

Iran under nuclear scrutiny again

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At the time of writing this piece, the outcome of the first meeting between the United States of America and Islamic Republic of Iran for the first time in 30 years scheduled for the 1st of October in Geneva was not known. Hopefully, their first encounter would engage the two nations in dialogue that would bring them together to work for peace rather than war and destruction towards which Bush seemed hell bent to go. Bush called Iran "an axis of evil" when he was threatening to browbeat the rest of the dissenting world to submission.

Iran is crucial to world peace for many reasons. First, its geopolitical location is something that no one can sidetrack. Second, it is a very rich country with capability to achieve goals it sets for itself. Third, despite what the western press may be suggesting, Iran is far from breaking in the seams due to internal political conflicts. Fourth, it has rich history and traditions; its people are proud inheritors of a civilization that have remained unbroken over thousands of years. Finally, it can be militarily attacked by any country, be it the United States or Israel that is just itching to take down Iran's nuclear installations that it claims are for peaceful use, only if the objective is to throw up the world in flames.

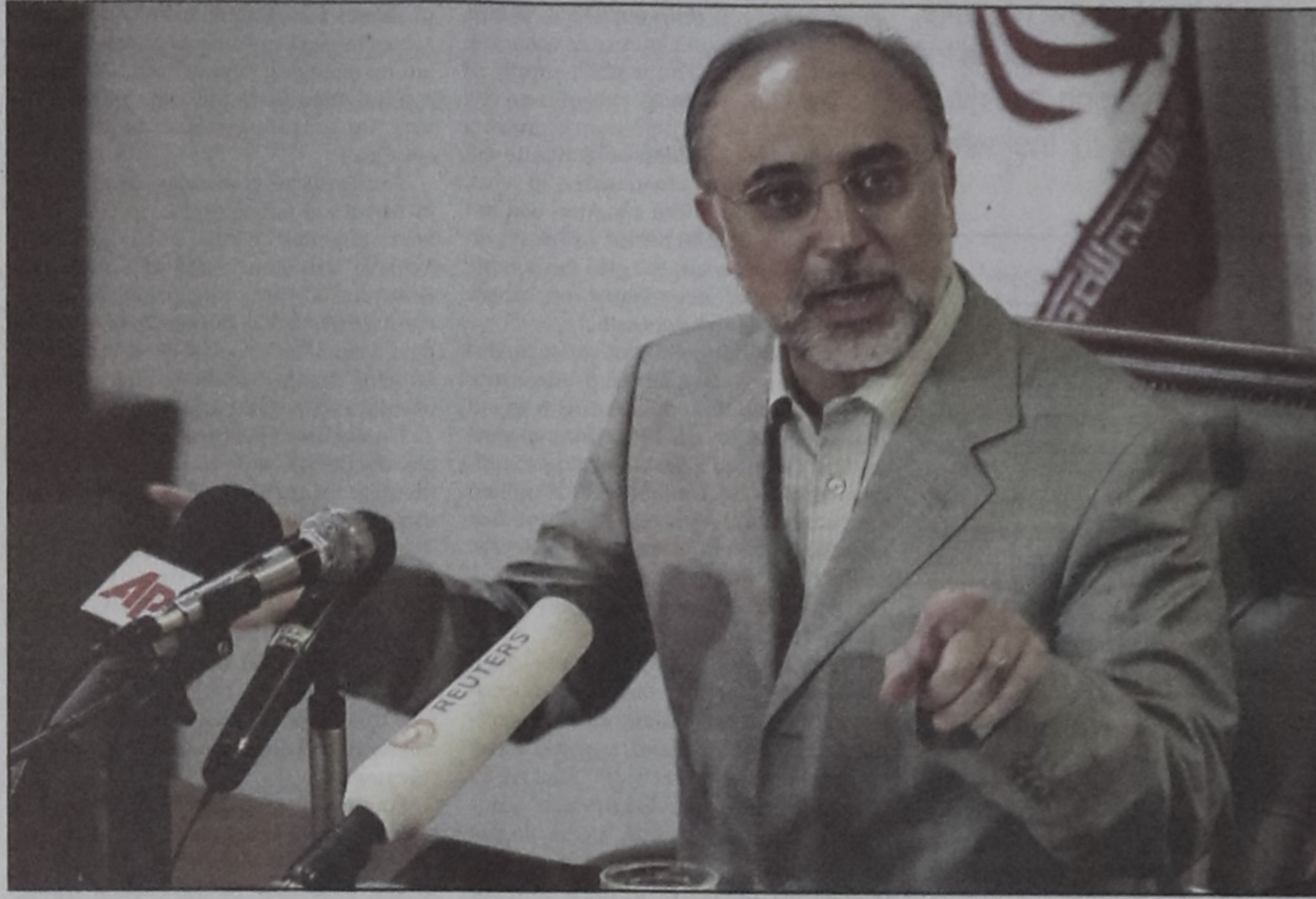
Hence, when Barak Obama made his first overture to Iran soon after becoming the President for engagement, the rest of the world was relieved because it ended what Bush had threatened, a new World War by attacking Iran. In Cairo, a few weeks later, President Obama made further overtures. Unfortunately, since then Iran had a disputed election that the western press attempted to blow out of proportions into a potential civil war between the clergy and the reformists. They also hinted at serious dissensions within the clergy. President Obama, who had remained quiet over Iran's disputed elections initially, came out later and spoke in favour of the reformists, sending a tough message to President Ahmadinejad without derailing the possibilities of discussion and negotiation between the

two former antagonists.

Unfortunately, ahead of the talks in Geneva between the US and Iran, new tension has appeared in the midst of the two countries. It has only been revealed last week that Iran has a second nuclear enrichment facility at Qum, Iran's religious capital, hitherto kept secret from the IAEA. This one is inside a facility occupied by the Revolutionary Guards. The serious question with the Qum discovery is whether there are many more like this where Iran is enriching uranium for the bomb while opening to IAEA the far larger one at Natanz to keep them off the track.

The new site has brought strong comments from President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, all demanding immediate access to the site. Gates said that the new facility is "part of a pattern of deception and lies on the part of the Iranians from the very beginning with respect to their nuclear program." He said he feels that Iran will eventually build the nuclear bomb although there may be no formal decision to do so yet. Gates, however, clearly gave his verdict for diplomacy over a military response for which the Israelis are itching.

For the Israelis the revelation has come at an opportune moment ahead of the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh on September 24-25. They wanted this Group to issue tough sanctions and push forward its intention to do with the Iranian nuclear reactors what it did with the Osiraq nuclear reactor in Iraq in June 1981 by carrying out surgical air attacks. While one understands the Israeli concerns, what is incomprehensible is why those to whom Israel is appealing do not turn back to ask them about their own arsenal of nuclear weapons. Then of course, the case Israel is making to attack Iran the way it attacked Iraq is not, even for argument's sake, the same for Iraq was a murderous regime led by Saddam Hussein while Iran has a mature and responsible leadership at the helm. In fact, logically looking at the issue there is no reason why Iran would eventually not have the bomb as long as Israel has those weapons. Iran has Pakistan and Russia as neigh-



Iran's Nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi said it is Iran's right as a state to perform uranium enrichment.

bours that are both nuclear weapons states, which is an additional reason to go for the bomb.

Iran of course has consistently said that its nuclear programme is peaceful. Its argument is to sell its oil and gas for foreign cash while using nuclear energy for electricity and power for industrialization and economic development. The Shah of Iran who purchased Iran's first nuclear reactor in 1959 from USA and hoped to build 23 such reactors by the 1990s used this argument. There were few suspicions about Iran's nuclear programme but the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war in the decade

following put an end to such suspicions.

These suspicions re-surfaced when Iran made its intentions to build seven nuclear reactors to generate 1000 MW electricity from each by 2025. In 2003, Iran said that acquiring nuclear weapons is inhuman and immoral and against its basic principles and defense doctrine. At about the same time, Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Khatami have said that Iran would not give up its uranium enrichment programme at any cost. These statements do not make Iran's intent absolutely clear. Intelligence works by international powers as well as IAEA have given further cause of doubt about

Iran's nuclear intentions. Meanwhile, the Iranian leadership, particularly President Ahmadinejad is under pressure from within and needs whatever help they can get. Iran was therefore looking optimistically towards the opening of dialogue with the USA and the revelation of the Qum site has come at an inopportune time for Iran.

It has however come as handy for those led by the USA who want to end Iran's desire for the nuclear bomb, if any. After the Qum revelation, President Obama said in his weekly radio address that his offer to Iran for serious dialogue "remains open" but "it must now cooperate fully

with the IAEA and take actions to demonstrate its peaceful intentions". European countries also are now expected to pressure Iran to follow its agreement with the IAEA to allow its inspectors to go virtually anywhere to follow suspicions of nuclear work. At the threat of tough economic sanctions by the US and western nations, IAEA, urged by the US and western nations, would now seek from Iran documents based on their intelligence work suggesting that Iran was working on designing warheads and technologies for detonating a nuclear core. Iran had denied having such documents for last 3 years. The IAEA would now insist also that Iran must inform the Agency its intentions to build future nuclear facilities that Iran had originally agreed to do under the agreement but later renounced.

There are a host of other issues that the US would like to press forward with Iran on the nuclear question such as interviewing key officials, accesses to computers, etc. following catching Iran with the Qum reactor. The officials are not confident that Iran would comply with many of their requests but nevertheless they feel that they can turn the nuclear standoff with Iran of the last seven years sharply in their favour.

Gates' intuition that Iran would eventually have the bomb may be prophetic. Pakistan's Prime Minister ZA Bhutto had said in the 1970s that Pakistanis would eat grass to produce the nuclear bomb to be even with its nemesis India. Iran will do what Pakistan did; have a bomb because Israel is a nuclear weapons state. To dissuade Iran, the US and others meeting Iranians for direct talks in Geneva must balance the Israeli factor. Iranians are not Japanese and have no historical need to renounce the military option. Hence those negotiating with Iran must keep in mind what Gates has said and give Iran enough incentive not to build the bomb. They must also keep in mind about Iran-China closeness on energy exploration and development in Iran. China is crucial to influencing Iran on the nuclear issue and would be unlikely to push Iran too much.

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Change of military strategy in Afghanistan

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It has been reported on 22nd September that the top General in charge of NATO forces in Afghanistan US General Stanley McChrystal has ordered his forces out of sparsely populated areas where American troops have fought bloody battles with the Taliban for several years and is redeploying them to protect major Afghan population centres.

The strategy shift which amounts to a retreat from some areas, has drawn resistance from some Afghan officials who worry that any pull-back from Taliban-held territory will make the weak Afghan government even more powerless in the eyes of the people. Some US officials told the media that the moves were driven by the realisation that some remote regions of Afghanistan, particularly, in the Hindu Kush mountains, that range through the northeast were not going to be brought under government control anytime soon.



As part of a strategy shift American troops are being re-deployed to major populated areas.

The changes are in line with General McChrystal's confidential assessment of the war, leaked to the media, which urges US and NATO forces to "initially focus on critical high population areas that are contested or controlled by insurgents." His assessment warns that the US led NATO coalition risks losing the war unless there are fundamental changes in strategy, including the addition of 10,000 to 40,000 American troops. (60,000 US troops are already in Afghanistan)

But it has been reported that Pentagon told the General to delay his request for more troops amid signs of the Obama administration which shows that it is rethinking its strategy for combating a resurgent Taliban.

The administration's call for a review which could take weeks comes at a time when the congressional and public support for the war is

flagging. But General McChrystal warns if the Taliban insurgency's momentum is not reversed, defeating it may no longer be possible.

The General's call for more troops appears to be increasingly at odds with recent comments from President Obama who has insisted in recent days he would not be rushed into approving more US troops for the war.

Among the alternatives being presented to Obama is Vice-President's suggestion to revamp the strategy altogether and instead of increasing troops, Biden has proposed scaling back the overall US military presence. Rather than protect the Afghan population from the Taliban, American forces would concentrate on strikes against Al-Qaeda cells using special weapons such as predator missile attacks and other surgical tactics. Since Obama announced his war strategy in March, the political situation in both the US and Afghanistan has muddled.

skyrocketed to record levels. In the third week of September six Italian soldiers were killed in a roadside bombing in Kabul. Demands for withdrawal of Italian troops became louder as Italy has lost 2800 soldiers already. Chancellor Merkel could be forced to pull German troops (4,500) out if she forms another grand coalition with the left or right parties.

What are the reasons for the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan? There are many reasons but some of them deserve to be mentioned below.

First, Afghanistan is more complex than Iraq socially and ethnically. There are many ethnic groups in the country that do not see eye to eye to each other. Then there are the Sunnis (85%) and the Shias (15%) who dislike each other. The major ethnic groups are Pashtun, Tajik and Uzbeks.

The Pashtun tribe straddles across in Pakistan and at one stage the Pashtuns wanted a separate country, neither with Afghanistan

British creation. It was demarcated and then signed into a treaty on November 12, 1893 between the ruler of Afghanistan, Amir Abdul Rahman Khan, and Sir Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary of what was then British India.

Kabul rejects the Durand Line as the boundary was imposed arbitrarily by the British rulers between Afghanistan and British India. This is where the United States and its NATO allies are battling the Taliban and there is the possibility of military defeat.

Fourth, the tribal areas on both sides of the Durand Line have always been autonomous. Anxious to safeguard this autonomy, the tribes resist control by the central government, whether in Islamabad or Kabul.

For centuries, their overriding impulse has been to protect their Muslim religion and their traditional way of life from foreign interference. Of all the challenges NATO troops will face the ongoing war across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border that has been the most difficult and dangerous.

Fifth, the traditional role of the tribal leaders in the country has broken down. Unless its role is restored, peace in the locality will be difficult to maintain. Neither the Afghan government nor the NATO troops have been able to engage the tribal leaders in the fight against Islamic militants. Rather the tribal people are angered by the death of innocent civilians including women and children in the tribal belt by US missiles.

Sixth, the climate is both hot and cold in Afghanistan. Instead of open expanses of desert as in Iraq, much of Afghanistan is made of grim mountain fortresses. Its population is far less literate and much poorer. The economy is the reverse of Iraq big on agriculture, light on industry and no oil. The illicit drug trade is lucrative, which earns about US\$40 billion dollars that remain with warlords and some of it reaches the Taliban.

Seventh, seven years into the conflict, the US administration realises that the proposed strength of the Afghan National Army - 85,000 - is only half of what is required. After spending US\$16 billion on military and police training since 2002, only two out of 105 Afghan army units and none of police units were assessed as fully capable of conducting counter-insurgency action.

Finally, rampant corruption is a big problem in the country. It is the problem of inefficient government machinery. President Karzai conceded that "It is a problem of so much money coming to this country."

Foreign forces may have taken the sting out of the Taliban for a while but that it would be unrealistic and probably incredible to think that the multinational forces in Afghanistan could rid the country of insurgents, unless Afghanistan government can run its administration in unity and with legitimacy.

Whatever the truth of the matter, in the long run, it's not soldiers but services that count - electricity, water, food, health care, justice, and jobs. Had the Afghan government delivered the promised services on time, while employing Afghans to rebuild their own country according to their own priorities and under the supervision of their own government, they would now be in charge of their own defence. The forces on the other side, which we loosely call the Taliban, would also have lost much of their grounds for complaint.

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Where is the "Northern Spring" in Sri Lanka?

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THE Sri Lankan government's socio-economic and political plans for the island's north are called "Northern Spring." It has two broad aspects: 'Triple R' and elections.

Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction are the major components of 'Triple R'. For this, the Rajapakse government had announced in June 2009 a "180 plan" to resettle the displaced, who number about 300,000. A Task Force has been set up to implement this plan. The process of implementation involves steps such as demining of areas meant for resettlement and reconstruction, building up of basic infrastructure like houses, roads, schools, energy grid, telecommunication, etc. There are separate plans for the rehabilitation of former LTTE cadres, especially child soldiers. Providing livelihood opportunities to all the resettled IDPs is yet another mammoth task before the government. The government finds lack of sufficient resources the major challenge confronting its reconstruction plans. Initial estimates suggest that over US\$2 billion will be required.

In addition to the government of Sri Lanka, three broad categories of actors are involved in the post-war reconstruction: inter-governmental organizations, state actors and local non-governmental organizations. Inter-governmental organizations include the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the various organs of the United Nations like United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), World Food Programme (WFP) etc. The IMF has recently agreed to sanction US\$2.5 billion to help revive post-war Sri Lankan economy. But, the aid comes with stringent human rights tag to which the Rajapakse government is averse to. Part of the aid will be used to fund the reconstruction programme. UNHCR and WFP are basically involved in the welfare of the IDPs.

Principal state actors assisting Sri Lanka in the 'Triple R' include India, China, Japan, Libya, Pakistan, Iran, the United States, and the European Union. Interestingly, Asian countries currently outnumber the West which had predominance in such tasks earlier. India has recently provided INR 500 crores especially for relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction for the displaced Tamils. In addition, the government of Tamil Nadu has provided INR 25 crores. New Delhi has conveyed that it is willing to allocate more funds depending on future needs. In addition to the monetary assistance, India has also sent 2,600 tonnes of galvanised corrugated steel sheets to Sri Lanka to construct shelter for approximately 5,000 families living in relief camps in northern Sri Lanka. The Indian Army had been running a temporary medical centre in the island's northeast to treat those affected by the war. Four Indian demining teams have also been working tirelessly in sanitizing the conflict areas for resettlement. On request, four more teams have recently been inducted.

Being a time-tested friend of Sri Lanka, China is one of the major players. It has already provided one million dollars for the humanitarian needs. This apart, it gave tents meant for IDPs worth 20 million Renminbi. Japan, one of the principal donors to Sri Lanka, has pledged generous help for the 'Triple R'. Libya has agreed to provide US\$500 million and Iran has extended credit line for oil imports. These apart, a section of the Sri Lankan diaspora have come forward to invest in small and medium scale industries especially in the northeast. A number of local NGOs like Sarvodaya are also involved in the reconstruction process.

Politically, the government's plan is to emulate the east - initially conduct elections to local bodies of Jaffna and Vavuniya and later for the whole of the Northern Province. In the polls that took place on 8 August 2009, the ruling UPA won Jaffna Urban Council and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), considered a LTTE proxy, won Vavuniya Municipal Council. This was the first elections held in the Tamil-dominated areas after the formal end of ethnic war in the island. The elections signified that Tamils still nurture grievances and look forward to a responsible leadership. Polls for the entire Northern Province will take place only after the resettlement of all the displaced.

Presently, the living conditions of the IDPs are not up to the mark, although they are improving. The camps are overcrowded and there are dangers of flooding due to the upcoming monsoon season. Instead of being defensive, the government can accept the shortfalls frankly and try rectifying them in due course. Formation of local councils in Jaffna and Vavuniya is appreciable, but they should be entrusted with sufficient resources and autonomy.

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