevardnadze, the well-known foreign minister (1985-90) of the erstwhile USSR who, as the first President of Georgia, took strong measures in 1991 to orient Georgia's foreign policy to the West and the US. Shevardnadze's start was quite satisfactory. Internally, the Georgians were pleased with a world famous leader like Shevardnadze, but slowly he became hegemonic. His thirst for power compelled him to apply Machiavellism in Georgia. He manipulated all political institutions, almost destroying them for his own interests. His foreign policy was addressed as a cult policy. In true sense, Shevardnadze spent long years in punishing his opponents till his departure from power in March 2004.

Georgia is a country inhabited by Georgians, Russians, Tatars and a few Chechens in Georgia, Batumi and Adjara. Ethnic divisions are deep in this poverty-torn country.. President Boris Yeltsin's regime pursued a workable foreign policy with Georgia. Yeltsin had a soft attitude towards Shevardnadze as both of them acted as democracy-loving politicians in the beginning of their careers.

In 1996, after Russia's withdrawal from Chechnya, Shevardnadze became pleased with Yeltsin as he backed the Chechen rebels, as is claimed by the hawks in the Russian establishment. After 1996 Georgia became a free country for the people of Chechnya (then independent, although no other country recognised Chechnya officially). Chechnya shares its border with Georgia. The Chechen fighters, who divided Chechnya into many parts to establish their influence over those, started confrontation amongst themselves. It is true that these warlords bypassed Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov (after 9/11 he is termed as a terrorist) from time to time and created anarchy in Chechnya, which brought miseries to the general Chechens. One section of the warlords began to control the rich oil-sectors only to make money. The Chechen administration used the Russian Roubles as its own currency. For their communication facilities the Chechens became dependent on Russia.

In the middle of 1999 President Yeltsin had to face sharp criticism (his family was facing corruption allegations and he was also in poor health) for Russia's defeat in Chechnya in 1996. In 1999, during the Yugoslavia crisis, Russia felt humiliated at NATO's strike on Belgrade without consulting it. These issues created grounds for Russia's re-advancement into Chechnya in the winter of 1999. Under pressure from the Russian military, some Chechen guerrillas fled to Georgia. President Shevardnadze at times used the Chechen rebels to increase his internal influence and

also to consolidate political power. Russia accused Shevardnadze of destabilizing it, mentioning that Chechen guerrillas were acting against Russian soldiers with the help of the Georgian army through the common border of Russia-Georgia time to time (strategically significant Pankisi-Gorge of Georgia borders Russia, which is a free haven for the Chechen guerrillas). Shevardnadze denied Russian charges and dubbed the guerrillas as 'refugees,' which angered Russia.

After 9/11, President Vladimir Putin again accused Shevardnadze of helping the Chechen guerrillas, calling them terrorists. Shevardnadze was in problems as a distinct Russian threat arose. In fact, Shevardnadze tried to restructure the Georgian army in line with the US and the West. Some army

in Russia. However, the West and US remained supportive of Shevardnadze's regime.

Shevardnadze's failure to re-structure his army in line with that of the West and US angered his people. For more than 12 years he had ruled Georgia. Georgia's army was used by Shevardnadze to suppress his opponents. Its involvement in internal conflicts in favour of Shevardnadze created negative impact in people's mind. There were a few corruption allegations against some high officials of the army who were his close aides. Realising all these, Shevardnadze's effort to join NATO was not successful. The general people lost their faith in Shevardnadze who, from time to time, hinted of leaving power after 2003. But finally it was proved that it was a political game of Shevardnadze to suppress

little for the strategic survival of Georgia. In early 2004 his opponents finally succeeded to unite against Shevardnadze. Anti-Russia sentiment was high in Georgia then and the army refused to support Shevardnadze any longer. People's movement became victorious and Shevardnadze lost power.

The result of a fair election in March 2004, Mikhail Saakashvili, a pro-US politician became the second President of Georgia. He was educated in the US and it is normal that under his leadership Georgia will try to re-structure its army with the help of the US and even the NATO.

Again, economically Georgia will have to survive with the US' and West's foreign aid. Georgia is a democratic country now. Traditionally it possesses a very rich culture, which is different from Russia's. The Russians



officers were taught English and the US sent military trainers to Georgia in May 2002 to help reshape its rag-tag army into a force capable of confronting the Chechen guerrillas. Thus it was possible for Shevardnadze to achieve US-backing. Again in May 2002 US anti-terrorist war became successful in Afghanistan. Putin diplomatically supported Bush in this war from the beginning. Russia again pressed Shevardnadze to end his backing of the Chechen guerrillas using its TV channels and media, which showed and promoted Chechen guerrilla movements in Georgia around Pankisi Gorge. Shevardnadze became active to neutralize these Chechens, as they were thought to be responsible for creating anti-Shevardnadze image

his opponents. In September 2002, Russia became critical of Shevardnadze for his high ambition of joining NATO. In fact, in April, 2002 then NATO's Secretary General George Robertson's desire to get Ukraine as a member of NATO caused Russia to be critical of Georgia's ambition of joining NATO.

However, a weak and small country, Georgia cannot survive geo-strategically without the backing of the West and US. Georgia considers Russia as a security threat which Russian leaders are well aware of. Although Shevardnadze served 5 years as the foreign minister of the former USSR (he dealt with the US on issues like arms control, disarmament, democracy and others), he worked a

are use to living under a strong leader whereas the Georgians like freedom.

In 1991 after the collapse of the former USSR, the Georgians wanted a separate land with separate identity. This identity is a 'sensitive' issue for the Georgians. The Russian Federation is still a military Super Power whereas Georgia is a small power. Possibly some moderate policy makers of Russian now feel that it may co-operate with tiny Georgia despite Russia's pressure on it at times. Saakashvili is capable of working with President Putin effectively.

At the same time, the West and US can help Georgia to survive as an independent entity within the sphere of influence of Russia.

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