



Editorial

We live in a democratic age and democracy has become a near universal aspiration of the people. Many forces have contributed in creating democratic aspirations among the masses and it is a complex phenomenon that it cannot be located in any single arena. Values of equality, freedom, justice and political rights have become deep-rooted. These have become the motive forces for restructuring the polity and preventing it from being an authoritarian, monarchic, fascist or dictatorial regime. The beneficiaries of the democratisation process are the oppressed castes, classes, gender and minorities, whose goal is to free themselves from injustice, discrimination, denial of rights, inequality, class division and other oppressive social practices.

People aspire for a democratic government, a government created by their free choice made through election in which every adult citizen could vote. It reflects the popular will and acquires popular political legitimacy, and is well-equipped to advance the aspiration of the people.

Dictatorships of whatever kind or form only excel in suppressing people's voice and will. Even the judicial institutions under them are not autonomous or free. The citizen has virtually no recourse to legal redress of grievances, no recourse to a peaceful method of opposition to the rulers or of correction of their misdeeds.

South Asia is very much a part of this new democratic wave. In the last four months of this year, South Asia has been passing through an election season – Pakistan's 18 February parliamentary elections, followed by Bhutan's election on March 24, Nepal's on May 10 and Sri Lanka's Eastern Provincial election in May 2008.

The Constituent Assembly election in Nepal marks a transition from a period of conflict and political crisis to a period of hope for the future. The political crisis emerged because of the non-inclusive structure of the state. The ruling elite defined the rights and duties of the citizens towards the state by conflating it with its own interests and introducing political institutions that concentrated power among them. More than two-thirds of Nepal's population, including the indigenous nationalities (Adibasi Janajan), Dalits (traditional untouchables) and Madhesis (plainspeople) are excluded from influential realms of governance. The caste Hindu political elite constitutes 31 per cent of the population, but it overwhelmingly dominates the governmental structure, politics, economy and society. Nepal has always been embroiled in social and political conflict, arising primarily out of a mismatch between an awareness of modernity and an archaic mode of social organisation. For a people, who have been divided historically by ethnicity, caste, faith and geography, the new political process provides opportunity to institutionalise a vibrant democratic culture in the country.

Election in Nepal has two unique features. First, the very notion of a Constituent Assembly formed through universal adult franchise is a noble experiment designed to create space for equitable representation of the marginalised groups, women, Dalits and ethnic minorities is unique. Secondly, it is a rare occasion in history that an underground movement actually transforms itself into a viable democratic entity. Beating all odds, this is exactly what seems to be happening in Nepal as the country's 17.6 million voters have polled to end the monarchy and usher in a new republic.

The election of the Constituent Assembly, though historic, is only the beginning of the next phase of the country's history. Not only will Nepal have to work out its system of governance, but those who run the country will have to get down to work, quick time, to repair the damage that the years of conflict have left.

Experiments with the democratic process in the neighbouring country of Bhutan followed a different script. Democracy has been introduced in Bhutan from above as a benevolent gift by the erstwhile absolute monarchy. The Bhutanese elections are unique not only because they were ordered by the King but also because, unlike in other South Asian countries, educational qualification was made an important criterion. Under the newly framed election laws, no one can contest parliamentary elections without having a graduate degree. Bhutan has a small graduate community of just 3,000 persons. This is also indicative of the fact that in a country where the rate of literacy is still around 42 per cent, the graduate community may mostly come from the upper and elite sections of society. The ethnic issue, although kept carefully out of the electoral process, will have to be addressed seriously by the new establishment. Nine Nepali-speaking candidates belonging to the DPT have been elected to Parliament, but this number is too small compared with the size of the ethnic Nepali population in Bhutan even after the huge forced migration to Nepal. Imposing a curb on democratic participation goes against the principles of democracy, that is, a shift of power to the people and the rule of the people.

Institutionalising democracy is a complex task as anti-democratic forces reassert themselves at the slightest opportunities to subvert the democratic process. South Asian political history is replete with examples of such subversion. Time and again shadowy seen and unseen forces, both internal and external, seem to have played a larger-than-life role in making and breaking the fragile political process.

Despite many problems and tensions, there is no going back on democracy and the way forward is more democracy. The continuous process of democratisation ensuring equitable representation to all sections constitutes the best resource to deal with the future challenges. This is because democracy is not just a political system and is continuously being transcended from being a formal government to a way of life and a political movement. The essence of democratic politics is freedom to secure justice and wellbeing of all citizens.

SAAPE NEWS

Decision adopted at SAAPE Core Committee Meeting at Colombo, Sri Lanka, 29-31 January 2008

- The meeting endorsed the proposal of implementing all the activities included in the work plan 2007-2008
- SAAPE poverty watch report needs to be updated, revised in format and content and produced in 2009. Further discussions are necessary to improve the quality of the report
- Each thematic group will constitute a core group of advisers from among the given thematic groups for instant support. Such thematic core groups will consist mainly of three members
- Regional campaign strategies should be undertaken as SAAPE is a regional network
- Membership should be expanded by the regional thematic groups, with due support from the regional secretariat
- Each of the regional thematic groups, along with their country groups, should make fund raising efforts as planned in the work plan.
- SAAPE should be made visible as far as possible by using photographs, newspapers, posters, web pages, listserv, etc. The country level visibility of SAAPE needs to be scaled up.
- Around the end of the three-year period (i.e., by June 2008), an impact evaluation of the SAAPE undertaking need to be carried out.
- SAAPE also needs to be engaged in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Doha Round of Financing for Development (FfD) process, including similar other initiatives at the national, regional and international levels.
- SAAPE also needs to take up the emerging issues of environmental degradation, climate change and global warming as these environmental issues are of the utmost concerns for the people of our region affecting us the most.
- Capacity of the Communication Officers (Cos) should be built to the tune of SAAPE's engagement therefore an orientation for COs has been envisaged. One of the main responsibilities of the COs is to actively engage in and keep communications flowing. They need to facilitate in making the organic link between country and regional level activities. Salaries of COs could be withheld if they fail to perform their duties and responsibilities.
- SAAPE should continue supporting the People's SAARC initiative for building and strengthening people's solidarity at local, national and regional levels - Shobha agreed to write a preamble on gender perspectives.



Workshop on International Financial Institutions and Debts in South Asia

Colombo (Sri Lanka), 15-17 January 2008

The first South Asian regional workshop on Debt and IFIs was held from January 15-17, 2008. 52 delegates from Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal convened near Colombo, Sri Lanka for three days. Delegates from CADTM Belgium also participated in the workshop. It was organised by South Asian Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE), Vikas Adhyayan Kendra (VAK), Comite pour l'Annulation de la Dette du Tiers Monde (CADTM) and Alliance for the Protection of Natural Resource and Human Rights (ANRHR).

Sessions on awareness building (on current economic and political situations, analysis of the World Bank's evolution, and current state of global alternatives...) combined with very accurate presentations on the impacts of indebtedness and of the policies of the International Financial Institutions in various regions of the represented countries. Water privatisation, hydraulic projects of World Bank in Nepal, forced eviction of indigenous people for an "ecological" project financed by the World Bank in India, mineral exploration in the State of Orissa by leading transnational companies including a French corporation, etc. The social situations were also well focused: the situation of Sri Lankan fisher folks affected by the civil war, tsunami and the country's debt; resistance of the overexploited Tamil workers in tea plantations; the struggles of the Sri Lankan trade unions and peasants; the struggles in Pakistan against dictatorship and neo-liberal policies.

Task forces were constituted and they worked on issues of privatisation, debt, cognisable solutions and means of devising a common agenda to reach at these solutions; following which, the necessity of a bigger convergence of action among the various contemporary political and social movements led to the constitution of a Forum for South Asian Solidarity.

The workshop started off with a deliberation from Linus Jayatilake (from the Sri Lankan trade union CIWU) and Sushovan Dhar (from VAK, India). Later, Ajit Muricken

(Director of VAK) presented the various publications of VAK, containing information on the diverse themes discussed during the workshop. Mr. Muricken conducted all the sessions of the workshop.

Eric Toussaint (CADTM, Belgium) started with a deliberation on the World Bank's historical evolution. The talk incorporated five periods: 1944-1962, 1962-1968, 1968-1982, 1982-1996 and 1996-2008.

The general impact of the World Bank and the IMF is totally negative. A concept of creating alternatives to these institutions is taking shape. Seven countries of Latin America have launched a Bank of the South. It is quite possible that this new institution would not be a real alternative to the World Bank but the decision somewhat weakens the Bretton Woods Institutions. It is necessary to reinvent a completely new international financial structure. Moreover, it is necessary to try and win lawsuits against these institutions insofar as they are responsible for human rights violations.

Subsequent to the first speech, there was a debate on the following issues:

- The respective functions of the World Bank and the IMF, their collaboration and also their competition.
- The abolition of institutions is not an end in itself. It is imperative to supplement it with a

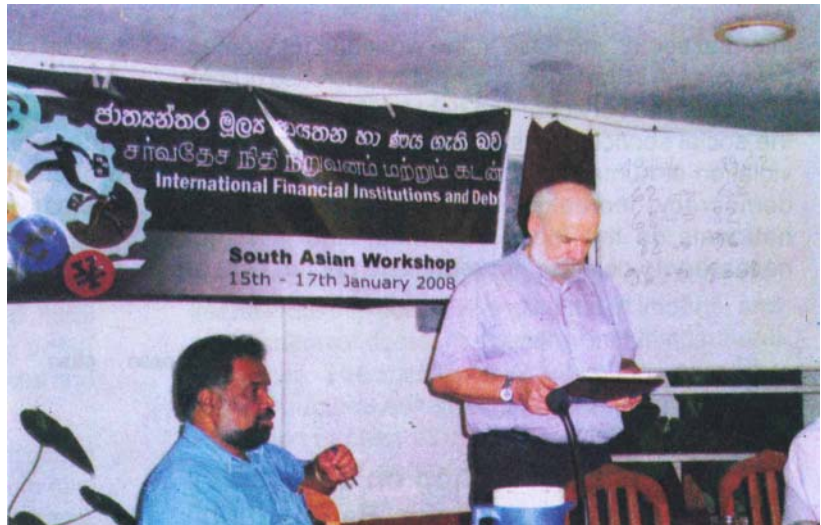


A group discussion during the Colombo Workshop

global alternative. In this context, the word “socialism” should be redefined for making it an alternative to capitalism.

- Among the alternatives, it is necessary to take into account the development of popular power centres by means of forming constituent assemblies and new constitutions whose agenda is the revocation of mandates.
- As for the problem of the trans-nationals, it is necessary to take into account the trans-nationals of the South (Tata, Petrobas, Petronas...)
- As for the reform of the UN, it is for the Security Council to take action.
- Agricultural problems: green revolution, exports, opening of markets, agro-fuels.
- The people voted “democratically” but their vote has often been misappropriated by dictatorships. When the regimes were democratised, the changes were not visible. Therefore the people expressed themselves in the streets (Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela...)
- Difference between mass mobilisation and lobbying.
- Bolivia wants to quit ICSID which renders the Bank illegitimate. The firm attitudes of the governments do not involve reprisals: IFIs do not have an agency to force the governments. If they have had so much of power, it is because they could count on the connivance among the governments of the South. The blows dealt to the IFIs, for not presenting ideas to other governments; do not receive any “publicity”.
- A country can not form an alternative on its own, but it can try to start building it and forming a strong coalition and collaboration with other pro-progress governments. That is what has happened with the initiative of the ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas) in Latin America.
- The “Make poverty history” campaign is very soft (charitable).

The meeting was also addressed by Tissa Balasuriya from the Centre for Society and Religion, Sri Lanka in which he traced back history, in the context of the



Workshop on Debt and IFIs at Colombo

plunder, the genocide, the monopolisation of the land and wealth - an initiative which started in 1492 at the time of the brutal European aggression against the populations of what were later called Americas, and also the West Indies. He insisted on the entire relativity of the current concept of terrorism compared to this context. He pointed out the flight of technologies (weaving in India by the British), the slavery blessed by the theologians themselves, the racism which was at the base of the division of wealth and markets. It is now necessary to inverse the notion of indebtedness and demand compensation. The religions should take note of these social questions.

The day's second deliberation revolved around the current international crisis and was addressed by Eric Toussaint where he explained in brief how the current currently, the epicentre of the crisis is situated in the industrialised North while, in 1982, it was found in the Third World countries.

There were interventions from Sharath Fernando, Linus Jayatilake, Niel Wijethilaka, Rajan (plantation worker and trade union leader), Jude Pernan, (leader of a fisher folks association) from Sri Lanka highlighting the current plight from different angles. Following this Monower Mostafa from Bangladesh, Abdul Khaliq from Pakistan, Anivar Aravind, Roy David, Sanjay K. Rai, Satish Samuel, William Stanley from India made interesting presentations highlighting the issue of debt and the role of IFIs like the World Bank, IMF and the ADB.

The meeting felt that the common experience in South Asia is that privatisation promotes reduction in employment, evictions and migrations, growth of the informal sector, increase in the workload for women,

deterioration in the working conditions, increase of costs for goods and services. The debt leads to reduction in the social services, loss of dignity and social power, violation of human rights, displacements, erosion of democracy, increased control of IFIs and transnationals on the local resources. And it is thus necessary to demand the repudiation of the debt as well as compensations; it is necessary to plead for an

ecological development, the creation of a Bank of the South favourable to the interests of the poor and independent of the companies Through mass mobilisation, raising consciousness about the alternatives at a global level; independent research on IFIs and the impact of their policies; reinforcement of the alternatives based on benevolent practices.



Country Level Workshop on Democracy and Governance at Dhaka, Bangladesh

The country level workshop on the theme Democracy and Governance took place at Dhaka, Bangladesh on March 12 and 13, 2008.

The workshop started with a sharing meeting of the country paper on Bangladesh, prepared by Monower Mostafa followed by comments on the paper. The meeting was well attended by people from various strata of the society representing politicians, journalists, civil society groups, members from the legal fraternity, students, youth, trade unionists and others.

In a lively discussion that followed the presentation of the country paper participants raised questions of the limited democratic choices in Bangladesh in the absence of a democratically elected government and

the parliament. The responses from participants on wide ranging issues related to globalisation and democracy, withdrawal of the state from social welfare commitment, influence of international agencies in defining policies and governance structure are some of the issues incorporated in the final report.

The meeting received wider press coverage from all leading newspapers and television.

The public meeting followed with a group discussion on the next day to assess the inputs and comments of the sharing session and to broaden the scope of the paper by moving away from the limits of formal democracy to a more substantive and inclusive democracy.



Country level workshop on Democracy and Governance at Dhaka



COLOMBO DECLARATION

Structurally Adjusted Destruction of Human Lives and Democracy in South Asia

We, the people of South Asia share contiguous geographical space and similar social and cultural ethos that shape the people's lifestyle, belief systems, cultural specialities, material practices and social relationships in the region.

The long history of interaction and constructive movements of ideas and influence across South Asia in so many fields – literature, arts, music, trade, commerce and other human engagements have had enriched social and cultural life.

It is unfortunate that our secular open and pluralistic past is under threat. The rulers of these countries have endeavoured to keep their people isolated by erecting walls of suspicions, encouraging hostility and intolerance, feeding disinformation and prohibiting interaction amongst the people of the region in order to maintain their control in the land. This has resulted in fraudulent legitimization of the system of oppression and exploitation. Such system also creates conducive conditions for the proliferation of paranoia, war hysteria, militarization, nuclear weapon and authoritarian domination of the security forces by adhering to an ultranationalist ideology that self righteously curbs debates, discussions and disagreements in many vital issues.

Structurally Adjusted by Neo-liberal orthodoxy

The ruling class despite, many social structural and ideological differences, are under the grip of the development “mania” of neo-liberal paradigm of economic globalism directed towards a closer integration with the world markets and world economy. A major feature of this integration is the increased operations of global capital within these countries with minimum restrictions if at all any. This process has further accentuated by the free flow of finance capital with the pro-active intervention of World Bank–IMF and WTO. These institutions provide the synergy necessary for the global capital to penetrate.

The multilateral creditors (IMF and World Bank being the most important among these) impose conditions that impinge on the economic sovereignty of the debtor country. They dictate the control not only specific projects and sectors of the economy but command the direction of the entire macro-economic policy including its future direction. The prescription

includes measures like devaluation of local currency, liberal industrial policy, liberalisation of imports, and privatisation of domestic economy including natural resources. The conditions whether they carry the name Structural Adjustment Programme or Poverty Reduction Strategy all push the debtor country in one direction. The debtor country has to accept an insertion in the world economic system and world markets in a particular manner. It has to accept and adopt neo-liberal prescriptions (globalisation, privatisation, modernisation, rationalisation, and ‘liberalisation’). This stability and adjustment only inserts the debtor country in the new world economic order and places it firmly (of course, as a subsidiary entity) in the system of new international division of labour. The compulsion to liberalise and open the economy – sector after sector – to the global capital, rapidly changes the economic structure of the country – the manufacturing process is trans-nationalised, fragmented and dispersed across the country. It becomes extremely capital-intensive and constantly replaces labour.

The entire policy package makes a significant departure from the long cherished principles of growth with justice, equity and self-reliance. By its own logic it also excludes those sections of the society that have no entitlements to participate in market exchange from the process and benefits of ‘development’.

The TNCs’ untrammelled entry into the developing countries is not only a major threat to national priorities, but the development goals are also distorted beyond repair. Their predatory method of profit accumulation and political hegemony is detrimental to the interest of South Asian people and the nation state is no longer treated as a major actor in pursuing socio-economic goals and development with justice and equity for all.

The governments of these countries, whatever their political hues, are in a rush to open up their economies to global capital and global capitalist markets. They also bend over backwards, whatever the occasional rhetoric, to align themselves with the aims and objectives of the neo imperialist forces lead by USA. All countries have altered their economic policies, political arrangements, and foreign policy

stances to suit the interests of the dominant industrialised nations led by the US – often under direct or indirect dictates of the multilateral financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF, the World Trade Organisation, and at times the US administration.

The empirical evidence of the failure of the globalisation are numerous and yet its main proponents such as the World Bank and IMF in its post-Washington Consensus policies are blaming the victims of their neoliberal policy prescriptions for having poor institutions, bad governance and corrupt cultures. Jobless growth in particular, is being blamed on flexible labor market institutions or the resistance to globalization.

Economy

The trends of corporatisation of agriculture and the reversal of land reforms have introduced a paradigm shift in the direction of export orientation for debt repayments. Besides, given the structure of unfair trade practices, controlled by developed countries, the exports have little impact on the levels of poverty. On the contrary, import barriers and trade restriction by rich countries cost these countries twice as much as they receive in aid.

Relentless penetration of global capital renders traditional occupations unviable and destroys the subsistence or survival sectors in an economy. Primary production becomes directly linked to world markets and becomes dependent upon them for inputs as well as for disposal of products. It also thus meets with greater instability and becomes vulnerable.

The regime of globalisation also destroys traditional and subsistence production. It extends markets so bring all economic activities under its purview. The link is not only with national markets but with international markets. This means that the inputs, technology, production process, product, processing of the product, packaging, marketing and management styles have to be in conformity or consonance with the international standards. This has far reaching effects on particularly the non-industrial and non-corporate sectors like agriculture. The subsistence production in the sector is more or less destroyed. The labour component is reduced through mechanisation or rationalisation of the labour process and labour is thrown out of the sector.

These production processes are usually (but not always or inevitably) resource intensive as also resource destructive and thereby environmentally hazardous. The profitability, even viability of every cycle of production is dependent on the situation in

the international markets. Producers from these sectors, even the biggest independent ones, have neither information about nor control over these conditions. They, hence, become extremely vulnerable. A long term tendency then would be expropriation of even the rich peasant in favour of an entry of the corporate sector in the field.

The effects have been deleterious for the toiling masses of these countries. They experience deterioration in living standards, economic insecurity, and erosion of livelihood opportunities. They also find themselves powerless under the new dispensations with curtailment of most rights – particularly the rights of free expression, organisation, and struggle and survive. Their access to natural common property resources is severely limited or made conditional. The environment in these countries experiences unprecedented imbalance and destruction.

There is a dispersal of industry within the countries as well, along with a fragmentation of the production process. This leads to informalisation, farming out, creation of spurious independent entrepreneurship in the shape of generation of self-employment. In effect capital turns less productive and more speculative. As collective production is dispersed, the working class is splintered, scattered and forced into a decline. Its weight in economic, political and social terms as a class decreases. It is weakened in face of capital. Capital also dodges its responsibility to labour by these mechanisms since it becomes free of any obligations towards wage increases, employment benefits, welfare measures, social security, redundancy payments etc. in the name of the free operation of the market and its regulatory capacity these charges are transferred to other sections of the society – mainly the toilers themselves.

Indeed, globalization has brought with it greater injustice to the working class. Employment and wages are under attack under flexibilization and its resulting phenomena of increased informal labor, migrant labor and contingent labor and in the process threatening job security, union and workers rights, and eroding wages and income.

Climate Change

Climate change, the current global crisis poses a most serious threat and challenge human-kind has faced so far. The increased incidents of extreme climate changes are likely to be most severe in the region as many South Asian countries will be affected by the rising sea level due to climate change. The people of South Asia are witnessing increasing natural disasters causing devastating impact as a result of the climate crisis. This process has been speeded-

up by the dominant economic system of economic globalism with its inherent quest for profit-maximisation and its consequent disregard for human and ecological needs. The impact will severely hit farmers, peasants, pastoralists, and fisher-folk, etc.

Addressing the climate crisis also requires the need to incorporate the wider issue of sustainability and equity rather than being obsessed with its technical aspects of mandatory emission reduction, essential as they are. The stand on equity follows from the sustainability argument. There cannot be a level playing field in emission reduction when wide disparities prevail between the rich North and poor South. Much of this wealth of the rich North has been derived from environmental degradation, in the first place, itself.

Food Crisis

The soaring food crises threatens to derail the economies of South Asia as the crises of food security increasingly manifesting itself on the streets of several poor countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America. According to FAO the magnitude and sweep of the crises will push an additional 100 millions people into hunger along with the existing hundreds of millions. This is the face of hunger – the million of people who were not in the urgent category six months ago but are now. The food crises in South Asia are not a sudden emergence but a creation of deliberate policies and laws and prescriptions of International Finance Institutions. The IMF–World Bank induced SAP programme of the 1990s enforced the trade liberalisation regime, preoccupied in the pursuit of the new economic liberalisation policies of liberalisation of agriculture which has transformed food into a commodity, in the global market for sale, from something that nourished the people and provided them with a secure livelihood, into a commodity for speculation and bargaining.

The governments have intervened at every step to create corporate monopolies in the food system from seed to domestic production and trade, from food processing to liberalising imports, export oriented agriculture and corporate retail. Liberalisations of trade in many commodities have seen the entry of private traders including large transnational corporations who largely benefited from market monopoly in food grains. This integration of the food economy with the volatile speculation, driven by agri-business corporates are undertaking massive procurement of food grains and release these grains into the market after creating artificial scarcity for better profit margins, trade and market.

The trend of corporatisation of agriculture, a reversal

of land reforms, has led to major changes in cropping pattern and displacement of small farmers from their land. Food is grown not for local consumption but for global market. A small number of agri-business companies' world wide increasingly control all aspects of cultivation and agri–trade from supplying food to farmers to buying agricultural products and distribute these through controlled supplier's network. The export driven policies of successive governments committed to liberalisation inherent in the logic of an integrated global agricultural economy has caused the crises of food security at a large scale. The government policies of diverting agriculture land to SEZ and bio fuel have further aggravated the crises.

Food is central to human survival, cultural identity and sustainable livelihood and not an object of profit driven by market forces and human greed. Therefore the issue of food security or insecurity is basically an issue of basic human rights, equity and social justice. This entails that every one has a fundamental right to food, and that community control over production and distribution resources and systems is crucial to food security. The countries of South Asia take urgent steps to tackle the root cause of the problem that is reversal of the policy of corporate driven food policy.

Post Colonial State in South Asia

We are in the sixtieth year of liberation from the colonial yoke in most parts of South Asia but as we pause to look around, to reflect, to consider and to take stock what do we see?

The gains of national liberation, the limited gains of democracy, the rising aspirations of millions of women, men and youth are all lying shattered around us. We were told that western democracy with capitalism was the panacea to all ills. We were even told that any other vision of society-including the socialist one would result in the violation of human rights and in the erosion of democracy itself.

The leaders of our respective countries believed these proclamations. They instituted various forms of democracy. Constitutions were written and indeed some of them arose against the background of independence struggles. Many of these constitutions did contain economic, social and cultural rights and civil and political rights as well. Our national liberation movements drew inspiration from multiple sources. In addition to our own unique strengths, we drew from the anti slavery struggle, French Revolution, the Cromwellian Revolution, the American war of independence and even from the Russian revolution. Unfortunately, however none of them had a sufficient understanding of patriarchy and the systemic denial

of rights to women-even though women constitute one half of humanity.

There was some progress in all concerns of South Asia. Srilanka made phenomenal progress on the quality of life. Education and other nutritional needs were delivered quite substantially. Almost all countries of this sub-region paid some attention to basic needs and promised a bright future for all its Citizens. Efforts were made to set up and indeed in many of our countries we did set up an elected legislature and an independent judiciary. Freedom of the press won substantial recognition. Formal proclamations about women's equality were heard all around us. Children started attending schools though when it came to girl children the scenario was different. We were trying to learn from each other. We started travelling to each others countries and we discussed, debated and began to wonder how to do better?

Poverty under development

The results are now quite evident. The best source for introspection is the Human Development in South Asia Report 2006 now prepared for the tenth year in succession by the Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre, Islamabad, Pakistan. Very briefly their main findings are:

Women continue to bear the heaviest burden in poverty in South Asia.

All poverty alleviation programmes suffered from major policy and implementation problems, and none succeeded in reducing poverty to a significant extent.

Looking at the gender dimension of poverty the report also pointed out that women of South Asia have a disproportionately lower level of participation in the world's female labour force, that lower education and skill levels of women led to lower earnings, that gender discrimination starts even before birth through female foeticide, infanticide and continues throughout life and that South Asia still contains the highest number of female illiterates in the world.

Outside recorded history millions are being impoverished in this sub region. There is unprecedented displacement and destruction of livelihood. There is increasing malnutrition and even hunger deaths. Children are suffering permanent brain damage. All this is further aggravated by discrimination based on gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, and class origin. Yet another phenomenon of cancerous proportions has been the growth of fundamentalism. Our sub-region bears evidence to all forms of fundamentalism-we are witness to its Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, and Hindu variety and we are witness to the seeds of discontent, intolerance

and even extremism. As a result people who lived as neighbours are now killing each other and sowing the seeds of inter-generational hatred within humanity.

New constitutions were written and where people's initiative was showing some promise-as in Sri Lanka and Nepal, divisions were created on innumerous lines providing grist to the mill of the destabilisers. Post neo-liberalism we witness the collapse of elected democracies, the erosion of the judiciary, the capitulation of the executive and the surrender of the media to the new dogma. Those who came to teach us democracy are now scared of growing democratic movements and institutions.

Unable to bear the brunt of impoverishment, exclusion and denial of basic needs violating almost all the economic, social and cultural rights guaranteed by covenants, treaties and constitutions myriad forms of protest have emerged. Even as these protests manifest in different corners of South Asia one is witnessing a growing intolerance to civil and political rights-often despite the protection of prevailing legal regimes. Invoking draconian laws, denying trials, detention without charges, incarceration without bails, let along judicial processes – these have all risen during the last few years all across the sub-region.

Conflict in the region

South Asia is among world's most conflict prone region due to the legacy of the colonial past and subsequent war on terror. In Sri Lanka 25 years of war, ethnic conflicts between Tamil insurgence and Sri Lankan Government, Sri Lanka is now the most militarised zone in South Asia. The protracted ethno-political conflict produces a vicious cycle of civil war with consequences of violence, death displacement of civilian population and violation of civil and human rights. The violations of civil rights have been routinised in times of intense war – arrests, torture, abductions, civilian killings, etc.

The best solution is not concentrating on a military solution which only creates further exalations of violence. The only solution seems to be to resume political dialogue and work out a sustainable political settlement.

Similarly, ethnic violence in the North East and in Kashmir has taken a heavy toll of life and property. Apart from the daily killings, bomb blasts and targeted assassinations, blowing up human lives through land mines, the dimensions of the unfolding disaster are alarming. Conflicts in South Asia, especially between Pakistan and India creates ideal conditions for war hysteria, paranoia, armamentisation and dominance of the armed security forces and creates a wall of suspicion, hostility and intolerance.

In Afghanistan-beyond Kabul the Taliban rules-girls are killed for going to school, in Bangladesh the Army takes care of the “Care Taker government”, in Nepal the Constituent Assembly-a great achievement of Janandolan-II-is now in grave risk, in Sri Lanka the cease fire is withdrawn and war is on, in Bhutan the happiness index is bereft of the refugees of Nepali origin, in Maldives there is democracy in the promised land and incarceration on the island and in India the state machinery uses ingenious ways to stifle civil and political liberties by even arming the community and sowing the seeds of civil war as in Salwa Judum.

Religious Fundamentalism

Last three decades have seen the rise of communal politics defined as political construction of religious identities along religious lines and the mobilization of religious sentiments and consciousness for political ends. Socially engineered prejudice, tension and conflict between religious communities especially by the Hindutva force has led to an unprecedented brutality and insecurity among minority communities.

A worrisome social trend, emerging from the various communal conflicts and riots, is the increasing use of violence as an instrument in the polarization of civil society and polity leading to social and physical ghettoisation of minority communities. Each time a ghastly violence occurs polarization is further deepened thus fracturing and fragmenting civil society along communal lines, and converting a religious majority into a political majority.

What is at stake is democracy, secularism, the rule of law, religion and cultural pluralism; in essence all that we have fought for and held dear during the last two hundred years. The idea of democracy is being replaced by majoritarianism, the rule of law is subverted by public coercion. Thus communalism is seeking to destroy the fundamental character of Asian society – its historical legacy, cultural complexity and political institutions.

There is a substantial erosion of democratic processes, legislatures hardly exist, emergencies alternate with army rule, monarchs lie in wait, armies administer in the name of civilian rule, incarceration without trial, torture and rape, killing and molestation in the name of fighting terrorism and extremism and to top it all judicial abstentionism in place of judicial activism or worse still a judiciary committed to the neo-liberal dogma – all these put together have already reversed the course of our democratic journey. Sections of the judiciary in Pakistan led by the former chief justice and supported by the legal profession has been an honourable exception. They constitute the silver lining in an otherwise gloomy

collapse of judicial commitment to social justice. The degree of subversion of democracy may vary but the trajectory of moving towards mounting democratic deficits is now clearly discernable. There is no longer any reason to believe that this is incidental to the new growth model-it has now become essential to the “deadly growth” that has overtaken peaceful people who still strive for a new order within the parameters of a “Rule of Law” society.

Game of War on Terror

The greatest consequence of 9/11 has been a spiritual, moral, and intellectual anomie. This consists essentially of a slow dissolution of inherited certainties and fear of the undefined, nameless, faceless enemy waging war against a whole way of life.

The most reproachable aspect of the ‘war on terror’ is that even if the purported targets are terrorists the victims are often innocent civilians and their suffering reinforces the cause of the terrorists. The ‘war against terror’ has relied only on military actions and ruled out a political approach and solutions based on dialogue, reconciliation, peace and has spectacularly failed to address the root causes of violence.

Six years after the war on terror, the future looks grim. Afghanistan seems to be moving towards anarchy and chaos with the regrouping of Taliban, and the different ethnic war lords directly challenging the Kabul regime set up by the US and other willing allies. In fact terrorism is spreading far and wide without any centralised command system. With new technologies, simple and accessible, small groups are becoming even more powerful, can execute the terror strike at will. The State is incapable of disarming them and respond by acquiring draconian powers and crushing civil liberties, brand all dissent as terrorism, institute new curbs on freedom of expression, breeding xenophobia urging to eliminate the ‘other’. All these tendencies will entail gross denial of justice and growing violations of democracy, human rights and the right to self-determination.

Towards the Union of Democratic Republic in South Asia

Nation building in South Asia has largely been radically liberative, rooted in democratic fantasies and radical imagination which unleashed the creative energies of the masses. What the countries of the South Asia is in need today is new radical imagination and dreams that can shape the creation of a new South Asian Union into a reality and give rise to a new political future in the region. The dream for such a “Union Democratic Republic” could be a creative force that could transcend the reified notion of the Post-Colonial

Nation-State and National Sovereignty and subvert the narrow nationalist discourse isolating people by erecting walls of suspicion, encouraging hostilities and intolerance, and prohibiting the free intercourse and interaction of people in the region so as to maintain the hegemony of the ruling class of each country of the region.

Such a South Asia Union of Democratic Republic could create new possibilities of an alternative political, socio-economic and cultural system in the region which will do away with discrimination of gender, caste, religion, ethnicity, identity rivalries can give way to new identity of "South Asia citizenship", free movement of people, new mode of human engagement. In such a vision massive standing armies of each country can be replaced with people safeguarding and protecting one another. The resultant saving in military expenditure must be compulsorily reinvested in social security, people's welfare and poverty eradication.

This may look like an impossible dream in the given set up. Human and non-human history teaches us, however, that nothing is immutable, permanent and unalterable.

People's SAARC must legitimately cherish the vision and perspective of a different political, social, economic and cultural system in the region and inaugurate a new climate in which each individual will have the opportunity, in solidarity with the collectivity, to realise the full development of her or his human potential; will restore the balance and harmony with nature, will liquidate the artificial and inhuman barriers that divide lands, collectivities and minds and transcend all boundaries. Such an enriched imagination will have the capacity to become ideological and material forces capable of mobilising the people into action in realising the vision of Union of Democratic Republic of South Asia.

☪ ☪ ☪



Group discussion on the Bangladesh country position paper at Dhaka



Polity Research for Development Alternative

South Asia News and Views

BANGLADESH

HR in Bangladesh worsens under EPR: US

The caretaker government's human rights record worsened, in part due to the state of emergency and postponement of elections, US State Department said in its country report on Human Rights Practice – 2007.

The report on 191 countries across the world was simultaneously published by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Washington Tuesday.

In the country paper on Bangladesh, the report said the Emergency Powers Rules of 2007 (EPR), imposed by the government in January and effective through year's end, suspended many fundamental rights, including freedom of press, freedom of association, and the right to bail.

It said the anti-corruption drive initiated by the government, while greeted with popular support, gave a rise to concerns about due its process.

The report said, "For most of the year, the government banned political activities, although this policy was enforced unevenly." It said while there was a significant drop in the number of extra-judicial killings by security forces, they were accused of serious abuses, including custodial deaths, arbitrary arrest and detention, and harassment of journalists.

"Some members of security forces acted with impunity and committed acts of physical and psychological torture," the report said, adding that violence against women and children remained a major problem, as was trafficking in persons.

The report said the police, BDR, the military, and the RAB frequently used unwarranted lethal force. While there was a significant decrease in the number of killings by security personnel, the government and military did not take any public measures to investigate these cases. According to local human rights organisations, it said, no case resulted in criminal punishment, and, in the few instances in which the government levied charges, punishment of those found guilty was predominantly administrative.

The report said disappearances the kidnappings remained serious problems during 2007. According to human rights organisations, 235 persons were kidnapped during the year. An indeterminate number of these kidnappings were politically motivated, and child kidnapping for profit also continued to be a problem, according to human rights organisations.

The report said while the law prohibits torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment, law enforcers frequently employed severe treatment as well as psychological abuse during arrests and interrogations.

Quoting human rights organisations, it said, "The use of such techniques increased after the interim government declared the state of emergency on January 11. Abuse consisted of threats, beatings, and the use of electric shock. Security forces, according to human rights organisations, tortured 30 people to death.

It said the government rarely charged, convicted, or punished those responsible, and a climate of impunity allowed such abuses by the RAB, police, and military to continue.

The report said despite the fact that the government took several major steps to improve prison conditions, such as cracking down on corruption and improving morale of prison employees, the prison system remained abysmal due to overcrowding and the lack of proper sanitation. It said local human rights observers considered the poor prison conditions to be a contributing factor to custodial deaths. The inspector general of prisons sought to improve conditions. "Since the declaration of a state of emergency, according to international and local human rights organisations and witness accounts, security forces, including the military, held detainees in substandard ad hoc Joint Forces and military camps of the military intelligence agency, the Directorate General-Forces Intelligence (DGFI)," the report said.

According to Odhikar, it said 87 persons died in prison and 67 died while in the custody of police and other security forces, among them was a ten-year-old boy who was found with his throat slit in the Juvenile Detention Centre.

Quoting international and local human rights organisations, the report said security personnel used unwarranted force after the government declared a curfew in August 2007 in response to protests on university campuses in several major cities.

It said, "While the government issued instructions that security forces should accept media credentials and other professional identifications, security personnel harassed dozens of journalists who were attempting to conduct legitimate business. The government later apologised to journalists for the treatment." The report said, "Preventative and arbitrary detentions increased after the declaration of the state of emergency, particularly after the caretaker government launched its anti-corruption programme." The government reported arresting more than 300,000 persons between January and August, an arrest rate approximately 15 percent higher than in 2006, it said, adding the majority of those arrested were released within a day or two.

The report said human rights organisations estimated that approximately 200 former politicians, government officials, and business leaders were held on suspicion of corruption, extortion, or other abuses of power after the caretaker government began its anti-corruption drive in January.

Quoting Human Rights Watch (HRW), the report said the joint forces held suspects illegally and were interrogated, often abused, and in some cases forced suspects to sign confessions before releasing or presenting them to a magistrate. In some cases, the authorities released detainees after they agreed to file cases against other high-profile suspects. The report said several high-profile figures, including some members of the leadership of BNP and AL, however, were held for months without any charges filed against them. It said international and domestic human rights organisations accused the government of selective prosecution. For example, it said several high-profile

figures believed to be corrupt were omitted from the lists of corruption suspects, allegedly because they agreed to ally themselves with the caretaker government. The report said the caretaker government implemented legislation developed by the previous government separating the judiciary from the executive.

It said, "The Appellate Division of the Supreme Court frequently overturned politically charged decisions by the High Court Division of the Supreme Court if those rulings went against the government." For example, the report said, "The Appellate Division overturned several decisions granting bail to high-level corruption suspects, including former prime ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia." On several occasions, the report said, when the Appellate Division upheld the High Court ruling to release a high-profile detainee, such as in the case of senior AL adviser Kazi Zafarullah, the person was re-arrested immediately upon release on a new set of charges. The report said, "The government imposed unofficial house arrests on former prime ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia and made repeated efforts in the first six months of the year to force them into exile." Eventually, the report said, the government arrested both women on corruption charges, and at year's end they were awaiting trial. It said by year's end the Anti-Corruption Commission and the public prosecutor had prosecuted several dozen cases against ranking political officials, ranging from extortion and money laundering to murder.

"While the government said that these were legitimate charges, some cases, such as the filing of charges against former Law Minister Moudud Ahmed and former Communications Minister Anwar Hossain Manju, were seen to be politically motivated," the report said. It said the authorities charged Ahmed and Manju with alcohol possession, normally a minor offence for which bail is granted during trial.

The report said the EPR suspended indoor and outdoor political gatherings, allowed the government to take legal action against critical editors and journalists, and allowed authorities, to compel the broadcast or publication of stories supporting the government.

Ground Realities: Bengali Women, Equal Rights and Obscurantism

There are questions you need to ask today about the ruckus whipped up by men unhappy about women enjoying the same rights as they, in this country. And the first question that you need to raise, and expect an answer to, relates to the equality enshrined in the nation's constitution for women. Obviously, if you hold absolute faith in democracy and everything that gives it a definitive flavour of the modern, you will not deny that Bangladesh's women do have a place in the political and social scheme of things. The constitution may have been tampered with in many ways and has, through years of arbitrary government, been rendered emasculated at places. But one truth it has upheld is the esteem in which Bengali women are held, and will be held in the times to be. That being so, you go on to the next question.

And it is a simple question. If the government of the day has been bold enough to make public a women development policy, why did it have to take two steps backward only because a handful of obscurantist are unable, because of their blinkered vision, to come to terms with women being regarded as part of the human race?

Note the recommendations put across to the administration by an ulema committee relating to the provisions of the proposed women development policy. Each and every recommendation made by the committee militates against the moral and political values we as a sovereign body of people have strenuously tried to uphold in all these years since we liberated ourselves from foreign rule.

And if you, if we, if the government were to treat these recommendations with the seriousness they do not deserve, you can be sure that women in this country — your mother, my spouse, your sister, my aunt, your woman friend and mine — will steadily be pushed back into an area of pitch darkness.

Do not forget that there was once a body of wildly parochial men called the Taliban, for whom the religion of Islam did not go beyond a certain length of beard for men and an all-enveloping, stifling dress code for women, in an unfortunate country called Afghanistan. And now observe the attitude of the ulema committee to women in this country. It has suggested that six of the provisions in the women development policy be scrapped altogether and that fifteen other provisions be rephrased.

The rephrasing will, as you may have guessed already, render the policy altogether meaningless.

The acting khatib of Baitul Mukarram mosque tells the country that several sections of the policy are "very objectionable." Now you cannot but raise another question: are those aspects of the women development policy objectionable because they threaten the impunity with which men, guided so long by a motivated interpretation of Koranic laws, have so far lorded it over their families and communities?

The acting khatib goes one disturbing step further when he informs this nation of secular citizens that "a woman cannot enjoy rights equal to a man's because a woman is not equal to a man by birth." That begs the question: how did this individual, and others of his kind, draw the inference that there is something about the birth of women which relegates them to a station below that of men? It is a bizarre proposition.

There are men who speak of religion all day long and will leave no stone unturned to tell us that Islam accords the highest respect to women. That is fine, for history remains proof that the Prophet of Islam went out of his way to ensure that women occupied a place of great honour in society.

You try going back to the history of Islam and you do not come across a single instance of the Prophet ever having pronounced judgment on the lowliness of women's birth. Women prayed in the mosques with men. They engaged in open dialogue with the Prophet. After the death of the Prophet, men unable to interpret his sayings consulted his wives, whose word was deemed to be final.

So why are these obscurantists around us taking upon themselves the responsibility of interpreting Islam for us and, in their skewed interest, busily going about whipping up hysteria about our world coming to an end if our women share the same pedestal of rights with our men?

The late khatib of Baitul Mukarram once inflamed the passions of his followers by openly declaiming that Bangladesh was in crisis because it was being dominated by two women. That was a silly thing to do, for it obscured the fact that many of the problems the country has been facing all these decades have had their roots in the depredations of some of its unscrupulous male ruling classes.

Let us face facts. And the first one of these concerns the very constitution of the ulema committee itself. Whoever first conceived the idea of referring the draft

women development policy to such a committee, indeed of helping to set this committee up, should have known that nothing enlightening would emerge from it. And nothing has. That is made obvious through the emphasis on “just” rights that such a class of religious scholars has placed.

You know of justice and you know of equality. They have their own nuances and meanings. So why mislead people, in this day and age, through inventing a meaningless term and calling it “just rights?” But look at the issue in a deeper way. Advocating “just rights” is but another way of trying to maintain the entrenched, backward tradition, which has, so long, kept Bangladesh’s women pinned to the ground, mud and all.

Recall all the ugly tales of men unable to contain their anger when *Grameen* and Brac initially undertook a campaign of women’s empowerment in the villages. The bigots thought it was a bad idea, because the bigots have long looked down on women, placing them at a point where they have been nothing but sub-human.

The ulema committee has only echoed those primitive sentiments. We need to be able to forge the will and the courage in ourselves to put up strong, intellectual resistance to the committee. It is a job that must begin through taking the initiative back from the extremist elements arrayed against our women, for the simple reason that Bangladesh’s women have struggled long and hard to come by the rights that are now within their reach. Speak of CEDAW, speak of Beijing, speak of the feminist movement all of these have been steps towards the creation of an enlightened society in this country and elsewhere.

Every citizen in this country has taken intense, sustained pride in the determined way in which the

movement for equality has taken shape and has forged ahead. Women in our civil service, in the labour movement, in teaching, in the armed forces and in politics have demonstrated an immense capacity to act as forces of change.

In the villages, in our small towns, in the cities, the social engineering that has gone into enabling our women to reach out for the skies must be allowed to go on without let or hindrance. The various tactics of intimidation currently being brought into play, indeed being refined, in order to thwart the march of Bengali women must be blunted through the concerted efforts of everyone who has striven for the establishment of a secular democratic order in this country.

This is no country for people who would prefer to hold one half of its population in disrespect and abject misery. And let it not be a place where men with wrong notions about life, with convoluted ideas about the scheme of things in the universe, determine for us the manners and modalities along which we will carry ourselves. We will restore the values of faith in our mosques by taking politics and extremism out of them.

We will reassert the principles of social behavior that bring men and women on a par, in every sense of the term. Bigotry cannot, and must not, be allowed to mar the quality of life. Just rights for women? Drop the idea, for nothing less than equal rights for them matters. Which is why a sustained campaign for an implementation of the provisions, all of them, of the national women development policy becomes an absolute and immediate necessity.

Syed Badrul Ahsan, *The Daily Star*, 23 April 2008

BHUTAN

All the King's men

Bhutan becomes the newest democracy as its unwilling voters elect the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa to power with an overwhelming majority.

South Asia is passing through an election season: Pakistan's February 18 parliamentary elections were followed by Bhutan's National Assembly elections on March 24, and now Nepal is all set to hold its first ever elections to the Constituent Assembly on April 10. All these exercises are a manifestation of the strong upsurge of sentiment for democracy and against the erstwhile autocratic governance in these countries; except that the Bhutanese elections were held in a unique political context. Unlike the situation in Nepal and Pakistan, there was no grassroots upsurge in interest in political change and the establishment of representative institutions. The Bhutanese people were happy to be governed by their traditional monarchy, whose criteria for development were defined within the parameters of the "Gross National Happiness" felt and enjoyed, not only materially but also "spiritually", by the people.

Bhutan's call for democracy was a top-down sermon by the King himself, Jigme Singhye Wangchuk, much against the unwillingness of and initial resistance by the people. While, in his neighbourhood, the Nepal King was hell-bent on going to any length to cling to power and the military regimes in Pakistan and Myanmar were most unwilling to abandon autocracy, the King of Bhutan decided in 2005 to institute democracy by handing over executive power to elected representatives. He got a new Constitution drafted accordingly, and went around his country discussing the draft Constitution and pleading with his people to learn to rule themselves through their elected representatives. The new Constitution makes it mandatory for future Kings of Bhutan to retire at the age of 65. The King can also be removed by a two-thirds vote in Parliament. King Jigme Singhye Wangchuk himself abdicated in favour of his son Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk, who is in his twenties, in 2006. Political parties were reintroduced in April 2007 by lifting a 50-year-old ban on them and elections to the Lower House of Parliament were scheduled for March 2008.

The Bhutan elections are unique not only because they were ordered by the King but also because, unlike in other South Asian countries, educational

qualification was made an important factor. Under the newly framed election laws, no one can contest parliamentary elections without having a graduate degree. Bhutan has a small graduate community of just 3,000 persons. This is also indicative of the fact that in a country where the rate of literacy is still around 42 per cent, the graduate community may mostly come from the upper and elite sections of society.

Elections were also constrained as the contesting parties were screened before they were given permission to participate. The Druk People's Unity Party (DPUP) was disqualified after scrutiny for what was described as lack of "credible leadership". It was alleged that more than 75 per cent of the party members were school dropouts. The elimination of the third party from the race reduced the two-stage electoral process into a direct contest. The Election Commission also disqualified a candidate of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) who tried to play up the problem of Bhutanis of Nepali origin. This was done to send out a firm message that there was no room in Bhutan for communal and sectarian politics. It was a clear decision to keep the Nepali issue out of the political process.

The new electoral laws also bar a person from contesting if any of his/her parents was a migrant Bhutanese. The parents of contestants have to be Bhutan-born. The electoral process was also kept free of religious issues. Monks were not allowed to vote. No wonder, there were no sensitive or contentious issues. In fact, there was not much to distinguish between the two major contenders, the PDP and the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), or the Bhutan Peace Party. While the DPT promised a compact government, equal and just treatment to all citizens and a high standard for political conduct, the PDP tried to lure voters by offering a salary rise and promising infrastructure development, including the construction of an airport in eastern Bhutan.

It was a keenly contested election. As many as 74.4 per cent of the more than 318,000 registered voters cast their votes. Even the King appealed to voters to exercise the franchise. People walked long distances

to cast their votes. Some expatriate Bhutanese also returned home to participate in the elections. The Election Commission gave one lakh Bhutanese rupees, in addition to essential election material, to each candidate towards poll expenses. A candidate could also spend one lakh Bhutanese rupees of his/her own to boost his/her electoral prospects. The Commission also organised a television debate between the leaders of the contending parties. The DPT levelled corruption charges against the PDP, saying that the latter was bribing voters, but these were stoutly countered by the PDP.

The election results upset all calculations. Analysts in Bhutan and India had expected a close fight, with a difference of not more than five to 10 seats between the winner and the loser. Even the DPT, which emerged victorious with an overwhelming majority, had not expected to win more than 30 of the 47 seats it contested. It won 45 seats. The PDP, which was routed, has asked for a re-poll or at least a serious investigation into the factors that caused such a landslide in favour of the DPT. This heavily lopsided outcome has been attributed to various factors.

Some observers have blamed the faulty mechanism or improper use of the voting machines. Others have given credit to the campaigning style of the DPT and the impressive articulation by its leader, Jigme Y. Thinley, in the debate as well as during the campaign. The DPT had five senior Ministers in its ranks and there was an impression that the party had the blessings of the King, although the PDP had a leadership related to the royal family. The active participation of senior civil servants in the DPT's electioneering confirmed this impression. Since the election was seen as a gift from the King, voters chose the party that was seen as the King's party.

Bhutan's top-down experiment in democracy, therefore, starts with an extremely weak opposition. The two elected PDP members have threatened to resign if the causes of their party's defeat are not investigated sincerely. In order to compensate for the weak opposition, the DPT leader and the Prime Minister-elect has promised accountable, corruption-free and transparent governance down to the constituency level. He assured the people that he

would do everything to "establish firm foundations for a great democracy" under constitutional monarchy. "We are all subjects of one King. And in this small country, we are all a family," he remarked.

Ethnic issues

While the international community has welcomed the democratic initiative of Bhutan, some criticism has come in for the neglect of Nepali refugees from Bhutan who have been languishing for years in Nepal and India. More than a 100,000 of the refugees were not included in the voters' list and were not allowed to participate in the elections. Extremist elements, including members of the Bhutan Communist Party, which is closely affiliated to the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists), have infiltrated this section. They tried to disrupt the electoral process by exploding bombs in various parts of Bhutan since January and on the eve of the elections. The extremists are against the third-party solution of the refugee problem wherein the refugees are being absorbed in the United States and some European countries.

The ethnic issue, although kept carefully out of the electoral process, will need to be addressed seriously by the new democratic establishment. Nine Nepali-speaking candidates belonging to the DPT have been elected to Parliament, but this number is too small compared with the size of the ethnic Nepali population in Bhutan even after the disbursement of the Nepal-based refugees.

The new government will also confront a foreign policy challenge in the form of an assertive and sensitive China, in the context of the renewed Tibet issue and the impressive development of infrastructure in the Himalayas, with roads reaching the Bhutanese borders. The boundary question has yet to be settled between Bhutan and China. As for India, a stable, democratising, friendly and confident Bhutan is the best security asset in the turbulent Himalayas.

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Frontline, Volume 25, Number 8, April 12-25, 2008

INDIA

67 million Indian kids don't get health care: report

India has the highest number of children under five years of age who don't receive proper health care. The annual "state of the world's mothers" report pegs the figure at 67 million, which adds up to 53 per cent of the total population of under-five children in the country. The report has been compiled by "Save the Children", a US-based global independent humanitarian organization. Nigeria comes second in the list, with 16 million children (66 per cent) falling under this category.

"Over one million deaths of children occur in their first month in India," says the report, blaming this on non-availability of medical facilities.

The report adds that Indian girls are 61 per cent more likely to die between the ages of one and five years. "This means that for every five boys who die, eight are girls. The survival gap between girls and boys in India has widened," it says, adding, "in Punjab, expenditure on health care during the first two years of life was 2.3 times greater for sons than for daughters."

Globally, more than 200 million children under five years of age do not get basic health care. According

to the report, about 10 million children die every year from easily preventable diseases, and about six million of these could be saved with basic services like immunization, antibiotics, skilled care at childbirth and timely treatment for diarrhea and pneumonia.

The report also includes the first ever "Basic Health Care Report Card" of 55 developing countries. In India, the poorest children are three times more likely to die than the richest children. Other countries in this category include Azerbaijan, Brazil, Bolivia, Cambodia, Egypt, Indonesia, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa and the Philippines.

India Tops List

Countries with children under five years who don't get basic health care

- India: 67,127,000
- Nigeria: 16,090,000
- Bangladesh: 11,656,000
- Ethiopia: 11,317,000
- Pakistan: 10,478,000

The Indian Express, 8 May 2008



70,000 workers may lose jobs

For lakhs of employees in the textile sector, the wolf is literally at the door. About 70,000-80,000 workers are expected to join the ranks of the unemployed within a month, as the rise of the rupee against the dollar makes textile exports uncompetitive and drives workers out of jobs. This figure is in addition to the 80,000 who have already lost their jobs, says the Clothing manufacturer's Association of India (CMAI).

The Indian apparel industry, worth approximately Rs. 1, 16,000 crore, exports clothing worth Rs. 36,000 crore. The domestic apparel market, which includes ethnic wear and hosiery in the organised and unorganised sectors, is worth around Rs. 70,000-80,000 crore while the readymade garments segment accounts for about Rs. 30,000 crore.

The labour-intensive industry, which is practically on

its knees, is looking to the government for help. "Rupee's appreciation has hit exports badly. No country can hope to survive a 10-15% appreciation without any government help," CMAI president Rahul Mehta told ET recently. "The margins in this industry are 7-9% and with a depreciation of 5%, the balance becomes very low for the industry to survive," he added. Growth in local textiles sales has also slowed as is evident from the fiscal second quarter financials of companies in the industry.

The government recently announced a Rs. 5,000-crore relief package for the beleaguered sector. But the industry feels it is too little, too late. The package, the industry feels, is not a relief measure but a reimbursement. CMAI feels that being an export-oriented sector, it should be tax-exempt. The interest rate subsidies are yet to percolate to the industry.

The shrinking margins have forced the industry to turn more competitive. It is now moving toward higher productivity by exiting low-margin products and making value-added goods and introducing modern technology. Tirupur, the knitwear hub of India, too has a similar story. Textile makers had earlier cut almost 10,000 direct jobs so far and are expected to take that number to 50,000 by the end of this year. Tirupur houses over 1,000 textile exporters and last fiscal year totalled revenues of Rs. 11,000 crore, a growth of 15% over the previous year. But this year, revenues are expected to fall by 10%.

As the US and European markets turn more uncompetitive, textile exporters are increasingly turning their attention to untapped Asian countries. Apart from finding new markets, this also helps them reduce dependence on the West. There is greater focus on the domestic market too. "If the domestic market is tapped properly, market growth cannot go below 25-30%," said Mr. Mehta.

However, for the textile sector, turning around won't be an easy task. The industry, claimed Mr. Mehta, is hit by labour laws that force units to retain employees despite inefficiencies. Besides, in India, companies retain employees even while they run a loss, said industry executives.

According to CMAI, for every 35 people re-employed in the industry, the government has to spend around Rs. 1 crore. That puts the total losses incurred by the sector at around Rs. 4,000 crore. In 2005, the apparel industry grew around 35%, which dropped to 14% in 2006. The industry fears that this year, the growth rate might plunge to negative 10%, i.e.: around 24% drop in the growth rate.

According to Mr. Mehta, in textile exporting countries like China, domestic prices are higher than their export prices, which in turn, make their exports cheaper, increasing their global competitiveness.

Devika Ghosh



India among world's 10 most gender-biased economics

Indian women's empowerment has still got a long way to go if the World Economic Forum's report, which has put the country among the bottom 10 when it comes to women's participation in economic agenda, is any hint. According to the World Economic Forum's latest Gender Gap Index report released over the weekend, India has been ranked at 114th position after taking into account economic, political, educational and health parities, among a total 128 countries.

In terms of "economic participation and opportunity" along, India has fared even worse at 122nd position, pushing it into the bottom ten. In the overall ranking, the country has slipped from 98th rank in 2006 when the index included a total of 115 countries.

This year's Gender Gap Index has been topped by Sweden with a gender equality of 81.5 per cent, followed by Norway, Finland, Iceland and New Zealand. The countries ranked below India include Bahrain, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Iran, Oman, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Benin, Saudi Arabia, Nepal, Pakistan, Chad and Yemen with the lowest gender equality of 45.1%.

According to the WEF report, India has an overall 59.4% gender equality, while for economic participation and opportunity it stands at 39.8%. India is ranked at fourth position with 43-percent gender

equality when compared in terms of a women state head.

Compared to its 122nd rank for economic participation, India has fared much better in terms of political empowerment at 21st position. The country has 106 women in Parliament, 118 in ministerial positions and has seen four years with a female head of state in the last 50 years.

The economic parity index is based on four parameters – labour force participation, wage equality for similar work, income, legislators, senior officials and managers and professional and technical workers.

In terms of wage equality, India's rank is much better at 59th with a 67 per cent gender equality, while for professional and technical it is 97th (27 per cent equality). It has been ranked below 100th positions for the other three parameters.

WEF said that India has 36 per cent female participation in overall labour force, while for professional and technical workers it is 21 per cent. In terms of economic participation and opportunity, Mozambique has been named as the top country with best gender equality of 79.7 per cent, followed by Philippines (78.9 per cent), Ghana (78.1 per cent), Tanzania (78 per cent) and Moldova (77.8 per cent). On economic parameters, the only six companies

faring worse than India are Iran (123rd), Bahrain (124th), Oman (125th), Pakistan (126th), Saudi Arabia (127th) and Yemen (128th).

The major countries faring better than India on economic parameters include the US (14th), the UK

(32nd), Australia (12), South Africa (85) and France (61st). Among the BRIC countries, Brazil (62nd), Russia (16th), and China (60th) have all been ranked well above India.

The Free Press Journal, November 12, 2007



Civil society in a confrontational state

Binayak Sen's incarceration in Chattisgarh underscores the paranoia of the developmental state towards NGOs that understand poverty in holistic terms. That has fuelled more violent forms of seeking redress, says Prabhu Ghate.

Shaheed Hospital in Dalli-Rajhara is a unique civil society institution. It started life 25 years ago as a dispensary, with donations of money and labour from the mine-worker members of the independent trade union started by Shankar Guha Neogi in this small iron ore mining town 70 km south of Bhilai. It attracted idealistic doctors and devoted nurses, and managed to pay for itself while adding to its facilities with no help from the state. Among the group of founding doctors was Dr. Binayak Sen, a gold medallist from Christian Medical College, Vellore. Today Shaheed Hospital has grown to a capacity of 100 beds, but the wards are still overflowing. It seems to run itself, under a highly collegial system of management, with doctors and staff taking very low salaries, and volunteer workers pitching in after their shifts in the mines.

This writer was here to attend a meeting on irrational drug use. There was a fabulous view from the terrace as the sun set on the ochre slopes of the open-cast mines rising in tiers across the valley, and adivasis families accompanying patients from miles around let their evening fires at the back of the building. Any serenity one might have experienced, however, was disturbed by a depressing thought. Shankar Guha Neogi has been assassinated, and Binayak Sen is incarcerated in Raipur jail on vague charges of alleged links with the Naxalites. He has been denied bail since May last year. Clearly, something has gone badly wrong in Chhattisgarh in the relationship between civil society and the developmental state.

The charismatic Neogi was as much a thorn in the side of the state as he was of the various mafias that flourished in the steel belt, and his murderers were never brought to book. Binayak Sen, after leaving Shaheed Hospital, devoted himself to enhancing the effectiveness of the rural health

delivery system, a contribution that was recognised in a prestigious award conferred on him during the recent annual conference of the Indian Social Science Congress, ironically just two days after a Raipur court started framing charges against him. The state at one time did work closely with Sen and other rural health NGOs in developing the 'Mitanin' programme, which is the Chhattisgarh version of the flagship ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) programme under the National Rural Health Mission. Mitanins are selected by the people through the panchayats and trained by the state or by accredited NGOs.

About 5% of the programme in the state is being implemented by NGOs. Many of them take the world "activist" in the acronym ASHA seriously, unlike the government which just pays it lip service. They encourage their mitanins to monitor the situation with respect to the attainment of other rights and entitlements too, such as whether the poor have been getting their rice and sugar from the local PDS shop, or have access to the muster roll under the NREGS. The logic is that unless the poor learn to demand the delivery of their entitlements generally, they are not likely to complain when the village health sub centre is out of medicines, or has an absentee or incompetent doctor, either.

The lack of pressure from below allows poor governance to flourish unhindered, fuelling social unrest and leading ultimately to more violent forms of seeking redress. Instead of appreciating this dynamic, the state has allowed its lower level functionaries to harass NGO mitanins, especially in the parts of the state where they are most needed, such as Dantewada and Bijapur districts where health services have been withdrawn from a large number of villages because of conditions of virtual civil war between the Naxalites and Salwa Judum. Because mitanins are allowed by the Naxalites to continue visiting and providing services in these villages, they too have become suspect and are often detained for questioning by the police.

The stance towards NGOs, who take a more holistic and structural view of poverty and the incarceration of Binayak Sen, are both reflections of the extreme paranoia that has overtaken the state government and its exclusive reliance on a narrow law-and-order approach. It is significant (and ridiculous in the context of framing charges against Sen) that the government pleader spent much of his time in the recent court hearing dwelling on how the mitanin programme was being used to aid the Naxalites. Sen has never condoned violence by the Naxalites. He learnt over the years, however, that improvements in the nutritional and health status of the poor required a secure foundation of food security, a stable ecosystem, respect for human rights and above all social justice and equity. His work in defence of these causes on behalf of the PUCL raised the hackles of the state. This is the real reason for his incarceration under the states' draconian "anti-terrorist" law.

Clearly, there are many complex socio-economic causes of extremist violence in the tribal areas, including the sense of insecurity engendered by the loss of control over resources, the demise of traditional livelihoods, and alienation of land for state

and private sector projects without adequate rehabilitation and just compensation. However, the neglect of basic social services such as food security, health and education is certainly a major cause, and one would have thought the state would do its utmost to forge useful partnerships with civil society to improve their provision.

It could also give the social sectors much higher priority by posting the best officers to them. State governments need to change the present value system that regards social sector jobs as inferior if not punishment postings. Being health secretary or education secretary should be as prestigious as finance or industries secretary. Also, the IAS urgently needs to revert to its area of comparative advantage, which is to provide good clean routine administration and public services. IAS officers need to spend many more years in the districts and in the same job, learning it properly instead of moving on to greener pastures early in their careers, never to return. These are some of the failures in governance reform the country is paying a high price for, including left-wing extremism.

Economic Times, January 17, 2008



'India fails in implementation of rights'

India has failed to impress United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), with its state report on issues like human rights, women issues, right to work, food, housing, health, education and cultural rights. The CESCR examines measures taken by 157 countries to comply with standards to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

In the recent concluded session with the 13-member Indian delegation of Geneva, the CESCR also found that the report reflects "a lack of political will to actively consult and engage with civil society and to present the true reality of human rights in India". Though India fared well for its initiatives and efforts taken in the field of constitutional provisions, laws policies, plans and schemes, the committee expressed its concern over the implementation of these initiatives.

Apart from the state report, "shadow reports" were also submitted by more than 300 civil society groups from the country that were used to supplement as well as counter the information provided by the government on various issues. In its questioning, the

committee also considered information provided in the shadow reports on various issues, submitted by the civil society groups from the country.

Some of the issues that were put up by these civil rights groups in their reports and which were missing from the state report were agrarian crisis leading to farmer suicides, declining farm production, rising food prices, threat to food security, forces land acquisition, state of Muslims in post-Godhra Gujarat and human rights violation of tribal people in country.

The CESCR evaluates reports submitted by participating countries and then it gives its observations and recommendations on how these countries can improve its efforts on promoting and protecting the rights of people.

"Though the government tried hard to impress the UN committee with its report, the verdict was that India has not performed well with issues like human rights, uprooting people from their land in the name of urbanization, denial of basic facilities to people living with HIV/AIDS, disabled people, rights to dalits and Muslims," said an official of a civil rights group which participated in the meeting.

Denial of basic services such as water and electricity to majority of population and continued discrimination against religious and sexuality minorities were also taken into consideration by independent experts of this UN's committee.

Meanwhile, civil society groups are waiting for the committee's recommendations which will come out in the form of "concluding observations," which the civil society groups think will force the government to rethink on its "model of development".

"There might be lot of good things undertaken by the government but they are only on papers. Ground reality is so different. Human rights violations are

taking place in India even after enactment of so many laws and government's initiatives," said the official. "We are hoping that once these observations are out, Indian government will rethink its model of development and search for urgently required solutions in order to preserve the rule of law, democracy, and human rights and dignity of the Indian people," added the official.

The CESCR suggested that India has an immediate obligation to realize certain rights, such as food, housing, health facilities, education and protection of women's rights, in which the country still needs to perform better.

The Asian Age, 12 May 2008



Supreme Court order on GM food items "a breakthrough"

Protocol for safety tests and impact monitoring inadequate: Gene Campaign

GEAC directed to consider toxicity of GM food items

Cultivating GE rice is a 'high risk' area

The interim order issued by the Supreme Court on Tuesday directing the government to publicise the results of trials on the safety of genetically modified (GM) food items represents a breakthrough in the campaign for biosafety regulations in India, Suman Sahai, convener of Gene Campaign, said here on Friday.

Talking to *The Hindu*, Ms. Sahai who is in the city to attend a two-day workshop organised by the Kerala State Biodiversity Board, said the order would be a boost for efforts to establish a better regulatory mechanism for GM products in the country.

A Supreme Court Bench headed by Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan issued the interim order based on a public interest litigation filed by Gene Campaign, a Delhi-based research and advocacy organisation.

The Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) has been directed to consider the toxicity and allergenicity of GM food items. The order asked the government to post the relevant material on the web so that independent experts could examine them.

Contamination hazard

The committee has also been asked to study the isolation distance of experimental fields from neighbouring fields to prevent contamination.

In its petition, the Gene Campaign had alleged that the unregulated release of GM grains and vegetables in the Indian environment was fraught with danger to public health and environment. It sought to prevent the release of GM foods without safety verification by an independent agency.

Persistent demand

"At a time when almost every other country, including the U.S., is revising regulations on GM products, the Government of India has not responded to persistent demand for an overhaul of the regulatory mechanism. The existing protocol for safety tests and impact monitoring in India is extremely inadequate despite growing scientific evidence of the impact of GM foods on public health," Ms. Sahai said.

"It is a pity that a country like India that is home to the biggest staple food in the world is fooling around with genetically engineered (GE) rice. Cultivating GE rice is a 'high risk' area for India, a major centre of origin and diversity for rice."

Ban in Mexico

She said Mexico had imposed a ban on not just the cultivation of GE corn, but also research in GE corn.

"Too little is understood about what happens when foreign genes are abruptly pushed into the genetic material of living organisms like plants. The results are intrinsically unpredictable and there exists the

potential for damage across generations. India must not cultivate GE rice until a solid body of research is done to understand the implications.”

Like atomic energy

Likening GM technology to atomic energy, Ms. Sahai who has a Ph.D. in genetics and several years of teaching experience in Indian and foreign universities, said, “The crisis is that we will never be able to guarantee total safety. I cannot see a day when we can remove precautions on GE research.”

She said transparency and facilities for data scrutiny would have to be part of the regulatory mechanism.

Sovereignty at stake

Ms. Sahai termed GE a solution in search of a problem. “The only ones to benefit from it are a few multinational corporations. At stake is the food security and food sovereignty of nations. It is a shame that a country like India has to waste so much effort in dealing with the problems caused by this technology.”

<http://globalpolitician.com/24492-nepal>



‘High growth, but no basic rights for women’

High growth rate of Indian economy has failed to ensure basic rights for all and India has failed to put in place basic entitlements to ensure rights to survival, life and dignity for women, especially dalit women and tribal women, said an NGO report.

The report “Divided Destinies, Unequal Lives, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the India State”, was brought out by the People’s Collective for Economic, Social and Cultural rights (PCESC) and handed to Planning Commission member Syeda Hameed on Friday. The process was initiated by the Programme on Women’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights under the broad umbrella of PCESC. The report was earlier submitted to the United nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for the upcoming India review.

The report highlights the gaps that exist between the promises and assurances made by the state and their actual delivery. It says that livelihood security has figured low in priorities and concerns of policymakers.

About rights of women, the report says that despite its upward economic growth, India has failed to put into place even the most basic entitlements that will ensure the rights to survival, life and dignity for women. Also, in addition to the declining sex ratio, the report says, India has the highest maternal death toll in the world and 57 per cent of girls are married in India are estimated to be under the age of 18 years. Other findings include: women earn only 38 per cent of the average male wage in spite of the Equal Remuneration Act and 93 per cent of the female workforce is in the unorganised sector.

Another alarming finding is that although gender gap in literacy and education have gradually reduced to 21.69 per cent in 2001, women’s representation in government jobs has decreased from a meagre 11 per cent in 1990 to 5.8 per cent in 2005. The Planning Commission has pointed out that “women remain largely untouched by gender-sensitive budgets”.

Asian Age, 4 May 2008



Non-tariff barriers with SAARC nations will go: Jairam

Non-tariff barriers between India and other SAARC countries, which were proving an irritant in trade relations, are to be phased out. Speaking to The Hindu on the sidelines of his discussions with representatives of the Maldives government here on Wednesday, Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh said the Ministry was in the process of identifying the barriers and removing them as far as

possible. He cited the recent decision to waive the stipulation for testing and certification of products by Indian laboratories as a precondition for imports. It would now be enough if the job was done in the SAARC countries by laboratories accredited by the Bureau of Indian Standards.

“Wherever possible, we will remove such barriers. In cases where they cannot be removed, we will try to

make the entire process less cumbersome and transparent,” he said.

The effort was to put the new mechanism in place before the next summit in Colombo.

Mr. Ramesh said the government of India had also taken steps to automate some of the decisions relating to the SAARC countries. As part of this exercise, it had notified the release of 20,000 tonnes of rice, 17,000 tonnes of sugar and various other items figuring in the annual trade list with Maldives on Tuesday.

This was the first time the notification was made so early in any calendar year. In addition, 102 million eggs, 5,200 tonnes of potatoes, 8,000 tonnes of onions, 22,100 tonnes of wheat flour, 5,26,000 tonnes of stones and 5,85,000 tonnes of river sand were cleared for export to Maldives.

It was decided to convene an early meeting of the Indo-Maldives Joint Commission for Economic and Technical Cooperation, co-chaired by the Foreign Ministers. Its last meeting was held in March 2000 in New Delhi.

The Hindu



MALDIVES

Social dislocation feeds Maldives Islamism

As street crime and narcotics proliferate, religious extremists draw island youth

Three years ago, Ali Rameez abandoned his place under the spotlights, and chose a new life guided by the light of Islam.

In public demonstration of his new convictions, the Maldives' top rock star had thousands of hit compact discs thrown into the sea off Male, and invited his fans to follow the teachings of the islands' best-known neoconservative Islamic theologian, Sheikh Ibrahim Fareed.

Both Mr. Rameez and Mr. Fareed are now being investigated for possible links with the cell which carried out the September 29 bombing at Male's Sultan park – the first-ever Islamist terror attack in the Maldives. But the real significance of Mr. Rameez's story doesn't lie in his possible links with terrorism. Instead, his journey represents an ongoing battle between religious neo-conservatism and liberalism: a battle Islamists seem to be winning.

Maldives residents say the influence of Islamists has become increasingly visible in what used to be an almost ostentatiously westernised society. There are more women wearing headscarves than short skirts or jeans now, while a growing number of men can be seen sporting full-length beards. On some islands, women have defied laws that prohibit the all-enveloping buruga, known in India as burkha.

Underpinning this shift is a deep cultural dislocation. Signs of the simmering social crisis aren't hard to come by. Just three kilometres by two kilometres,

Male is home to a welter of street gangs, engaging in violent crime and competing to sell drugs. Machangolhi's Buru gang has clashed with the BG in Maafannu and the Flats' Bosnia gang, named after the jihad which stirred Islamists worldwide.

Narcotics use has also grown to disturbing levels. According to a 2006 United Nations Children's Education Fund report, non-governmental organisations have estimated that there are some 8,000 drug users in the islands – an astounding figure, given that their total population is just some 300,000. In the southern-most atoll of Addu, informants told UNICEF that up to 70% of young men and women were using drugs.

Islamist mobilisation

Islamist groups have been quick to cash in on the discontent, offering the rigours of religious practice as a cure for the strains of cultural and economic change. “Many parents,” says Male journalist Ahmed Nazim Sattar, “are delighted that their wards turn to religious groups, since it keeps them away from drugs and gangs. Very few understand where this journey might take their children.” Bookstores selling the Islamist vision to new recruits have proliferated. One, until recently owned by Mr. Rameez's brother, Ibrahim Fareed, stocks a wide range of Salafi sect literature. Zakir Naik, a controversial Mumbai-based television evangelist whose admirers included 2005 Mumbai serial bombing-accused Feroze Deshmukh

and Glasgow suicide-bomber Kafeel Ahmed, occupies a place of honour on the shelves.

Perhaps more important than ideology, Islamist groups are able to provide new recruits tangible material inducements.

Male's traditional elites – in the main merchants and traders – have provided energetic sponsors of Islamist networks, hoping to regain the political influence they have lost to the new rich. Young Islamists are offered jobs, loans to start up businesses, and access to commercial networks that stretch into India and Pakistan.

Maldives Information and Legal Reform Minister Mohamed Nasheed is candid about the scale of the problem: "We turn out 10,000 'O' level graduates each year, but the kinds of white-collar jobs they expect aren't on offer. We need to find ways to absorb them into useful economic activities. We always thought prosperity would solve all our problems, but are now realising there are distributive and social issues that must be addressed."

Praveen Swami,
The Hindu, Sunday, November 18, 2007



NEPAL

A first for Nepal: 161 women in Assembly

Nepal's Constituent Assembly, which will undertake the crucial responsibility of writing the new constitution, will be represented by more women members. As many as 161 women members have already found place in the 601-member house. For the first time in the history of Nepal, as many as 31 women were elected under the first-past-the-post system, while 130 others were nominated by 25 political parties under the proportional system.

Few more women members may be nominated to the 601-member house. The cabinet would nominate 26 members from the civil society.

During the 1999 election, only 12 women members were elected to the 205 House of Representative. So far, women in Nepal's political arena have always been poorly represented.

For centuries, women have always been treated poorly by the feudal society in Nepal and in several places across the country, women are still forced to work as bonded labourers.

"This is a great opportunity for women in Nepal to fight for their rights," Ranjeeta Sharma, a women rights activists told the Hindustan Times adding that literacy rate of females in Nepal is only 27 per cent.

Of the 31 women elected under the direct election, 20 of them were from the Maoist strata, which has always been vocal about gender equality in every spheres of life. It had fielded 42 women candidates out of 240 under the first-past-the-post system of election.

"We feel the newly elected women members, and

especially the Maoists, would be able to work for the welfare of females," Geeta Pathak, a social worker, said. During the decade-long Janayuddhya (Peoples' war), the Maoist Peoples' Liberation Army was also represented by several women cadres. The Maoist central committee and politburo also has women cadres.

Senior Maoist leaders and Nepal's Physical Planning Minister Hisila Yami, and women and social welfare minister Pampha Bhushal have also registered victory in the CA election.

Aarzo Rana Deuba, wife of former Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and Ambika Basnet, chairperson of Nepali Congress' women's wing, have also been included in the Constituent Assembly under the proportional list.

However, the Communist Party of Nepal (UML), which performed poorly in the Constituent Assembly under the proportional list.

However, the Communist Party of Nepal (UML), which performed poorly in the Constituent Assembly election, did not include Foreign Minister Shahana Pradhan in the list of proportional system.

Women on Top

- 31 women were selected under first-past-the-post system
- 130 were nominated by 25 political parties
- 26 to be nominated by Cabinet from the civil society

Hindustan Times, 4 May 2008



The king gone, Nepal must confront a new danger

Unless the deadlock over government formation is broken soon, the constitution writing process will be compromised.

Nearly a week after the abolition of the monarchy in Nepal, a democratically formed coalition government still eludes the world's youngest republic. Instead of introspecting over the reasons for their defeat in the elections to the Constituent Assembly, the Nepali Congress and the Unified Marxist-Leninists are behaving like victors. And the Maoists, who came first but still lack a majority, have yet to master the art of compromise without which there can be no coalitional politics. At stake is not just the question of governance but something much more fundamental. For unless the deadlock over government formation is resolved quickly, the political atmosphere in the country will get so vitiated that enormous and perhaps irreparable harm will be done to the prospects of writing the country's new constitution.

Nepal's voters want the Maoists to lead the government and process of constitution writing, but only on the basis of power sharing. That is why they gave the former rebels 220 out of the 575 elected seats in the Constituent Assembly (CA) but withheld the two-thirds majority needed to allow them to run a single-party government under the terms of the interim constitution. Of course, the Maoists have never said they wanted to run the government by themselves. As soon as the election results became known six weeks ago, Chairman Prachanda extended an invitation to the others to join a government under his leadership. The terms of power sharing had been clearly spelt out by both the text of the interim constitution and the spirit of its working over the past 18 months and it was assumed that these arrangements would carry over.

As the single largest party in the interim legislature, the Nepali Congress got to keep the post of Prime Minister as well as the defence, home and finance portfolios. Moreover, the interim constitution specified that the Prime Minister would discharge the functions of both head of government and head of state and that he could only be removed if a two-thirds majority of legislators voted him out. Now that the Maoists have emerged as the single largest party, however, the Nepali Congress and the Unified Marxist-Leninists are demanding that the terms of power sharing be arbitrarily redrawn. Some of the changes demanded are objective, the product of changed circumstances

such as the formal abolition of the monarchy. But some — such as the demand that the two-thirds majority rule for the removal of the Prime Minister be changed to a simple majority — are totally subjective. As the Maoists correctly argue, such demands would never have arisen if the NC or the UML had won the elections.

Be that as it may, the current deadlock over government formation in Nepal can only be broken if the Maoists and the political parties make some effort to address each other's fears and insecurities in an open and transparent manner. Obviously, both sides must decide on what is vital to their interest and be prepared to compromise on what is not.

Constitutional amendment: Since the Maoists have more than one-third of the seats, the other parties say the provision in the interim constitution requiring a two-thirds majority vote to remove the Prime Minister means Mr. Prachanda can never be ousted once he is elected. The same, incidentally, was true of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala in the interim legislature. On their part, the Maoists say changing this provision to allow the Prime Minister to be removed by a simple majority would make the government unstable and encourage horse-trading.

Both arguments are right but is there a middle path? Even if the Prime Minister cannot be removed except by a two-thirds vote, the interim constitution has fixed the lifespan of the Constituent Assembly at two years. One extension of six months is allowed in case there is a state of Emergency. Since elections have to be held no later than mid-2010, there can be no danger of Mr. Prachanda remaining Prime Minister forever. But what happens if the work of drafting the new constitution takes longer than two years? In that event, the parties should agree that if the life of the CA is extended beyond the stipulated two-year period, a simple majority will suffice to remove the Prime Minister. In other words, the Maoists will have a two-year period during which their Prime Minister effectively cannot be removed. Beyond two years, if the other parties so desire, they can remove him with a simple majority vote. Such a formula should be capable of addressing both the concerns of the parties and the Maoists.

Ceremonial President: The post has now been explicitly introduced through an amendment to the

interim constitution passed shortly after the monarchy was abolished last week. But there is as yet no agreement on the precise role and nature of the job. The more the other parties insist that the Maoists cannot claim the post of President, the more the latter fear that the real reason for bifurcation is to create a second power centre to weaken the Maoist Prime Minister. After all, if the post is to be purely ceremonial, why the insistence on denying it to the Maoists? Insofar as they are suspicious of the other parties' motives, the Maoists are fully justified in seeking to hold on to the post themselves. But their stand that the NC and the UML cannot aspire to the job as "defeated parties" is not logical since the two parties did each win more than 20 per cent of the popular vote.

What form could a compromise on this issue look like? First, the interim constitution would have to explicitly provide for a strictly and exclusively ceremonial role for the President. For the sake of formality, the President might be the commander-in-chief of the Nepal Army but his or her prerogatives in the matter cannot be any more than those of, say, President Pratibha Patil in India. The President cannot declare a state of Emergency, appoint the army chief or decide on deployment without explicit instructions from the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. And there should be no role for the President in the National Defence Council. Second, it is not clear why Mr. Koirala of the NC should be considered the only aspirant for the presidential job; indeed, a better solution could be to rotate the post of President among the biggest four parties in the CA or their nominees every six months. The order of rotation could be by drawing of lots or by the smallest of the Big Four (that is, the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum) going first. Alternatively, a nationally respected non-party person could be selected for the job.

Integration of the People's Liberation Army: Since the PLA's integration with the Nepal Army is a part of the peace process and figures in the agreements struck by the parties well before the elections, there is no logical reason for this to have become an issue again.

Highly improper

It is highly improper for some parties to now demand the "destruction" of Maoist weapons or the disbanding of the PLA as a precondition for government formation. Even if the Maoists take charge of the defence ministry, Article 146 of the interim constitution clearly stipulates that a special committee to be established by the Cabinet will handle the work of integration of former Maoist

combatants. It is in the interest of the Maoists to ensure plurality of political representation in this committee so that there is wider oversight of an issue that clearly concerns all parties. It may be possible to seek an explicit commitment to this effect but the demand being made from some quarters that the entire modalities of integration be thrashed out before the new government is formed is illogical.

Activities of the Young Communist League: The real or purported activities of the YCL have generated considerable alarm and consternation in the ranks of the other parties. As such, the Maoists have to realise that the process of government formation will go smoother if this issue is sorted out in a transparent and fair manner. It is unreasonable for anyone to demand that the YCL be disbanded; but certainly it is legitimate for parties to insist there be no "paramilitary" or "law enforcement" manifestation of its activity. Mr. Prachanda has gone on record to say the Maoists themselves want the YCL to be a "development-oriented" body. The sooner they start taking practical steps towards this end, the better.

Return of confiscated properties: The parties are insisting that the Maoists ensure the return of properties seized by them or their supporters during the course of the 'People's War.' Here, it is necessary to separate this issue into two. Certain properties such as private dwellings are easier to return but land seized from landlords is not. In the case of land that is being tilled by persons other than 'legal' owners, a solution of a longer-term nature can be found through the constitutional process itself rather than through bargaining outside the CA. After all, Article 19 of the Interim Constitution speaks of "compensation" to be paid by the state for any property requisitioned as part of "scientific land reform." The question of land is central to the livelihood of millions of ordinary Nepalis and land reform will be a major pre-occupation of the CA. It is only through the work of the CA, therefore, that a comprehensive and just solution to the problem of confiscated properties can be found.

In sum, a careful review of the five outstanding issues dividing the Maoists and the parties suggests that a workable compromise is possible. The electorate, in its wisdom, produced a certain distribution of seats. The Maoists cannot now seek prerogatives not envisaged by the electorate. By the same token, the other parties must not try and cheat the Maoists out of their mandate by arbitrarily changing the power sharing formula that had been agreed upon prior to the elections.

Siddharth Varadarajan
The Hindu, Tuesday, June 3, 2008

Enter Nepal's Maoist establishment

Will the untested Maoists be able to rise above their bombast and rhetoric to ensure political stability?

The Nepali citizenry surprises itself and the world on occasion, with a show of people's will that is unprecedented and path-breaking. The People's Movement of April 2006 was one such epochal event, which led to the Constituent Assembly elections of last Thursday. Those polls in turn have brought a rebel force barely out of the jungle into the driver's seat of national politics.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has achieved a massive win over its rivals, the Nepali Congress and the 'mainstream left' Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), and is set to organise the government and define the Constituent Assembly process. While still a radical force, it has been cleansed and legitimised through the electoral exercise. The forecast of analysts who had predicted a graduated entry of the 'Maobaadi' through the elections of April 10 has been turned on its head, including this writer's projection that the CPN (Maoist) would come in third after the other two parties.

The people of Nepal seem to have kept their own counsel, and in an election that saw more than 60 per cent participation of the 17.5 million-strong electorate in 21,000 polling centres, they pushed the Maoists far ahead of all other political forces. We have seen a demographic tsunami, and the face of the 601-member Constituent Assembly will be the most inclusive of any legislature in Nepal's history, besides the contribution of the Maoists, the electoral formula combining direct-candidate the proportional elections is set to deliver a dramatically expanded representation of marginalised communities from the country's uniquely diverse population. Several factors would seem to explain the victory of the former rebels, who went underground in 1996 to start their war against the state, 10 years later made a compact with the NC and the UML to defeat and autocratic King Gyanendra through the People's Movement, and thereafter came above ground and joined the interim set-up of the last two years.

To begin with, the Maoist win is the result of a well-oiled campaign machinery worthy of a politico-military organisation. There was countrywide deployment of threat and intimidation during the run-up to the elections, which demoralised competing party activists and civil servants alike. On the day of the polls itself, voting was enthusiastic and widespread enough for national and international observers to declare the exercise a resounding success, though for national and international observers to declare the exercise a resounding success, though 'proxy voting' seems to have been a factor in various parts.

However, election-related malfeasance cannot explain the extent the extent of the Maoist victory and would deny the populace the agency and rational choice it exercised last Thursday. A major reason for the win seems to be voters' desire to keep the Maoists from returning to the 'people's war' and suffering attendant miseries. The imperfect peace process, made so by the absence of the rule of law and state administration over the last two years, left the population beleaguered and worried of a return to that horrific period. Much of the electorate seems to have decided, en masse, to give the CPN (Maoist) the prize of government so that the dire threats of a 'return to the jungle' would not be implemented. To that extent, this was a vote under duress. That said, the urban analyst is required to respond with sobriety to the Maoist victory, because this was also an indication of the scale of unrelenting deprivation from which the people sought release. The hold of the Maoists' populist promise has been strong in a country whose workforce continues to migrate in massive numbers to India and overseas because of high levels of poverty. Against this backdrop, both the UML and the NC were seen as failed establishmentarian forces, while the Maoists projected themselves as true agents of change. The vote swept much of the political old guard entirely out of the picture. With the flexibility available to a new entrant, the Maoists also filled their candidatures with members of the deprived communities, including the Dalits, the janajati ethnic category and women. They laid claim, with justification, to having introduced all the salient issues that had been placed before the electorate, including the demands for inclusion, federalism, secularism, and an overturning of economic relations to serve the underclass.

Immediate steps

The expectation has been that the Constituent Assembly would deliver long-lost political stability, which would allow the revival of the economy and restart development. The populace has been watching the neighbouring economies grow at nearly 10 per cent, while Nepal's own growth has been consistently below three per cent for the last decade. The question in many minds today is: will the untested Maoists be able to rise above their bombast and rhetoric to ensure political stability in order to trigger economic growth? With all their failings, and despite populist suggestions to the contrary, the NC and the UML had in fact since 1990 developed values of responsible politics and parliamentary practice, and the expectation was that the elections would lead to a healthy discourse between these two parties, the Maoists and the new entrants from the Tarai/Madhes. The people now wait to see how the Maoist leadership takes the lead vis-à-vis the

grave responsibilities of writing a new democratic constitution and running the state administration. By the understanding in the Interim Parliament, the key political forces are to work in collaboration to ensure a smooth and inclusive functioning of government and constitution-writing. That was when the NC and the UML believed that the Maoists would be the third force; now that the tables are turned, the latter would have to take the lead in ensuring consensual procedures.

Indeed, all eyes are on the Maoist top brass, which itself has been taken by surprise by the extent of the people's verdict. Early signs will be read in how it responds to criticism and challenges from the opposition parties and by members of civil society who are not exactly fellow travellers. Across the country, the leadership will have to call off the hotheads of the Young Communist League, engaged in a campaign of harassment over the past year. There are other challenges for a Maoist party confronted with the task of moving from belligerent radicalism to responsible leadership of state within matter of weeks. Besides controlling the YCL, immediate gestures would include a public rejection of political violence by Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda'), and the dissolution of the parallel governance structures that have made a mockery of state administration. At a victory rally on Saturday evening, Mr. Dahal did not go that far but he did seek to reassure the national and international community of his party's commitment to multiparty democracy and willingness to work with the other parties.

Federal republic

Nepali politics will never be the same again, and people everywhere wait to see how the Maoists comport themselves in the days ahead on issues beyond the all-important matter of personal security of citizens. To begin with, on the Nepali monarchy, if the Maoists do not have other plans and do work with the UML and the NC, the collective decision to establish a 'Federal Republic of Nepal' will be irreversible.

A consensual approach to the writing of the constitution as well as a commitment to pluralism, freedom of press and assembly, and a willingness to stand by the principles to accountability and transitional justice, will



The Maobaadi Triumph seeking explanations

How did the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) win so many seats in the Constituent Assembly? More importantly, can they now prove to the Nepali people and the world that they can be the vanguard of pluralism and progress?

For thirty years, modern Nepal was ruled by a royal autocracy. Then, starting in 1990, the people began

reassure the citizenry and the international community alike. The Maoists must also assure all on a sober and responsible approach to the national security forces (the Nepal Army, the Armed Police and the Nepal Police) even as they seek integration of the former fighters in the cantonments. Such reassurance is also important to control capital flight, as well as to attract foreign direct investment from investors who have been waiting for post-election stability. A proximate danger for an untried force such as the CPN (Maoist) is crony capitalism, whose short-term benefits to the party may devastate economic growth long into the future.

Here is a country trying to push through a return to peacetime, a return to democracy, and a state restructuring exercise all at the same time. Society is confronting demands for inclusion from myriad quarters in order to right historical wrongs. How will the Maoists tackle these challenges, now that they are indubitably a part of the state establishment? In particular, will they have the maturity to deal with societal forces such as the antagonistic Madhesi Janadhikar Forum of Upendra Yadav, whose victory in the plains mirrors that of the Maoists elsewhere? The ability of the CPN of the CPN (Maoist) to present a sober face will also obviate a radical-right coming-together, which would plunge society into a steep spiral of violence and uncertainty. A party which developed using political violence as an anti-state rebel force needs now to immediately convert into an organisation that can keep its cadre in check, reassure the international community and neighbours, and project a face of responsibility to the donor and business communities. Most importantly, it must rise to the expectations of the people and guarantee the personal security and freedom of citizens. Beyond the jubilation of the moment, the challenges before Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his comrades are enormous. But Nepal has surprised the world before this, and perhaps the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) will surprise us all with its power of transformation.

(Kanak Mani Dixit is editor of Himal Southasian magazine and a civil rights activist based in Kathmandu)

The Hindu, April 14, 2008

to experience inefficient, perhaps, but real democracy, through the medium of political parties.

In 1996, one of these went underground, to engage in Maoist revolution, picking up the gun against the multiparty system of the day. Though gaining momentum and spread over the first seven-odd years, by 2005 the insurgency had achieved a stalemate with the state security. The rebels then decided to relinquish the 'people's war' and, along with the other parties, helped generate the People's Movement of April 2006 against the king, Gyanendra - who had in the meantime taken over. Two years later, on 10 April 2008, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) made a leap into the government, winning an astounding 50 percent of elected seats in the Constituent Assembly, and nearly 30 percent of the proportional-representation votes. In so doing, they trounced the two main forces of yesteryear, the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), and gained a definitive mandate from the people.

The win by the former rebels is explained most significantly by demographic shifts in Nepali society. These delivered a wave of support straight into the Maoist hands from the Dalit, ethnic/indigenous janajati, youth and economically marginalised strata. They also had a fine-tuned campaign machine that used populist rhetoric to woo the masses, and did not shy away from countrywide threats and intimidation. The demographic surge and populist campaign gave the Maoists the bulk of their votes, but they were nervous enough about this first-time outcome to feel the need for coercion. In retrospect, they might themselves agree that they need not have.

The decisive evolution in the public's self-awareness began with the 1990 People's Movement, which did away with the royal Panchayat regime, and provided space for ethnic assertion and grassroots activism. The radical transformations that, over the last decade, overtook Nepal's diverse population, are also explained by: exposure to the wider world through media and first-time road transport, political awareness through non-governmental activism, the experience of local governance, the arousal linked to the 'people's war', and the democratic fight against the autocratic royal, Gyanendra. A huge spike in the youth population, coupled with higher literacy, delivered a voting category that was quite different from the one which had exercised the ballot the last time, in 1999. All of this was carefully utilised by astute strategists within the Maoist party, who had stayed in continuous touch and engaged with the villages when the other political parties had been scared off by the insurgency.

While these and other societal shifts were obvious, they had not been studied adequately by many analysts in terms of electoral impact. Those with lack of foresight and insight included this writer, who had suggested a third-place showing for the Maoists, after the UML and Nepali Congress. Based on the experience in other countries, the reading was that the Maoist violence was too recent in the public memory for the party to excel in its first electoral exercise, but that staying the course would deliver the support of the underclass and marginalised to the Maoists in the long run. Indeed, this writer had thought the public would not give unqualified support to the Maoists in the absence of some kind of apology down the line for the excess that was the 'people's war'. As it turned out, the populace had no time for any kind of further evolution: that the Maoists had called off their insurgency and come into the peace process and elections was deemed enough to give them a resounding mandate.

Moreover, unencumbered by the hold of upper-caste politicians, and without sitting legislators and party bosses to cater to, the CPN (Maoist) went all out in selecting candidates from marginalized groups. They then proceeded to successfully get them elected in a manner that the other political parties could not expect to achieve over successive elections. Besides the Maoists' good showing in garnering 120 of the 240 seats in the direct-candidate elections, and ensuring diversity therein, the representation of the many communities of Nepal was also guaranteed by the innovation of 335 seats available under the 'proportional representation' ballot. Under this system, parties were allotted seats in proportion to the votes they polled, and parties in turn selected their Assembly members in proportion to the defined national communities, such as women, Janajati and Dalit. The presence of the Maoists in this election and the use of proportional representation have delivered the most significant success of the elections of 10 April, one that turns Nepali politics on its head and guarantees representation and inclusion like never before. Along the way, the decades-long control of the Bahuns (hill Brahmins) over the political process seems to have been significantly deconstructed.

Baidhanik kypcher

In a country made up of many marginalised groups - by ethnicity, caste, faith and region - the poor and disfranchised overwhelmingly responded as a vote bank for the Maoists. Age, too, played a significant part in the recent polls, with voters between 18 and 25, making up 30 percent of the national roll, casting the ballot for the first time. Many new issues cropped

up that were not present in past general elections, including positions and planks raised by the ethnic consciousness across the hills, the Madhes agitations in the plains of the last two years, and the 'people's war'. This turbulence threw up the new agenda of secularism, federalism and republicanism, and the bulk of young voters, it turned out, saw the Maoists as the vanguard on all fronts.

The CPN (Maoist) war chest was full, and money was spent liberally. The campaign strategy was to make use of smart slogans, aggressive speeches and a reliance on unrestrained populism. The key slogan, "We've seen the others, now let us try the Maobaadi" caught the public's imagination, and the Maoists had no compunction about utilising ethnic populism for votes - for example, by mooted ethnic-based federal provinces in a country of widely mixed habitation.

At the beginning, the Maoists were not confident about their showing, and so the matter of 'seat adjustments' was raised with the competing parties. For long, the Maoists also insisted on a full-proportional system of voting rather than the mixed system that was ultimately adopted. In those initial calculations, the Maoists felt that a proportional vote would secure them a base level of seats from the underclass and marginalised communities, expecting that they would not get enough votes for their individual candidates to succeed. Having agreed to the mixed electoral system, the Maoist leadership experienced a panic attack in September 2007, and walked out of the interim government so as to scuttle the (second scheduled) polls, slated for November. As it turned out, it was the well-worn faces of the Nepali Congress and the UML that the voters rejected, while the CPN (Maoist) made off with exactly half of the 240 seats in the direct-candidate elections. The proportional elections, which were supposed to be the Maoist lifeline, in fact turned out to be one for the other parties.

Over the winter, the Maoists were hoping to make a strong third place while aiming for second. A poll conducted in December found that around 43 percent of respondents were still undecided, with the first two places still reserved for the UML and Congress. In retrospect, the undecided seem to have gone for the Maoists in toto. According to Maoist leaders, they knew that they had turned the corner by January, and in a samikshya baitha (evaluation meeting) two weeks before 10 April, the conclusion was that there was a lahar (wave) in their favour. The party suddenly looked headed for first place, and the leaders said as much publicly but few others were believing.

Indeed, such was the leadership's confidence level that it downplayed the killing of six cadre in western Dang District in a skirmish with police two days before the elections. Those who believed that the Maoists were, yet again, itching for an exit from the polls worried that the party would use this incident as an excuse; they were surprised when Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda') urged his followers to remain calm and stay the course. In retrospect, the controlled response was also an effort not to jeopardise the sure win.

The fact that pressure tactics were used countrywide in the immediate lead-up to the polls simply extended the Maoist range of victory - sometimes to unbelievable proportions, as in the district of Gorkha. The real brilliance of the Maoist electoral malfeasance, what some of their activists called 'baidhanik kyapcher' (legal capture), was that it was geared to be invisible to the international poll observers, while the local poll officials, observers and volunteers of other parties could be intimidated as required. (It should also be noted that, booth-per-booth, election-time malpractice was even more pronounced in the Tarai plains, by elements other than the Maoists.)

Threat of violence included the spreading of rumours about secret techniques to monitor the voting, threats of dire consequences and fines for those voting for others, marches by Young Communist League and cantonment combatants, and so on. Individual candidates were selectively thrashed to send a message to the activists and voters of other parties: a state which could not protect candidates of the prime minister's and home minister's own party could hardly shield others.

Compared to the expectations of outright election-day violence - from the Tarai militants, from the royalist right and from Maoist cadre - polling day itself was bright, largely peaceful, and indeed, celebratory. It was like a nationwide festival, and everyone rushed to pronounce the elections free and fair. As the results started coming in the next morning, it was clear the Maoists were on a roll. While there seems little doubt that the level of malpractice was not at such a level as to negate the Maoist landslide, the craftiness of the exercise of intimidation and 'booth capture' certainly needs scrutiny. Hopefully, one or more of the many election-observer groups in Nepal will compile reports and study the trends so that future elections can be more free and fair. Vote for peace

The transformed nature of the voting populace and clever campaigning explain, in large part, the Maoist

win. But the results of 10 April also indicated, in a roundabout way, a 'vote for peace'. Over the two years since the People's Movement of April 2006, and the peace process under which the CPN (Maoist) was gingerly brought into the interim government, Nepal has been largely without government administration and law and order. A large part of the population felt insecure, particularly with the Maoists having deployed their youth wing, the Young Communist League.

In addition, the party's leadership regularly provided ominous warnings, carried by Nepal's efficient radio, print and television media, that they would return to the jungle and restart the people's war if the party lost the Constituent Assembly elections. They added that 'revolutionary parties' can never lose elections. As such, with the state establishment and civil society having neglected the task of demobilisation and integration of Maoist combatants, the country went to elections with two armies, the national force and the Maoist force. A rational choice was thus made by the public: to vote the Maoist into power, as the most effective means of keeping safe. Many voters would have hoped that all the strong-arming and extortions would end with this one stroke, coupled with the responsibility that comes with overwhelming power.

The aging and ailing Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala had in April 2006 been anointed the unquestioned head of state and government, with the task of easing the Maoists into the mainstream. Unfortunately, emphysema had taken a toll on the prime minister's health, which showed up in his weakened organisational abilities and political leadership. For a man whose strength had always been a voracious ability to meet people and ingest diverse ideas, Koirala was now mostly confined to his bedroom and antechamber at the prime ministerial residence. He hardly visited Singha Durbar, the central secretariat, and did not maintain a prime minister's office worth the name, working variously through confidantes and relations.

It was Koirala's choice of Krishna Prasad Sitaula as home minister that became an important factor in the state's inability to give the people a sense of security. A peacemaker who had been the key interlocutor in negotiations with the rebels in 2005-06, Sitaula seemed out of touch with the requirements of his cabinet post: he was lenient regarding Maoist misdemeanours to the point of appeasement. It could be that Sitaula was fearful of a Maoist return to the jungle (which was not about to happen) and consequent collapse of the peace process. With the Home Ministry unable to galvanise the Nepal Police

and the district administrations, the impunity that had been the leitmotif of national polity for a decade and more remained firmly in place, even during the transitional phase. The populace understood that the government was in no position to protect them, not the peasant, the teacher, the party activist, trader nor administrator. All of this was a boon to the Maoists as election time came around.

Incumbency factor

The legitimisation of the Maoists through the electoral process was long sought by the Congress and UML, and whether by design or by default they conducted a low-key election campaign compared to the aggressiveness of the former rebels. All the same, the two parties were hardly expecting the kind of triumph that the Maoists went on to achieve. No doubt, both parties were seen as Bahun-dominated establishmentarian forces that would be slow in delivering change, at a time when the people had waited too long in despair. The weaknesses of the political parties - including influence peddling, nepotism, infighting, corruption and lack of an energising worldview - were all too evident, and the CPN (Maoist) promised something new and exciting even if untested.

The question remains, however, as to whether the Congress and UML deserved to be penalised the way they were at the ballot. They were being made to answer for the lack of economic progress and the halt to development over the decade of conflict, ironically a situation that was largely created by the Maoist 'people's war'. Likewise, over the last two years the coalition government was so engaged in the peace process, with the Maoists having one foot in and one foot out of government, that both governance and the economy were inevitably impacted. The situation was further complicated by the Madhes Movement of the winter of 2006-07, and the continuing agitations throughout the following year.

It is important to remember that the Maoists did not begin their 'people's war' against the monarchy. Rather, the gun was picked up, in 1996, against the parliamentary set-up and democratic government in Kathmandu. The conditions in Nepal at that time certainly required a social revolution, and the 'people's war' was the action of a smallish political party seeking the path of violence to power. The party utilised effective war strategy in its fight against the state, gaining strength in its central-west stronghold. The CPN (Maoist) was eventually awarded a string of rewards with which to expand, including the suspension of Parliament, the cancellation of local government, and the progressive moves by the pompous Gyanendra to rule absolutely after 2002.

This last allowed the Maoist propaganda machine to claim that all along the fight had been against the feudalistic royal regime.

Six years after the advent of democracy in 1990, the political parties had barely begun to learn how to govern when the Maoists went underground and shook the foundations of the state establishment. The mid-1990s were a time when, after initial hiccups, the Parliament had finally started to function as a place of civil discourse, and the economy had begun to grow at six percent annually. Nepal's political parties tackled the insurgents as best they could, given their individual competitive inclinations, the subterfuges of the royal palace, and the fact that an under-equipped and dispirited civilian police was being put up against the highly motivated guerrilla army.

It was only when the Maoists had achieved a stalemate with the state that they became agreeable to peace. But first, they needed a face-saving way out of the 'people's war'. As such, Koirala and the UML's Madhav Kumar Nepal agreed to the Maoist demand for the Constituent Assembly, provided that the Maoists give up the gun. With the Maoists entering the peace-and-democracy process, the marginalised communities of Nepal took up the Constituent Assembly agenda with alacrity, and the process took on a life of its own.

The fact is that elections had not happened for nine years, and the economy was in shambles for many reasons, but mostly due to the insurgency. When the Maoists came up with their effective slogans against the 'incumbents', they were exploiting the frustrations the populace had with the ten years of conflict followed by two years of tenuous transition. The Maoists were successful in painting the slow-moving UML and Congress as failed parties, which represented the corruption, poor development, maladministration and chaos of both the immediate and long-term past. In fact, it was the political parties who had worked to bring the Maoists into government, making notably magnanimous agreements, including giving the rebel force equal berths in the interim parliament and interim government. Whatever the reasons, the UML and Congress' great contribution in bringing the Maoists to the table did not seem adequate to the voters.

Maoist capitalism

The Constituent Assembly has long been seen as the departure point for the making of a new Nepal' after decades of underdevelopment and a dozen years of violent instability. The Maoists have now been 'cleansed' by the elections. The expectation is that they will indeed rise to the responsibilities of high

office, shedding completely their ferocious streak and publicly renouncing violence. One must hope that, having won where the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) of Peru and so many other 'revolutions' were crushed or compromised, the well-honed politico-military machinery of the Maoists will have the understanding and capability to transform into a democratic institution that will tolerate and encourage pluralism, representative government and the fundamental freedoms.

Rather than begrudge the former rebels their success, the other political parties and broader civil society must help the Maoists to run a government (in whatever configuration) that is accountable, promotes service delivery, rule of law and the writing of a democratic constitution over the course of the next two years. It could even be that the political party that has, in the past, been the most violent can itself most effectively crush the culture of physical harm that has invaded Nepali society in the last decade. The people crave to live peacefully and without fear, holding different values and opinions, and to have political stability that will automatically energise economic growth. On the other hand, it is unlikely that they would want the Chinese model of economic growth without personal freedom, which surely would not work with the democracy that Nepali society has experienced.

The Maoists have promised peace and stability through a multi-party democratic polity, but civil society will have to keep alert because the rebels are also past masters at tailoring words to the audience, be it national or international. In his first victory speech, on 12 April, bedecked with layers of marigold garlands, Chairman Dahal concentrated on addressing the fears of the bureaucracy, international community, the security agencies and the private sector. One disconnect between what the Maoists have promised and what they can deliver is the fact that they cannot escape Nepal's particular geopolitical and developmental straitjacket. 'Prachanda Path' - the local answer to 'Mao Tse Tung Thought' - will have to be rapidly adjusted when confronted with these realities. The Maoists will realise double-quick the need to drop their tried and tested ultra-nationalistic rhetoric; and for managing the country's finances and carrying out development, they will have to cohabit with the international financial institutions and the omnipresent 'donors', bilateral and multilateral.

While the conservatives would smile cynically as the Maoists begin their ride down the road of realism, there are already signs that would alarm the Marxist fellow-traveller. On 16 April, the party's very first

formal meeting, even as the election results came in, was with the pantheon of the Federation of Nepali Chamber of Commerce and Industry. There, Chairman Dahal promised to maintain capitalism, and not to rock any commercial boat. In addition, the chief Maoist ideologue, Baburam Bhattarai, made haste to claim that the party did not expect to introduce socialism for another century, and communism for an additional century. Rather, this was the time, in the Nepali context, when feudalism was being jettisoned, and there was nowhere to go but the route of bourgeois capitalism.

While such pronouncements are striking, they do beg the larger question: whether the 14,000 dead, the disappeared, the destruction of the economy since 1996, the devastation of bridges and district infrastructure, the traumatising of the population, and the deployment of the national army (which conducted its own brutalities) in response to the insurgency were indeed justified to arrive at such a point. Will the CPN (Maoist) become just another party espousing the social-democratic message of mixed economy and state benevolence, dropping its plans on the altar of instantaneous pragmatism, even before the marker ink has dried on the voter's thumb? Whatever the answer, one could hope that now, with power achieved, the former rebels will be able to provide development and economic advance amidst a free society, with the same proficiency with which they conducted guerilla warfare and the election campaign just ended. For this, the Maoists will have to turn into democrats, and there is perhaps no reason why Nepal cannot make a success of this brand of political experimentation.

Loktantrik sambidhaan

Things may also not be simple for the Maoists because, unlike their own rhetoric before the election results started coming in, they are not going to be in total command of the polity even though they are on the driver's seat. There is a hung parliament - or, rather, a hung assembly - in Kathmandu, with the Maoists needing to muster forces and form a coalition government that will work consensually to run the administration and write the constitution. For this, they will have to negotiate with the three main forces, the Congress, the UML and the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) as the powerful new entrant in the Nepali polity and representing the sharp edge of plains activism. (Indeed, the Maoist success in the hills is mirrored by the win of the MJF in the Tarai, where it got 30 seats to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Congress and UML as a national party.) The hope for now is that the new constitution, which will be written and promulgated over the next two

years, will protect the values to which the Nepali people have already become accustomed. These include the fundamental freedoms of thought, speech and assembly, as well as accountability, human rights, free judiciary, multiparty governance, periodic elections, pluralism and separation of powers. At the same time, the Constituent Assembly will be adding elements to make Nepali democracy more inclusive and representative, addressing the issues of secularism, federalism, affirmative action and republicanism - ideas that have already been agreed upon by the main political players, but whose actual fleshing out is bound to prove problematic. Simply put, Nepal needs to evolve as a liberal, inclusive, democratic society through the writing of a democratic constitution, the *loktantrik sambidhaan*.

The CPN (Maoist) will now be driving Nepal with the people's consent, in a position to chaperone both the government and the writing of the constitution in collaboration with the other parties. Having come to power through popular will, the party should have the wherewithal to deliver three elements that are so desired in Nepal at this time: political stability, durable peace and inclusive democracy. While the neighbors may prioritise the first, and the international peacekeepers prioritise the second, the Nepali people will be forgiven for wanting all three, and simultaneously. When that happens, the country's economy will spring to life, as it has been waiting to do all these years. Simultaneously, the government will have to kick-start development, begin the process of post-conflict rehabilitation of both infrastructure and the citizenry's psyche, and launch showcase projects that generate hope and employment.

The Maoists have arrived at the helm of power when the people are tired and want change, and have decided to reject the other parties in their favour. This is a great opportunity for Chairman Dahal, who likes to talk of how Nepal's Maoists are innovators who know the weaknesses of communist regimes elsewhere, to lead his party into a democratic evolution that will surprise the world. Indeed, he can try and fashion a polity that is economically strong, like the neighbor of the north, but fit it into a democratic frame, such as that of the neighbor of the south. Let it be said that there is a party that is Maoist in name, which can and will function as a democratic force to protect pluralism and promote the economy.

The CPN (Maoist) must prove to the world within a matter of weeks that it can, in one stroke, put its violent past behind. No sensible citizen or political party will think twice about the Maoists continuing to win in future free-and-fair elections if they do transform thus, for that will also be the start of the Nepali economic

transformation. At that point, conditions will finally be created under which citizens will no longer have to migrate to seek menial jobs in foreign lands, as they have done for three centuries now. With the writing of a people's democratic constitution and its effective implementation, let the country put an end to that chapter, and let Nepalis never again have to

leave their fields and terraces for remote outposts. They need to experience wealth and happiness in their own homes and neighborhoods, and perhaps the elections of 10 April is harbinger of the turning of the historical tide.

Kanak Mani Dixit, Himal South Asian, May 2008



Nepal deports Tibetan refugee

In an unprecedented move, Nepal's multi-party government ordered a raid on a centre for Tibetan refugees and departed one of them to appease China that is sending yet another team to Kathmandu to strengthen its grip on Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala. China's assistant foreign minister Mr. He Yafei arrives here on Sunday, heading a nine-member delegation for the seventh round of bilateral consultations with Nepal that will focus on developing warmer diplomatic ties and greater cooperation.

During the meet that opens on Monday, the Chinese minister will also deliver a policy statement on Sino-Nepal relations and cooperation. To ensure a smooth visit for He, Nepal police last week raided the Tibetan

Refugee Reception Centre in Kathmandu, which is funded by the UN, in an unprecedented violation of the "gentlemen's agreement" with the world body.

The centre, funded by the UN high commissioner for refugees and run by Lutheran World Federation, acts as a transit point for Tibetans fleeing from China-controlled Tibet Autonomous Region and trying to reach their exiled leader Dalai Lama's seat in Dharamsala town in India.

On February 23, a posse of 50-60 armed policemen raided the centre late at night to arrest 27-year-old Tsering Dhundup, who had escaped to Nepal from Qinghai province in Tibet and was seeking to flee to India.



"The people's mandate is for all parties to work together"

If the Nepali Congress and the UML run away from the task of building the new Nepal, the people will never forgive them, says Maoist leader Prachanda

In the final part of his interview to The Hindu, Maoist leader Prachanda discusses the future of the monarchy and Army in Nepal, and the need for the country's new constitution to escape the trap of formal democracy and actually empower its citizens.

The Maoists and others are committed to abolishing the monarchy in the first sitting of the Constituent Assembly. But once again people have started speculating about what might happen.

There is no ambiguity. The mandate for a republic is clear. We want the end of the monarchy to be done in an orderly, peaceful way. Since the institution of the monarchy is going to be dissolved, it is better that Gyanendra goes of his own accord. This way, a good atmosphere will be created for him to continue

living in Nepal as a common citizen and run his businesses. The people will forgive him and it will be better for him and his family. So I told [the royalist politician] Kamal Thapa the people's verdict has come and in the first sitting we are going to implement it. There is no room for any confusion about this. And since you have good relations with [Gyanendra], you should tell him it is better he goes before this. Thapa said he would convey my message but I never received an answer.

One issue the new government must tackle is integration of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with the Nepal Army. What is the nature of, and timeline for, the integration you envisage?

We want the question of integration to be resolved as quickly as possible. My expectation is that this process will proceed in tandem with the writing of the constitution. And there is no need for us to take two years to do this. It can be completed in a year and integration too should be solved within a year. Secondly, the problem is not as difficult as it was earlier because when the government is formed with our leadership, the integration process will also be easier. Integration is not as complicated as people outside think. The comprehensive peace agreement created the basis for integration, as does the way in which the interim constitution and other agreements speak of the PLA and Nepal Army (NA). Also, there has been continuous dialogue in the JMCC [Joint Monitoring Coordination Committee] for the past one-and-a-half years between the representatives of the NA and PLA, and this has also created an atmosphere.

In our view, the Nepal Army needs to be further democratized and the People Army needs to be further professionalized. In this way, only those who are professionally fit will be integrated and those who are unfit will go to other jobs. This is already clear. And the democratization process of the NA has already started. The Army says it will follow the orders of whichever elected government is formed. This is a positive statement. Immediately after the new government is formed, we will set up a special committee for integration under the government and with the participation of other parties. There will be comprehensive debate and discussion in that committee so that the process of integration is completed as soon as possible.

You have said Nepal does not need a large army. [PLA commander] Badal has spoken of 30,000 being the optimum size of the Nepal Army, which is much less than the current strength of 90,000.

In a small country like Nepal, there is no need to have a large army. The size of the army should come down. Broadly speaking, we are thinking of a size of 30,000 to 50,000. But we are not speaking of an immediate reduction. We don't wish to disturb the institution of the army too much. But on the basis of a plan, over 5 to 7 years, we would like to have a smaller army.

Is there a need for the U.N. to supervise this process of integration?

I feel there is no role for the U.N. in integration. Now that we have a CA, and a basis has come into being for political stability and integration too, I do not see a role for the U.N.

The Young Communist League (YCL) has come in for a lot of criticism during the election campaign with the other parties accusing them of using strong-arm tactics. Why can't the YCL be converted into a development-oriented movement?

We want its role to change. We are thinking of the YCL being mobilised as a working force, a creative, construction force, and are debating this in the party and will take a decision in the Central Committee soon. Not only about YCL but for all the youth of Nepal – how to mobilise them for the building of new Nepal. We are developing a plan of the state to mobilise the strength of youth, and so the YCL's role will not be as it was before.

One of the challenges a Maoist-led government will face is working with the Madhesi parties, particularly the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum. Given the bad blood between you and the experience of the Gaur massacre, where more than 30 of your cadres were killed, how do you plan to address this issue?

During the Madhesi andolan earlier this year, I tried very hard on behalf of our party to address some of the issues. In the process, some relations with the Forum will be built. You are right that last year there was a very bitter struggle and this bitterness increased especially after the Gaur massacre. We believe action should be taken there against the guilty and wherever we have made mistakes, there should be legal action too. In this way, we will solve this problem at the level of law and order, while at the political level we will interact with them, build a front and go forward, I see no problem in this. And it is not as if we don't know the Forum and its leader, Upendra Yadav. He was in the district committee of our party for seven years. I don't think it will be difficult for me to talk with him and work together in the writing of the constitution.

And you want the Forum in the coalition government?

It is necessary to include them. We need their assistance to build the constitution. Only if they are also in government can we unify the whole country and move forward.

But the Maoists' map of a federal Nepal is quite different from the Forum's. Can you bridge that gap?

There is some difference, not in theory but in practical terms. And this can be resolved through debate and

discussion. We have a common understating on autonomy and federalism but on the question of what kind of autonomy, they say 'ek mandhes, ek prades', i.e. that there should be one Madhes province in the Tarai from west to east. Our party has said we are not against this. But the ground reality should also be seen. For example, the Tharus in the west and elsewhere do not see themselves as Madhesis. So we can not force them, we have to convince them. Pushing a policy from the top cannot solve contradictions that exist in the people. If the Forum can convince everyone, we have no objection. So even here I do not see a big difference. But given the Tharus' historical background, they want a separate autonomous province. And in Mithila, the Maithili speakers have their own tradition and culture, and in Bhojpura and Awadh you have Bhojpuri and Awadhi speakers, and in the east you have Rajbanshis. All these aspirations have to be addressed. You cannot impose anything.

What kind of political system do you envisage for Nepal? In India, Britain or the U.S., people are dissatisfied with the purely formal nature of their democracy. Money power dominates and there is a disconnect between voting rights and actual empowerment. How can the CA avoid this trap and build a system that genuinely empowers the people?

I think this is a very important question. The reason we speak of a new system – of inclusiveness, federalism and restructuring the whole state – is because we are fully aware of the problems with the theory of formal democracy and parliamentary systems in which the majority is in government and the minority is in opposition. In this formal democracy, parties spend money, there is corruption, and people are never empowered. We want Nepal to escape from this trap and have effective democracy. This is the change we want. The tradition of formal democracy does not address the aspirations of the people. So though we are committed to multiparty competition and democracy, parliamentary democracy is not the only system. We want the people to be involved and empowered to run the state within the context of multiparty competition. Our concern is to bring women, Dalits, janajatis, Madhesis, workers and

peasants forward and have an effective democracy for them. Side by side with the struggle against feudalism, we want a real democracy that can address people's aspirations and build in the control, supervision and intervention of the masses over the state. We believe the CA election has been one exercise of inclusiveness and democracy, but we have to now seriously look at what kind of democracy we are going to have.

Though this election was about constitution writing, the people also have a lot of expectations from the government you will lead. How will the Maoists deal with this pressure?

There is a contradiction between people's expectations and the political reality we find ourselves in. We will have to tell the people that we are going to write a constitution and are committed and obliged to work together with all the parties. WE have to explain what we can and cannot do. And I think if we are open about this, given the political consciousness of the Nepali people – they will wait and see whether the government is sincerely working for them or not. If they see that, then I think the Nepali people will be ready to make sacrifices. What will provoke them and make them angry is if they see people in government earning crores through corruption and their sons and daughters are studying in good schools abroad, and their buildings are coming up in Kathmandu, while ordinary people are mired in poverty.

Are you confident the NC and UML will eventually join the Maoist-led government?

I am fully confident. If they don't come, the loss will be theirs because the mandate from the 12-point understanding to the election results is for all of us to work together for drafting the constitution and taking the peace process to its logical end. In elections, you always have one party gaining or losing but this does not mean the mission we started has ended. If the NC and UML run away from this mission before it is completed, the Nepali people will not forgive them. It will not be an act of responsibility. From our side, we will spare no effort to ensure we all move forward together.

Siddharth Varadarajan, The Hindu, 29 April 2008

PAKISTAN

73% live below poverty line

WFP says 50% may face food shortage

Pakistan finance minister Ishaq Dar has said that at present, 73 per cent of the country's population is living below the poverty line and the new government would give relief to the masses in coming Budget. He hoped that the Army would help the government to slash the defence budget but said national security would not be compromised.

Talking to reporters after presiding over South Asian Federation of Accountants Conference in Lahore on Friday evening, the minister said the Army leadership is truly patriot and understands the country's financial problems and would hopefully help slash the defence budget, if needed. He said that the government was watching flour prices and would not allow these to go up.

During the previous regime, flour was sold in black while price of the said commodity was stable under

the current regime.

He said there were no queues and people were getting flour on controlled prices.

Earlier, addressing a gathering, Mr. Dar said that in the coming Budget, special focus would be on the poor and such policies would be formed which could benefit the commoners.

Meanwhile, nearly half of Pakistan's 160 million people are at risk of going short of food due to a surge in prices, the World Food Programme said.

The WFP survey covering the year to March showed the number of people deemed "food insecure" had risen 28 per cent to 77 million from 60 million in the previous year.



External debt: a false sense of achievement

Pakistan's official external debt has not gone down since 1999 although it has received record aid, investments, and remittances flows. It has gone up to \$36.9 billion from \$33.6 billion in 1999 despite receiving at least \$10 billion in economic, military and development aid from the United States, over \$6 billion in privatisation proceeds, and a relief of \$1.6 billion in loan write-offs by foreign governments during the last seven years.

The rescheduling of Paris Club debts provided an additional relief of \$ 1.2 to \$1.5 billion annually in terms of debt service payments. Is the government's debt management policy as sound and successful as it claims or a historic opportunity to restructure country's high debt levels has fallen victim to political expediency or a false sense of achievement?

Even after having received such generous assistance, Pakistan external debt to GDP ratio is 28 per cent - slightly worse than Africa's 26.2 per cent, which also happens to be the average for all the developing countries. The average external debt

to GDP ratio of all emerging markets declined from 42.1 in 1999 to 26.2 per cent in 2006, underpinned by strong growth in the global economy and record investment flows into the developing countries.

It is argued that the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sahrif left a heavy external debt burden at 53 per cent of the GDP and the current levels represent a substantial improvement. The net debt flows (disbursements minus repayments) into Pakistan during 1990-1999 aggregated \$5.4 billion compared to \$1.1 billion during 2000-2006.

Hence, the growth in the debt slowed down during the last seven years. However, post-9/11, Pakistan received generous foreign aid as well as much higher levels of foreign direct investment. Remittances averaged around \$4 billion a year during 2003-2006 compared to an average of \$1.5 billion in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, Pakistan's liquid foreign exchange reserves, after jumping to \$10 billion-level in 2002-03, have more or less stayed around that level on average. The foreign exchange reserves of even Sub-

Saharan countries (excluding South Africa and Nigeria) doubled to \$50 billion during the same period. Brazil and Argentina repaid all of their \$25 billion debt - by utilising their foreign exchange reserves - to the IMF in early 2006 to rid their countries of its influence.

In contrast, Pakistan has not been able to reduce the external debt burden in absolute terms or build up its foreign exchange reserves. In fact, it has become the fourth largest borrower of the World Bank and the fifth-largest recipient of American aid to foreign nations. This shows its continued reliance on foreign governments and multilateral institutions - despite declarations of economic sovereignty - and a failure to mobilise domestic resources to pay for the development expenditure. Leaving aside all the technicalities and vague statements, there has been no convincing explanation for not having used the privatisation proceeds to reduce the external debt in a completely transparent manner.

Some policy makers argue that it is acceptable to borrow if the borrowing is for productive purposes. That is theoretically correct. However, if the borrowing record is littered with corruption and wasteful spending, and major sectors of the economy (large agriculturists, stock brokers, property barons, etc.) do not pay any tax at all, the proposition becomes quite debateable and the motives questionable.

This is a critical issue for Pakistan's political economy because the subject of external debt has been a highly political one for most of Pakistan's history since it has relied heavily on the US and institutions under the US influence for its external financing needs. So have many other developing countries - though not necessarily to Pakistan's extent - in the past but most no longer do. This type of aid has been associated with corruption, waste and increasing debt burdens. It has even been viewed as a payoff to the third world dictatorships for their support and aid in helping the US in achieving its foreign policy objectives that have often clashed with the national interests of the borrower countries.

For example, the recently proposed US law, aimed at punishing oil companies that deal with Iran, will make it even more difficult to construct the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. Pakistan must import natural gas from Iran to meet an imminent shortage during the next few years. On the other hand, recent moves in the US congress threaten to cut military aid to Pakistan if it fails to "do more" and stop the Taliban insurgency from its tribal areas.

The government claims that it no longer borrows from the IMF and does not carry around a begging bowl. This is quite misleading because it has been

borrowing more and more from other multilateral institutions like the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The borrowing from multilaterals has outpaced the borrowing from the Paris Club since 1999-2000. Its share in total public and publicly guaranteed debt has increased from 37.5 to 50.2 per cent in 2006.

Consequently, whilst the government has made progress in raising money from the international capital markets - a welcome and positive development - official sources still account for 90 per cent of Pakistan's external debt, including the WB/ADB [48 per cent] and foreign governments [38 per cent]. IMF's loans rarely exceeded 5-6 per cent of total external debt as it normally provided the balance of payments support and not long-term loans that constitute the bulk of our external debt.

The present government has criticised the previous governments for the accumulation of almost \$18 billion debt in the 1990s and increasing Pakistan's debt burden. While it is true that the debt accumulation in the 1990s was large, critics of the civilian governments conveniently overlook a key statistic: 77.2 per cent of the gross disbursements during 1990-1999 were utilised to repay the old debts. The debt-service to gross disbursement ratio jumped to 82.8 per cent during 2005-2006. The continuing increase in this key ratio throughout the 1990s and even during 2000-2006 indicates that more and more of new loan disbursements were used to repay the past debts; a significant percentage relating to the borrowings during the previous military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq.

Pakistan's total external debt that stood at \$8.7 billion in 1978, reached about \$22 billion (50 per cent of the GDP) by the end of the 1980s. That Pakistan had to borrow more later in the 1990s just to service some of the old debts indicates that the loans were not properly utilised as they did not contribute to the development and therefore to the debt servicing capacity. This raises serious questions about the whole wisdom of politically motivated borrowings from the foreign governments and the institutions under their control.

It is therefore fair to ask whether any cut in aid from the foreign governments would be of real significance from a development perspective and particularly in a global economic environment when the private capital flows (through foreign direct investments and international capital markets) have become the dominant source of financing to the developing countries. As a group, they reduced their total external debt to the foreign governments and

multilateral institutions (WB, IMF, ADB, etc.) through net repayments of \$48 billion in 2006 whilst attracting a staggering \$502 billion in net private capital flows.

Pakistan's vicious cycle of borrowings from foreign governments and multilateral institutions, graft, waste, and accumulation of more debt to repay the old debts leads one to believe that the rulers have been putting excessive burden on the people and mortgaging their future by borrowing more and more while indulging in wasteful and unproductive spending while the 'big fish' get away with not only benefiting from the "development projects" financed by external borrowings but also with paying no taxes.

Pakistan's foreign (or hard currency) debt to total debt (that is, including domestic debt) ratio of 47 per cent is high compared to an average of 28 per cent for emerging economies. Given our long-term track record of using foreign debt to indulge in wasteful expenditure, it would be in the best national interest to set up a special fund (in a hard currency, be it dollar or euro) to accumulate all the privatisation proceeds and use that for the early retirement of our external debt. Some countries, like Russia, have set up hard currency stabilization funds to provide for the rainy days.

However, this would be just one among a series of measures needed to reduce dependence on foreign debt. We must cut imports and reduce the rapidly deteriorating current account deficit that has prevented a build-up of foreign exchange reserves since 2003. We must also strive to increase the tax-to-GDP ratio from 10 per cent (one of the lowest) to 17 per cent within the next five years instead of making far-fetched 10-year plans.

The world today is experiencing unprecedented economic growth with huge pools of liquidity seeking investment opportunities. If Pakistan can reduce its macro imbalances by reducing foreign debt and mobilising domestic resources, it can attract a much greater level of foreign direct investment and achieve greater economic freedom. Shall we rise to the challenge or we will once again squander away a historic opportunity?

Yousuf Nazar, 8 February 2008

The writer is a former head of Emerging Markets Equity Investments, Citigroup.



Peasants Conference demands land rights

On 17 April 2008, the international day of peasants, a massive peasant conference in Okara gave two months to the government of Pakistan Peoples Party to fulfill the promises they made while in opposition. Held at Village 15/4L Military Farms, over 5000 participated in the conference organized by Anjuman Mozareen Punjab (AMP). Peasants came from all over the districts while representatives of different peasant and political organization came from all over Pakistan.

This was the first show of strength by the AMP after the formation of the new government. The peasant's leaders reminded the PPP government of promises of Late Benazir Bhutto, who declared the PPP will give ownership rights to the tenets working at Military Farms. They also reminded of 8 pages declaration by Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) for supporting the rights of the peasants to the land that they cultivating for over 100 years.

Both promises were made by the two former prime ministers during the thick of the militant movement

by AMP in 2002/2003 against the military efforts to take over this land from the peasants. The AMP resisted and seven peasants were killed, hundreds injured while over 100 false cases were registered against the leaders of the movement. In retaliation, the AMP declared that they have paid enough and will pay no more. They refused to pay the 50 percent share of the crops; they were paying for over 100 years to Military Farms administration. Till today, the rebellious peasants are not paying successfully and have taken over the land under their control.

The peasants came with red flags flying over their tractors and trolleys and waving the red flags in the processions, they were non-stop for over two hours. Village after village came out to participate in this historic conference. The slogans were very militant, "We are hungry because the Army generals have looted everything, Ownership or death, Down with military dictatorship and long live peasants workers unity.

Farooq Tariq secretary Pakistan Peasant Rabita Committee and spokesperson Labour Party Pakistan spoke about the courageous movement of the peasants and declared that give us ownership right within two months, or we will have a long march to Islamabad. He said that if we can fight the military dictatorship than we can also do the same with civilian governments if they do not fulfill the promises. Farooq Tariq, the main speaker at the conference, told the history of the peasant international day and said the history is littered with the bloods of peasants fighting for land rights.

Farooq Tariq demanded an immediate withdrawal of all the false cases against the peasant leaders registered during the last eight years. He said unfortunately false cases are still registered while the civilian government is in power.

Mehr Abdul Sattar, general secretary AMP reminded the new government about their promises of land rights and asked to fulfill it. He said we have given sacrifices and many of us have lost lives. However, it will not in vain. He said that the local administration should stop taking orders from the military generals and start a new round of talks with us about how to proceed further. He made it absolute clear that no one in Pakistan can take this land back from us and we will fight until the end. He said that we will organize the international day of peasants every year in Okara.

Asif Khan Chairman Liberal Forum Pakistan spoke about the need of a new agenda for the peasant and agriculture. He said we fully support the demands of the peasants for land ownership and demanded an end of feudalism in Pakistan. "go for a land reforms and give the land to the tillers, of Pakistan has to grow" was his message.

Asim Sajad Akhtar, convener Peoples Rights Movement (PRM) said that peasants have all the rights of ownership of the land. "The AMP was the first organization to start the fight against the military dictatorship, now every one is against the military



PAKISTAN NEWS -SAAPE members demonstrating at the old Pakistan embassy at Kathmandu against the imposition of emergency in Pakistan by Gen. Musharraf

dictatorship. Peasants demands restoration of judges and an end of military dictatorship" he said.

Nadeen Asharf vice president of AMP told the conference that a three member federal cabinet committee is formed two day earlier to solve this issue. We welcome the formation of the committee and expect that the committee decided in our favor of land rights. Asif Zardari co chairperson of PPP has asked all the relevant documents that we have submitted to them through a PPP member of parliament. We will march to Islamabad if our demands are not met, he said.

The four hours conference ended with a great enthusiasm. It was broad caste live by different private television channels and dozens of journalist were present at the conference. A team of senior journalist traveled from Lahore to Okara, a distance of two hour, to cover the conference, showed the interest of the media in this conference. Radio FM 103 had a live broad cast reports of the conference.

Report by: Tariq Mehmood



SRI LANKA

A Better Sri Lanka is Possible!

"Organising and participating in an event like this is also about overcoming the fear psychosis that has paralysed us since the resumption of war" — Nimalka Fernando, International Movement against Discrimination and Racism (IMADR)

Over 1300 people from all parts of Sri Lanka converged on Colombo on Saturday 26 January for the global day of action as part of the World Social Forum process (WSF).

The Call for Action addressed itself to all those who oppose war, militarism and racism; neo-liberal attacks on living standards and livelihoods of the poor; and imperialism dressed up as globalisation.

The all day gathering in and around Vihara Mahadevi Park's open air auditorium, convened by Peoples Space (Janavakasha / Jana Avakasam) in concert with a range of other organisations, marked the end of a week of mobilisations and actions in districts across the island.

For example, the Movement for National Land and Agrarian Reform (Monlar) conducted awareness raising meetings on the WSF as well as agricultural issues in several districts. The womens' network Savisthri held meetings on alternative concepts of development in several towns and villages. The National Fisheries Solidarity Organisation (NAFSO) organised a day long programme to inform coastal communities of threats to livelihood from capitalist globalisation. The Plantation Sector Social Forum had previously organised actions in Up-Country areas highlighting the housing crisis and private management's indifference to tea workers basic needs.

In addition to the WSF 2008 theme of 'Act Together for Another World', the organising committee selected an additional theme: "A Better Sri Lanka is Possible" to focus actions and mobilisations and to orient participants on the desired goal.

Three sub-themes were chosen with the national context in mind: "No to War", "Stop Rising Cost of Living" and "No to Capitalist Globalisation". The national convergence took the form of parallel workshops in both national languages, Sinhala and Tamil, with an opening and closing ceremony featuring regional and local speakers with the support of Action Aid and Cordaid.

In the morning, Sarba Raj Khadka of South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) shared the tumultuous experiences of the pro-democracy movement in Nepal; Sarath Fernando of Monlar spoke of those excluded by the present world order and the scientist and campaigner Ajantha Perera reminded of us of the looming global environmental crisis and the Sri Lankan dimension.

In the evening, Karamat Ali of Pakistan Institute for Labour Education and Research (PILER) spoke of the threats to working people from US imperialism, nuclear-bomb fixated elites and reactionary forces of religious fundamentalism. He was followed by international women's rights activist, Nimalka Fernando and anti-poverty practitioner Susil

Siriwardhana, who touched on the issues of war and civil society activism respectively.

In between, some thirteen parallel spaces raised challenges facing and alternatives from trade unionists, plantation sector workers and communities, women resisting war, disaster preparedness, health rights for women, violence against women, forcibly evicted Northern Muslims, fisheries and farming communities, people affected by mega-development infrastructure projects, inter-religious leaders for peace and reconciliation and many others. The venue was colourfully decorated with exhibits from the Green Movement of Sri Lanka and the radical youth of the November Movement and with banners, posters and photographs of other participants.

Cultural items included music by renowned performer Jayathilake Bandara and his troupe as well as the young activists of the Heritage Association. There was street theatre from a community based women's organisation in Puttalam, a demonstration by the 'women in black' group from the East protesting against war and violence; bicycle parade by children with messages on global warming and the costs of war.

The event was organised amidst much uncertainty and pessimism among civil society organisations. Sri Lanka's formal return to war following abrogation of the Cease-Fire Agreement between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam on 16 January 2008 has worsened violence against civilians by both sides.

Many out-of-Colombo participants especially from ethnic minority communities feared traveling to the city where they are subject to arbitrary identity checks, questioning and suspicion by security forces and fear of suicide attacks.

That this first Social Forum-type event happened at all under the prevailing conditions and considering the weakness and divisions in civil society in Sri Lanka is an achievement in itself. However, there is much room for improvement in achieving greater diversity and representation of all social sectors and struggles. Above all, the social forum model or process remains poorly understood and internalised by many.

"Reasonably good" pronounced veteran political activist, Vasudeva Nanayakkara; and his assessment would be shared by organisers and participants alike.

B. Skanthakumar, Colombo, 10 February 2008

B. Skanthakumar works for the not-for-profit Law & Society Trust in Colombo and is on the Working Committee of Peoples Space Sri Lanka.

Ethnic divide worsens as Lanka conflict escalates

A truce between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam is over, and gone are the Nordic monitors who kept watch over it. The government has refused entry to UN human rights monitors. Independent journalists are not allowed anywhere near the front lines. Only occasionally does a glimpse of the war's damage surface, as when the Red Cross confirmed that in the first six weeks of this year alone, 180 civilians had been killed.

While it is impossible to gauge what is actually happening on the battlefield, that is where, it seems, the government has placed its bets to settle the long-running ethnic war, once and for all. As it does, the public mood in this country is more divided than in many years, like an old scratch that has festered into large gapping wound. The new government offensive against the ethnic Tamil insurgents, who have fought for a quarter century to carve a separate homeland from this island, has received ample public support, at least among the ethnic Sinhalese who are the majority.

The enthusiasm can be felt in the large numbers signing up for the Army, or in the citizens' groups on patrol against suspicious activity, or in the voices of ordinary Sinhalese, who continue to brave checkpoints, suicide bombings and double-digit inflation in hope's of a military victory over the rebels. "We have economic problems, we have other problems, there is inflation, but people are tolerating it because the war is going great," said Premaratne Dawatage, whose son is in the Navy, describing the country's mood the other day at a crowded bus stand here in the capital. "They're defeating the enemy."

Such enthusiasm is hard to find among minority Tamils. Anxiety prevails, sometimes panic. They say they stay off the streets in the evenings, for fear of arrest or abduction. They quietly produce their identity cards at security checkpoints and say little when theirs is more closely scrutinised. Tamil neighbourhoods are raided at night. Few are willing to speak their mind, for fear that any criticism of the war effort will be construed as support for the rebels, or worse, subject to stringent emergency-era preventive detention laws.

S. Hariharasharma, 20, desperately searching for a sponsor to help him emigrate to Britain, recounted one incident, and it echoed the recollections of many young Tamils here. He was on the bus home from

the British Council library one afternoon when police officers got on and demanded to see passengers' identity cards. He began to tremble, he said, because he knew his identity would be suspect: a young man, a newcomer from Tamil-majority Jaffna in the north, unable to speak the Sinhala language. "Somehow I managed to hide my fear," he said. "It is a must to be normal." And then, a confession: "It's acting, it's acting, and it's humiliating."

That day, the acting worked. The police checked his identity card and let him continue. By the time he reached home, no more than half-an-hour late, his mother was hysterical with fear. It was barely 5.30 pm. The unravelling of the ceasefire, which began with a series of suspected rebel attacks on soldiers nearly two years ago, followed by the military's seizure of rebel-held territory in the east, and then, by late last year, a fullthroated assault on Tiger redoubts in the north.

Finally, in January, President Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration called off the 2002 ceasefire accord, which by then had become a truce only in name. ceasefire monitors packed up and left.

Alongside the conventional war, a shadow war was waged in government held cities, including Colombo, with a series of unexplained disappearances that Human rights Watch in a report released on March 6 blamed on the government; the victims were largely Tamils. The UN, having recorded more disappearances in Sri Lanka last year than any other country, pressed to send human rights monitors, a bid the US and many other countries supported, Rajapaksa's administration refused.

On Thursday, a foreign panel invited by Sri Lanka to observe a government commission's investigations into rights abuses said it was leaving the country in frustration over the government's lack of support.

"There has been and continues to be a lack of political and institutional will to investigate and inquire into the cases before the commission," the panel, known as the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons, said.

Freedom of the press has been one of the principal casualties of the latest phase in the war. Iqbal Athas, one of the country's best-known journalists and a veteran defence correspondent who has survived repeated death threats from the Tigers, faced the wrath of the government when he wrote about corruption in defence deals.

Even in a nation that once maintained wartime censorship, Athas said he found the current climate of intimidation of the media unusual. "Now there is no censorship but all vicious means are used to vilify journalists when something is written that doesn't please the government, both the political and military leadership," he said. "It is only success stories they want. Otherwise you are branded a traitor." In the absence of real news coverage, both sides tend to exaggerate battlefield casualties. News of a Sri Lankan Air Force strike is usually followed by a Tamil Tiger press release enumerating the number of Tamil civilians killed, often accompanied by gruesome pictures.

Much of the public faith in the war effort relies on the pronouncements of the Lankan Army Chief, Lieutenant-General Sarath Fonseka. In an interview in February, the general, a survivor of a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber, said his forces had killed nearly half of the rebels' 10,000-strong cadres in the north in the previous 14 months. The rebel organisation will disintegrate soon, he predicted, particularly if his forces succeeded in taking out the rebel leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran (the defence ministry has said it had lost barely 100 of its own troops so far this year.)

Somini Sengupta, The Asian Age, 9 March 2008



Sri Lanka's UPFA combine wins provincial polls

Opposition alleges large-scale irregularities

The ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), which teamed up with the breakaway LTTE faction led by Pillayan, has won the first ever election to the Eastern Provincial Council (EPC) by securing 20 of the 35 seats.

The election assumed significance in the wake of the October 2006 Supreme Court verdict declaring merger of north and east as illegal on technical grounds and the success of the military with the help from the rebel Tigers in mid-2007 in wresting territory in the east from the LTTE.

The opposition parties and independent election observers have denounced the Saturday election as "fraudulent" on the ground that the ruling party and the rebel Tiger faction have indulged in large scale irregularities in several polling booths. There is no response from the Election Commission to the demand by the main opposition, United National party (UNP) which contested the polls in alliance with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), for a re-poll in identified booths. As per the UNP, there were serious irregularities in at least 80 of the 1,010 booths.

Within hours after the declaration of results President Mahinda Rajapaksa said the people had "given a clear mandate for peace through the defeat of

terrorism, the strengthening of democracy and the development of the country.

"The voters of the Eastern Province who participated in this election peacefully and in large numbers have demonstrated their interest in protecting their democratic rights which were denied to them for nearly two decades by the forces of terror; which were restored to them with the liberation of the Eastern Province by the security forces. This election emphasizes the policy of the government to create an environment to create an environment in which all our people could enjoy democratic rights and live in freedom and harmony."

The immediate task before the President is to choose the chief ministerial candidate. The TVMP led by Pillayan is vying for the job. He has a serious rival in M.L.A.M. Hisbulah, former Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader who defected to the ruling party on the eve of the election.

The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), an NGO, said it had recorded 64 incidents of violence on the polling day. Of these, 48 have been classified as "major".

B. Muralidhar Reddy, The Hindu, 12 May 2008



REGIONAL

Food and South Asia's Future

The way to the political future of three major South Asian countries now lies through the stomachs of their poor millions. Escalating food prices may have far-reaching consequences for India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, each of which is currently passing through a crucial political phase.

The region might have been spared food riots of the kind to have rocked some African and Latin American nations in recent days. South Asia, however, is still a victim of the global food crisis hitting the headlines everywhere.

Especially distressing for developing countries have been the consequences of a shift in the farming paradigm dictated by the advanced world's quest for alternative fuels. Billed originally as a boon for the hungry of the earth, biofuels have actually spelled crop preferences that have proven cruel to the intended or imaginary beneficiaries.

The switch by tens of thousands of farmers in the US over the past two years from food to fuel production (on eight million hectares that provided mainly wheat, maize and soya crops earlier), with Europe and other regions following suit, has not meant fuller stomachs in either South America or far-off African and Asian areas. Experts agree climate change, entailing erratic rainfall, has compounded the crisis.

International agencies insist they are acutely conscious of the crisis, and the United Nations proposes conferences and promises concerted measures on the energy and environmental issues involved. The South Asians, however, can hardly afford to wait for such efforts to bear fruit. For them, the shortage of food and the spiral of its prices can have a political fallout of fundamental importance.

In India, a sudden and sharp spurt in food prices pushed up a long-contained rate of inflation from 5 percent to 7 percent over weeks after the country's annual budget was presented at the end of March. Grains, constituting the staple food of Indians, are threatening to go out of the common man's reach. The government has had to impose a ban on the export of wheat, consumed especially in the country's northwestern states. The price of rice, on which about 65 percent of the population subsists, has gone up by about 33 percent on average.

Even in New Delhi, the seat of power and the city of subsidies, edible oils cost 40 percent more, and milk is dearer by 11 percent. Vegetables and fruit have also recorded a whopping rise in prices across the country. What makes the figures significant is the fact, despite all talk of India's economic miracle, 75 percent of Indians earn less than two US dollars a day.

In Pakistan, the prices of "atta" (wheat flour, the ingredient of the poor Pakistani's daily bread) have been increasing rapidly, with no measures to halt the rise announced even in Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani's "100-day program." In January, the government had to reintroduce a ration-card system, abandoned earlier as part of avowed economic reforms. The situation today is such that government agencies have, reportedly, to keep a strict eye on food trucks.

In Bangladesh, prices of rice and other essential food items have nearly doubled over the last year. The average family is today constrained to spend about 80 percent of its monthly budget on food. According to one report, the poor families make do with a single meal a day. The situation might have gotten worse but for New Delhi agreeing, possibly for non-humanitarian reasons, to keep India's commitment, despite its own distress, to export rice to Bangladesh.

Critics in all the three countries have dismissed the claim about the crisis as an entirely international phenomenon and drawn attention to the internal factors behind it. They have a point. In India, while the government boasts about the economy's growth at a rate of about 8.5 percent, agriculture has grown by no more than 2.5 percent over the past five years. Given that farming still supports the majority of India's workforce, this shows a gross imbalance in the country's development strategy.

Similarly, in Pakistan, the otherwise inconclusive debate on the issue reveals a large degree of agreement that the crisis is also a legacy of former Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, with his background as a top Citibank executive and his baggage of elitist economics. Besides the floods and the cyclone that hit Bangladesh last year, the unconcern of the army-backed government in Dhaka has aggravated the problem. The famous anti-corruption campaign by the

caretaker regime has made it worse, by most accounts, leading to the closure of many unofficial rice supply outlets without providing legal substitutes.

Popular protests were inevitable in all three countries. In India, the price spiral has elicited calls for agitations not only from the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but also from the left that has lent support to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government from outside. The price rise would appear to have largely offset the political gain for the government from the waiver of 15 billion-dollar bank loans to farmers announced in the March budget.

In Pakistan, the movement of lawyers against Pervez Musharaff might not have acquired mass support but for the Mundane issue of "atta" prices. Insightful reports have pointed out the prices issue influenced Pakistan's electorate as much as the question of democracy and dictatorship. The Gillani government cannot afford to forget the issue retains grave importance for the people. In Bangladesh, too, food prices carried further the pro-democracy protests of August 2007, in Dhaka University, with the city's poor joining the students and teachers, and with the unrest spreading to other urban centers as well.

At stake in the food crisis is the political future of each country. Food prices have dislodged political parties and fronts from power in the states as well as the federal level, more than once in the past. History can be repeated in this regard only as a tragedy. The BJP today represents a far-right that is straining to move farther right (as we have seen in these columns before) ...

Unchecked "atta" prices will pose a serious danger to the democratic experiment in Pakistan. Drawing attention to the danger, the Lahore-based Daily Times notes the fall in this year's farm output and warns, "... we could be looking at an even bigger shortage of flour in the country once again. Therefore, given our inability to deploy a system of special distribution for sections of population directly affected by this shortage, one can say that the masses are likely to become quickly disenchanted with the new government."

In Bangladesh, too, the current food crisis, considered the worst after the famine of 1974, cannot continue without serious political consequences. The two major political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have threatened to launch protest actions against the continued detention of the leaders Sheikh Hasina Wajed and Begum Khaleda Zia. Food prices can provide popular fuel to such protests. It is hard to see how the military-backed regime - which has just given Army Chief Moeen U Ahmed a one-year extension until June 15, 2009, to ensure his august presence at the helm at the due time of elections in December 2008 - will handle such protests.

There is no easy or early solution to the problem of food prices in sight, of course. But the growth of hunger may bring no happy tidings for those who wish democracy and peace for South Asia.

J. Sri Raman, Friday 11 April 2008

A freelance journalist and a peace activist in India, J. Sri Raman is the author of "Flashpoint" (Common Courage Press, USA). He is a regular contributor to Truthout.



'No mechanism to protect the poor'

In a period characterised by all-round price rise, the issue of food security assumes extreme significance, especially for the rural and urban poor. At a time when the need for a universal public distribution system is increasingly felt, the government's categorisation of a very small percentage of the people as being below the poverty line and eligible for rations has invited a lot of criticism. Utsa Patnaik is among those who do not agree with the poverty estimates of the government. She feels that the current price spiral must have aggravated the sufferings of a much larger number of people than is realised.

In this situation of unprecedented price rise, how important do you think is the issue of food security?

The major policy thrust of the last 15 years, which has slowly changed only in the last few months, has been that food security is not all that important. It was taken for granted that we would be able to maintain our food security. This policy direction has mainly involved reducing the food subsidy and running down the public distribution system [PDS].

The roots of the present inflation do not lie in the global inflation as is being claimed by the Deputy Chairperson of the Planning Commission. I don't agree with that view as what we are witnessing in India is not a short-term phenomenon. If one looks at the question of foodgrains, the working of the PDS was made possible, between 1965 and 1990, by the phenomenal expansion of foodgrain production in the country. The moment

our entire economic strategy began to be guided by the neoliberal paradigm, one of the major decisions was to cut subsidies.

In the early 1990s, there was already an attempt to cut subsidies as the issue price of foodgrains from the PDS was almost doubled while the procurement price given to farmers rose very little. This ignored a simple fact of macroeconomics: if this was done, the poor would be priced out and they would be unable to buy the foodgrains. So we had a build-up of stocks, the cost of holding which increased the food subsidy.

Targeting was introduced in 1997, driven by the propaganda of focussing the subsidy for the poor. We got into the disastrous system of targeting; the distinctions of Below Poverty Line, Above Poverty Line, and so on. If one looks at the history of targeting in other countries, it becomes clear that it has always been a prelude to winding up of state intervention in procurement. That has been the ultimate aim of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation. They specifically say that the state should not intervene to buy and sell at prices other than global prices.

The WTO agreement on agriculture states that for food security purposes, the government can maintain food stocks but then, at the same time, it says that the government cannot offer farmers prices that are higher than global market prices. Global prices are very volatile. The government's role here is to protect both the farmer and the consumer. The whole rationale of the PDS lies in that.

By the end of the 1980s, the Food Corporation of India [FCI] was intervening to a very significant extent. My calculations show that 45 per cent of all foodgrain sales in the economy were made to the FCI, which meant that the minimum support price to farmers and the issue price could be effectively implemented. Private traders weren't able to raise the prices too much above the rates at the fair price shops. All this began getting jettisoned as soon as the shift to the new paradigm began. Nearly 8 million hectares of our agricultural land have been shifted to horticultural crops, cotton, sugarcane, and so on. The farmers who took to these crops have ultimately not benefited since they have been ruined by exposure to sharp price declines as protection was removed.

So, on the one hand the PDS began to be run down, and on the other, the shift in cropping patterns began. Farmers were literally lured into shifting from growing millets to cotton or expanding coffee or pepper by temporarily high global prices. Effectively, by 2001, the protection to our farmers was also removed. The quantitative restrictions went and tariffs were put at

very low levels. The moment the world prices started crashing, these farmers became insolvent, within two years or so, and the suicides started.

In the case of the food economy, the picture has been quite complex. Why we did not have inflation earlier was because there was a faster rate of fall in the purchasing power of the people than there was in foodgrain production per head. But that has changed in recent years. The growth rate of foodgrain production began coming down in the 1990s. It came down to 1.7 per cent a year as compared to 2.8 per cent a year in the 1980s and in the last six years it has fallen further to below 0.5 per cent per annum. That was a sharp deceleration and that is what I've been predicting. I have been arguing this for a long time that if you divert area and resources from foodgrains, the growth rate is going to come down. In fact, it came down below the growth rate of the population.

After 2000, the rate of decline has been very fast. Our political class is very sensitive to inflation but not to the farmers and labourers. The farmers were getting more and more into distress as output prices were falling from the mid-1990s. And, secondly, as the government had been cutting back on rural development expenditure, unemployment began rising fast, particularly in rural India, and this resulted in declining purchasing power. A combination of all these factors resulted in a decline in per capita demand for foodgrain which reached the level we had before WW II. There was an enormous build-up of foodgrain stocks to 64 million tonnes by 2002. This build-up was happening because per head demand was falling even faster than per head output was declining.

Our government and economists were completely blind to this as they thought of stocks only in terms of overproduction; that we are producing more than what people voluntarily wanted. But this approach was incorrect. This ignored the fact that it was not voluntary. If people lose purchasing power due to unemployment caused by the government cutting down on development expenditure, by crashing world prices of cotton or pepper, it is not a voluntary choice; they have to reduce consumption. The government advised farmers to switch out of foodgrains, procurement price was frozen and procurement run down. Farmers responded to these signals by cutting back output which has been stagnant for seven years after 2000. Now the situation is so bad that our very obtuse policymakers, having created this situation, have woken up to the reality that something is dreadfully wrong. The growth rate has fallen so much in the last six years that the per capita output is now lower than the demand and that is why the government has been forced to import. There is an outcry against imports but this

outcry should have happened earlier when output was going down for over a decade. Now if they do not import, they would not be able to run even the Antyodaya or a minimum welfare programme.

The logic that these people have been following for 15 years is that food security does not matter, farmers should produce to supply supermarkets in advanced countries under contract to transnationals, and we can always import food if required. This ignored the fact that if we are growing cash crops, there is no control over the foreign exchange earnings if the unit dollar price of export crops falls. We are all in a competitive race to the bottom with 80 other developing countries all exporting the same products. We are in a bind now, the only reason why the government has woken up is because the global price for wheat has almost doubled in less than a year and that is due to the high global price of oil leading to large-scale diversion of grain to ethanol production in advanced countries.

Even if our government now goes to the global market, they have to pay an enormous rate to buy grain. They have woken up 10 years too late. They have raised the procurement prices now. But after declaring the economy open and free trade the norm, why should farmers sell at a lower price to the FCI? They would rather sell it to the corporates or export and get higher prices. It is already happening.

It is not only foodgrain prices that are going up. Livestock product prices have also risen. The reason for that is twofold; the feed for livestock is a byproduct of grain production. When there is a decline of per capita cereal output, the feed output also goes down. Marginal farmers have really got affected by this as they have been unable to maintain even their minimal livestock. From the National Sample Survey data on land and livestock, I found that there was a rise in landlessness in terms of operated area. There has been an enormous loss of livestock of small and marginal farmers. Part of it has been sold to the richer farmers but the average livestock holding has gone down. It is not a short-term problem; it is a structural problem that has been created by an attack on the very basis of our production and this requires very strong measures to revive our agricultural economy.

In the 2005-06 Plan document, the Planning Commission observed that the PDS was the most significant instrument to moderate open market prices and ensure food security at assured prices. You have been criticising the Planning Commission for adopting an arbitrary methodology to determine the BPL population in order to deflate the level of poverty.

There are two aspects to it. From 1997 onwards, the

government started cutting allocations of foodgrains to the States. They started taking an average of the preceding 10 years as an indication of what the allocation should be. Now what had happened in the last 10 years was that as unemployment rose and purchasing power began going down and people were buying less food and by reducing allocations on that basis, it was as if the government was rationalising the loss of purchasing power. This was tantamount to saying we should have permanent loss of purchasing power and permanent hunger in our country.

People sitting in the Yojana Bhavan [Planning Commission] are not affected by cuts in foodgrain allocation. They buy from the open market anyway but their decisions affect the lives of millions of poor people in this country. If they are doing it unconsciously, then they are simply incompetent as economists; if they are doing this consciously, they do not deserve to occupy the chairs that they do. The reason for the decline in PDS offtake was that the segment of our population that needed the fair price shops most faced rising unemployment, loss of purchasing power and higher prices. The last happened because of the rise in issue prices as the government was trying to cut the food subsidy.

Second, targeting intensified the problem. The government put a whole lot of people who were actually poor in the APL category and this compounded the problem. Earlier they were being priced out; now they were institutionally barred. A new permit system was introduced where people had to show they were BPL.

There is this argument that people are not able to access foodgrains from the PDS because of a lot of wastage and because of leaks into the open market. It is not because they do not have purchasing power.

A certain amount of wastage does take place but it can be addressed by better transportation systems and better forms of preserving foodgrain. Even the private trader encounters a certain amount of spoilage. But how does it get better by winding up the FCI and giving it all to the private trader? It is not a logical argument at all. But there can be a certain scope for dishonesty when the gap between the PDS prices and the open market prices is very large, and then there is an incentive to divert foodgrain and get higher prices. But this can happen in any system which is open to abuse. Safeguards have to be put in place. People do not have the purchasing power. This arbitrary BPL/APL distinction has to be removed. Foodgrain has to be sold at BPL prices to everybody. To restore purchasing power, other things have to be done – like increasing rural development expenditure and implementing the National Rural Employment

Guarantee Programme [NREGP] sincerely. Why couldn't the government have started it in 1994? Why did they suddenly wake up and start increasing allocation only this year? I looked at the NREGP and found that the National Democratic Alliance government was already giving a certain amount for all the employment generation schemes.

What this government did was to only increase the allocation by 10 per cent to Rs.12,900 crore in the districts where the programme was introduced. And then the allocation was cut down to Rs.12,000 crore in the 2007 Budget. It is only in this Budget that the allocation has been increased, but it is still very small. Adequate budgetary provisions have to be made.

Government data show that the consumption of pulses by the poor is low; that the per capita cereal consumption has been declining for the last two or three decades; that only 28 per cent of the population was eligible for PDS at the all-India level in 2004-05. The Arjun Sengupta Committee report on the working and living conditions of workers in the unorganised sector states that 77 per cent of the population subsists on less than Rs.20 a day.

What the government decides as non-poor are actually poor. The government's estimate of the rural poor is only 28 per cent now for 2004-05 (those spending less than Rs.12 per day) whereas the actual percentage below the government's own nutrition norm is 87 per cent, spending less than Rs.26 per day. The entire basis of the Planning Commission's estimates of the number of poor people is not correct because the poor cannot be counted and poverty compared over time by reducing the consumption standard over time. They are following a method that is spurious. They have abandoned their own nutritional norm. They take the quantities people consumed in 1973 and whatever the cost then, they update it by a price index to get the poverty line for more recent years. But that does not capture the change in the actual cost of living.

I joined my University as a Reader in 1973 and my gross monthly salary was Rs.1000; if I apply the consumer price index for an urban non-manual employee, then a Reader joining today should get less than Rs.5,000. When the government determines the salaries of its employees or teachers in universities, it does not apply just the price index. If it does, then one would reach absurd salaries. They use this method only for counting the poor.

The true poverty line can be obtained easily from the NSS data. The Planning Commission did it only once, in 1973-74, when it applied the nutrition norm – that is, how much does a person need to spend every month to get a certain amount of nutrition. After that, it

abandoned the definition of poverty line completely. They have not factored in the nutrition norm for 30 years now. The poverty line they have got at present is crazy. The all-India official poverty line gives only 1,800 calories and not the nutritional norm, which is 2,400 calories and costs over double the official poverty line. Moreover, for some States, it is much lower than that and in others it is higher.

The poverty line has been pushed down so low in States like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, enabling them to say that very few people are poor but it is not mentioned that people cannot access even 1,600 calories at these poverty lines. Their bogus poverty estimates are used as a guide for allocating foodgrains. The genuinely poor States are left behind. Government policy now is based on a set of perceptions that are diametrically opposite to that of reality. They have used the NSS data in a selective manner. No academic has any business to look at the expenditure data only and not at the calorie part of it. It is in a sense suppression of information and not academically justifiable. Even if I take the lower nutritional norm of 2,200 calories, not the official norm, 70 per cent of the people are below the poverty line; if I take the actual nutritional norm of 2,400 calories, then 87 per cent are below the poverty line. There is a huge increase in poverty as compared with 1993-94. Only a universal PDS makes sense where the poor are now nearly nine-tenths of the rural population.

It is felt that by addressing the crisis of agricultural production alone, the problem will be solved. Does it automatically translate into more purchasing power?

Neoliberal policies have attacked both production and access. The issues are intimately connected because for farmers an attack on their production is an attack on their incomes and with decline in growth labourers get unemployed as well. Some belated measures have been taken to revive agricultural production but a lot more needs to be done. The government needs to revive the Commodity Boards and they need to do their job of procurement of commercial crops. State intervention in the market is very essential to protect both the consumer and producer from fluctuations. This is to ensure that farmers do not suffer from price falls and consumers do not suffer from price rise. If the procurement and distribution system had not been run down, we would not have been in a mess today. Today, we do not have the mechanism to protect the poor from inflation.

Interview with Utsa Patnaik, Professor of Economics, Jawaharlal Nehru University by T.K. Rajalakshmi.

Frontline, Volume 25, Number 8, April 12-25, 2008

SAARC legal experts to meet in Colombo: Pranab

To finalise text of legal assistance agreement for tackling criminals and checking undesirable activity

As the first step towards setting up a SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) security network, legal experts of the eight member-countries will meet in Colombo to finalise the text of a mutual legal assistance agreement, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee said here on Friday.

Talking to journalists after a meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers, Mr. Mukherjee discounted suggestions of discord over the agreement that was aimed at “tackling criminals and checking undesirable activity.” He felt the text would be finalised in Colombo by April next year.

“No disparate views”

“In our deliberations, there were no disparate views even when it was specifically mentioned that the agreement should be expedited in order to operationalise it quickly. I do hope when we have discussions [on the finalised text] we will arrive at a conclusion and go by it,” he said.

Mr. Mukherjee, however, felt that for a viable security network, first there should be an exchange of information as many SAARC countries were victims of terror. “Therefore, hard, real-time exchange of information is an important aspect that we will have to take into account.”

Social projects

The meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers resolved to operationalise the SAARC Development Fund, initially on the basis of India’s unilateral

commitment of \$100 millions. The fund was envisaged to have a corpus of \$ 300 millions and India had made the offer even before the fund was conceptualised. The amount would be earmarked for social projects and work would begin soon, said Mr. Mukherjee.

The meeting also saw a SAARC Declaration on Climate Change, in which the foreign Ministers called upon the international community to honour its commitments with the United Nations Framework convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol.

The Declaration said the way forward must include provision of adequate resources to tackle climate change without detracting from the funds for development, effective access and funding assistance for transfer of environment-friendly technologies, and adoption of binding GHG (greenhouse gas emission) reduction commitments by developed countries with effective timeframes. The Ministers emphasised the need for equitable burden sharing.

The Ministers also stressed that contributions to the global effort to tackle climate change should be in line with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. “We also believe that developed countries must assume greater commitments in line with their responsibility.”

Hindustan Times, Delhi, 2007

“Talks with Pakistan will resume soon”

Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan will meet after the new government is installed in Islamabad in January, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee told newsmen here on Friday after meeting his counterpart Inam-ul-Haq on the sidelines of the SAARC Council of Ministers meeting.

“Both of us expressed the hope that the dialogue, including composite dialogue, would take place after the new Government assumes power. The Foreign Secretaries will meet to wrap up the fourth round of the composite dialogue and we will also launch the fifth round. Other mechanisms established between the two countries will also be put in operation. We could not carry on our normal work due to the circumstances prevailing in Pakistan,” Mr. Mukherjee said.

He said bilateral trade had expanded and confidence building measures in several sectors mapped out. The joint survey of one of the disputed territories, Sir Creek, was successfully carried out and discussions would resume as soon as possible. “We will have to wait till the new government comes in position in Pakistan.

Second SAARC Youth Camp held in Chennai

The Second youth camp of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) brought over 60 delegates from across south Asia to Chennai at the start on 12 January of the five-day summit hosted by India.

The SAARC Youth meet was launched as mandated by the resolutions adopted at the 14th SAARC summit in April 2007, and aimed to increasing communication, understanding and cooperation among the youth in member countries. Representatives from all SAARC countries except Pakistan and Bhutan attended the camp.

In inaugural address, Anna University Vice-Chancellor D. Viswanathan, stressed the role the youth should play in addressing social issues, eliminating evil customs, contributing to economic development, participating in public life and protecting the environment.

“Youth development programmes,” he said, “should engage youth as resources in the community and create leadership opportunities for young people.” Project-based and experiential learning in collaboration with business, labour and industry was also important.

These programmes should also be able to respond effectively while respecting the culture of the person being served. “In this respect, youth development practitioners may have to increase their knowledge of different cultures,” he said.

He stressed the importance of training rural youth in vocational skills covering manufacturing and services, and developing programmes to bridge the urban-rural divide. He urged participants to develop emotional intelligence, including the qualities of self-awareness, self-motivation and empathy.



SAARC for job security in farm sector

The first ever SAARC Agricultural summit, which concluded here on Friday, has called for off-farm and on-farm integrated employment security in the farm sector, particularly by promotion of mass production and linking it through appropriate mechanisms with the markets. Each agricultural graduate should be an entrepreneur, the summit has suggested. It called for appropriate changes in university curricula for this purpose.

The summit expressed concern at violent price changes and trade distortions adversely impacting food security and incomes particularly of majority small holders and poor consumers.

Although contribution of agricultural GDP to the overall GDP is declining, though this is disputed by some farmer leaders and sector experts, the dependence on agriculture is still very high. Therefore, investment

in agriculture and rural infrastructure must be enhanced to increase the livelihood security of rural masses.

The summit has decided to set up a South Asian Farmers' Forum to address problems faced by the farming community of the region. The first formal meeting of the forum is to be hosted by Pakistan in September 2008. Former Union minister and Lok Sabha member Suresh P. Prabhu, who chaired the conference committee, will be the convenor of the forum till a formal executive committee is elected.

The conference recognized that while poverty and hunger are essentially a rural phenomenon, the concentration of the deprived people is much higher in rain-fed and other non-congenial areas and recommended enhanced investment in such areas.

Asian Age, 8 March 2008



NEWS AND VIEWS GENERAL

1.5 million face death in Myanmar

British aid group Oxfam warns of a major tragedy if the country delays aid

“What is critical at the moment is water sources. We understand a lot of water sources are contaminated. Ponds are full of dead bodies. Something as basic as a bucket is in scarce supply. If people don’t have water that is clean and safe, that is very difficult.”

– Sarah Ireland, Oxfam regional chief

More food reached Myanmar’s hungry cyclone victims as roads were cleared of fallen trees, but a British aid group warned that up to 1.5 million face death if they do not get clean water and sanitation soon.

“It’s really crucial that people get access to clean water sources and sanitation to avoid unnecessary deaths and suffering,” Oxfam regional chief Sarah Ireland said. She said the death toll from the May 3 cyclone could go up to 1,00,000 – a figure also suggested by other aid groups.

“There are all the factors for a public health catastrophe which could multiply that death toll by up to 15 times,” she said. Myanmar’s junta said 28,450 people died and 37,019 were missing after Cyclone Nargis slammed into the country’s Irrawaddy delta and Yangon, the country’s biggest city. The UN said amount 2 million people were living in 218 ramshackle relief camps, including 150,000 in and around Labutta town.

Fishing boats along the coast helped ferry survivors to safety but diesel supplies were running low and rescuers feared time was running out for those stranded in remote delta villages. “Some have been living on coconuts,” said Maung U, a 36-year-old driver of a rescue boat in Labutta. “But even those are running out.”

Yet the government has refused to let in most foreign experts who have experience in handling humanitarian disasters. It insists it is capable of distributing the aid being pledged by international donors. Aid group World Vision said it has requested visas for 20 people and received approval for two, while the UN World Food Program had one approved out of the 16 it requested.

World Vision said relief material delivered so far is a drop in the ocean. “It is very obvious that of the thousands of people who have been helped there are tens of thousands who have not been reached,” World Vision’s Samson Jeyakumar said.

The canals and flooded roads are littered with the bloated bodies of humans and animals. The stench of death is everywhere. Another Oxfam official, Ian Woolverton, said although the aid group has warned of a possible 1.5 million deaths, that was a worst case forecast—and one that could be prevented.

DNA, 12 May 2008

Red Cross boat sinks

The first cargo ship carrying relief supplies for cyclone victims in Myanmar has sunk. The ship, which was traveling from Yanon to Mawlamyinegyun, apparently hit a submerged tree trunk and began to take on water, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said. “This is a great loss for the Myanmar Red Cross and for the people who need aid so urgently,” said Aung Kyaw Htut, who leads the Myanmar Red Cross distribution team.

10 mn kids die from lack of health care

More than 200 million children worldwide under age 5 do not get basic health care, leading to nearly 10 million deaths annually from treatable ailments like diarrhoea and pneumonia, a US-based charity said.

Nearly all of the deaths occur in the developing world, with poor children facing twice the risk of dying compared to richer children, according to Save the Children's global report.

Sweden, Norway and Iceland top the ranking in terms of well-being for mothers and children in 146 countries surveyed, while Nigeria ranks last.

Eight out of 10 bottom-ranked countries are in sub-Saharan Africa, where four out of five mothers are likely to lose a child in their lifetime, it said.

The top three among the 55 developing countries ranked in the survey are the Philippines, Peru and South Africa – all surveyed for the first time. Indonesia and Turkmenistan tied for fourth.

Laos, Yemen, Chad, Somalia and Ethiopia were found doing the worst among developing countries.

Through a number of health initiatives, including access to oral re-hydration to treat diarrhoea, the Philippines has nearly cut its child death rate in half since 1990, said David Oot, Save the Children's associate vice president.

Today, more than 75 per cent of Filipino children with diarrhoea receive rehydration therapy, compared with 15 per cent of Ethiopian children, he said.

An alarming number of countries are failing to provide the most basic health services that would save lives, with 30 per cent of children in developing countries

not getting basic health intervention such as prenatal care, skilled assistance during birth, immunisations and treatment for diarrhoea and pneumonia.

Wide disparities in health care for the poorest and best-off children are seen even in the highest-ranked countries, the report said.

In the Philippines and Peru, for example, the poorest children are 3.2 times more likely to go without essential health care than their best off counterparts.

The poorest Peruvian children are 7.4 times more likely to die than their richest counterparts, while the chances are 3.2 times higher for poor Filipino children.

In Latin America, Brazil, Bolivia and Peru have some of the world's widest survival gaps between rich and poor children.

In Latin America, Brazil, Bolivia and Peru have some of the world's widest survival gaps between rich and poor children.

In Asia, large disparities also exist in India and Indonesia.

Use of existing, low-cost tools and knowledge could save more than 6 million of the 9.7 million children who die yearly from easily preventable or curable causes, the report said.

They include antibiotics that cost less than \$0.30 to treat pneumonia, the top killer of children under 5, and oral rehydration therapy – a simple solution of salt, sugar and potassium – for diarrhoea, the second top killer.

Teresa Cerojano, Hindustan Times, 7 May 2008

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Nepalese farmers interact with their compatriots in Bangladesh

A disaster and the politics of 'democracy'

The political agenda of the Myanmar junta is to turn its own relief effort into a charm offensive for the hearts of the people at home.

Is the military-ruled Myanmar a multi-role-capable state? Or, is it just a surviving anachronism?

These posers have been magnified by the politics of the differing responses to the May 3 "Cyclone Nargis" from the junta — the self-styled State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) — on one side, and from several external players, on the other. While the poignancy of the sufferings of the victims and also the urgency of relief supplies to them make for a major humanitarian saga, the cynicism of the politics behind their varied responses calls for a detailed scrutiny as well.

The cyclone struck during a particularly sensitive run-up to the SPDC's efforts to reassert its writ across the country through a referendum on the military-scripted draft of a new constitution. Significantly in that context, Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), the junta's chief political adversary, had already called upon the people to vote "no" in the referendum. And, the SPDC, for its part, was engaged in a high-pitch campaign of its own for a "yes" vote. In all, when the cyclone devastated the Irrawaddy delta and adjacent areas, Myanmar was passing through a rare battle, even if not a fair and free contest, for the hearts and minds of the people.

NLD's view

The NLD's dim view of the draft statute was outlined by the party's spokesman U Nyan Win in several telephonic conversations with this correspondent. Speaking over difficult-to-reach telephones in Yangon, Mr. Nyan Win emphasised that the draft, shorn of its unsubtle niceties, would only institutionalise a praetorian or military-dominant system of governance through the guise of a popular vote. A junta-subservient panel reserved 25 per cent of the seats in future parliaments to the military establishment, and the armed forces would have the prerogatives, under this draft, to appoint key ministers and impose martial law at will. And, as Mr. Nyan Win had pointed out, the referendum, now held on May 10 as per schedule and as a key aspect of the junta's responses to the cyclone, was never discussed by the military rulers with Ms. Suu Kyi, under prolonged house arrest to this day. And, before the announcement of this referendum, the junta's designated liaison officer held four rounds of United Nations-brokered talks with her,

in the wake of last year's uprising by Buddhist monks and pro-democracy activists. Yet, even in those circumstances of the junta's scant regard for the celebrated democracy campaigner, the NLD decided against boycotting the referendum. Aware of this, and in a bid to 'legitimise' the referendum on the basis of the NLD's willingness to vote, the SPDC lost no time, soon after the cyclone, to declare that the May 10 timeline would be adhered to. This prompted the NLD to call for a postponement of the referendum, which could turn into a travesty in a cyclone-distracted state with presumably limited means to cope with the major humanitarian crisis. From an alternative standpoint, though, the holding of a referendum at the height of such a crisis could help the SPDC project Myanmar as a multi-role-capable state under the military's wings.

In the event, as the junta held the referendum across Myanmar, except in the declared disaster areas including the NLD's bastion of Yangon, on May 10, the opposition estimated about a 50 per cent voter turnout. Also in focus were the allegations of pressure tactics by the SPDC's minions and of unfair practices such as the absence of a system of agents on behalf of the "no-campaigners" at the time of balloting as also counting. The entire process, in contrast, is manned by the junta's 'mandarins.' With the voting now scheduled for May 24 in the cyclone-ravaged areas, the 'result' is expected only thereafter. Ms. Suu Kyi has been declared eligible to vote in the referendum in its second phase, although she is barred from any elective office, under the draft statute, on the ground that her deceased husband was a foreigner. And, depending on the referendum 'result,' a general election has been promised for 2010.

The NLD, in its unsuccessful bid for a postponement of the referendum, did receive moral support from outside Myanmar as well. However, the party deserves credit for having participated, by arguing that "if we stay away, generation after generation will suffer under [military] dictatorship." If the two-phase referendum has been decided upon by the SPDC to 'demonstrate' Myanmar's 'capabilities' as a multi-role state in the face of a huge natural disaster and in the context of widespread international scepticism on this score, what is the nature of the politics of the relief effort itself?

India is believed to be the first donor to have succeeded in offloading relief supplies by sea at the Yangon port. And, the Myanmar junta did not say 'no.' Indeed, Myanmar Foreign Minister U Nyan Win (not to be confused for the NLD Spokesman by the same name) was present at the Yangon airport to welcome the arrival of two of India's AN-32 aircraft laden with relief supplies such medicines as also shelter-related and roofing materials. India airlifted more supplies thereafter too. China is also understood to have had no difficulty in sending in relief supplies to Myanmar at this time. And, all this happened, when Western aid agencies were reporting a stand-off with the SPDC over permissions to send in supplies by air and, no less importantly, "expert" foreign aid workers.

Double standards?

If, as is clear, the SPDC has adopted double standards in treating India and China well and in being tough with the Western-led organisers of "international" aid supplies and relief work, the reason is not far to seek. The junta is wary of Western-led aid effort, even under the U.N. auspices, suspecting the possibility of a hidden 'political agenda' behind

such humanitarian work. The bottom line, certainly, is that the SPDC will not be able to do without the Western-led aid effort as well. Yet, the junta is trying to drag its feet as long as considered 'possible.'

Significantly, unlike at the time of the 2004 tsunami, when India had joined a "core group," the other members being the United States and Australia as also Japan, in rushing to the aid of Indonesia, New Delhi has on this occasion chosen to play an "exclusive role." Obviously, India is keen to avoid getting caught in any stand-off between the West and Myanmar.

For the SPDC, the political 'concern' is not really that the Western-led aid workers would be able to 'engineer,' in a short time, a 'no-vote' in the ongoing referendum process.

As Soe Aung, Myanmar's pro-democracy dissident leader in exile, points out, the junta does not want to "look not capable" of managing the cyclone crisis without help from foreign aid-workers. The political agenda of the Myanmar junta is to turn its own relief effort into a charm offensive for the hearts of the people at home.

P. S. Suryanarayana, The Hindu, 12 May 2008



Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt (CADTM)

Newsletter number 16

Financial Crisis

Bankers saved, human rights sacrificed

by Damien Millet / Eric Toussaint - 16 April 2008

The randomness of numbers sometimes throws up some striking coincidences. Behind the shadow plays conjured up by the zealous servants of neoliberal globalisation, the brutal backstage reality revealed itself this week, through the publication of two international statistics.

On the one hand, the amount of Official Development Assistance (ODA) distributed by the rich countries in 2007 is approximately 100 billion dollars. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3275>

Ecuador

Constitutional Assembly Never Again (Nunca Mas) Foreign Military Bases Or Troops In Ecuador

by Helga Serrano N. - 3 April 2008

The National Assembly that is writing a new Constitution for Ecuador approved the following article on April 1, 2008: "Ecuador is a territory of peace. No foreign military bases or foreign installations for military purposes may be installed. No national military bases can be granted to foreign armies or security forces." This is a triumph not only for organizations such as the Ecuador No Bases Coalition that have proposed that this article be included in the Constitution, but also for (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3232>

Bolivia

The Conspiracy to Divide Bolivia Must Be Denounced

25 April 2008

The process of changes in favour of the Bolivian majority is at risk of being brutally restrained. The rise to power of an Indigenous president with unprecedented support in that country and his

programs of popular benefits and recovery of the natural resources have had to face the conspiracies of the oligarchy and United States interference from the very beginning.

In recent days the increase in conspiracy has reached its climax. The subversive and unconstitutional actions of the oligarchic (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3301>

Evo Morales' 10 Commandments to save the Planet

28 April 2008

Bolivian President Evo Morales said today that to save the planet requires putting an end to the capitalist model and for the North to pay its Ecological Debt. This was the first of 10 points presented by Morales at the inauguration of the UN's VII Indigenous Forum, in a long address acclaimed by participants at this annual gathering. Morales Ayma proposed 10 commandment to save the world, life, and all of humanity, making reference to respect for the earth, renouncing war, bilateral (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3329>

IMF/World Bank

World Bank's climate funds will undermine global climate action

by Celine Tan - 22 April 2008

The World Bank will be holding a key two-day meeting in Washington DC next week to move forward plans to establish its proposed portfolio of climate investment funds (CIFs) projected at in time for the G8 summit in Japan in July. According to a statement on the Bank's website by Kathy Sierra, the Bank's vice-president of Sustainable Development, the aim of next week's meeting 'is to work out details of how, when, and where to funnel new donor financing to projects that will have a (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3306>

Food Price Crisis Draws Attention at IMF/World Bank Meetings

by Soren Ambrose - 15 April 2008

It was easy to predict that the global credit crisis would be a major concern at the IMF/World Bank spring meetings.

But while that was true, it was clearly the case that the heads of the two institutions were intent on focusing attention on the rapidly rising price of food around the world. Both the World Bank's Robert Zoellick and the IMF's Dominique Strauss-Kahn

made the crisis the centrepiece of their messages to the media. Not surprising, perhaps, given that "food riots" are making (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3272>

As IMF faces Structural Adjustment, Global South Activists Demand Accountability

by 50 Years Is Enough Network - 24 April 2008

Following the International Monetary Fund's announcement of proposed staff cuts and sales of gold about \$11 billion, civil society groups reacted with demands for further accountability.

"At long last, the IMF is experiencing first hand serious budget cuts," said Cheikh Tidiane Dieye of Environment and Development in Africa (ENDA), based in Senegal. "The poetic justice of this is palpable. In Senegal, the IMF has mandated budget cuts for years. As a result, we have been unable to invest in (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3270>

World Bank and climate funds

24 April 2008

The World Bank is holding a key two-day meeting in Washington DC (14-15 April 2008) to move forward plans to establish its proposed portfolio of climate investment funds (CIFs). The Washington meeting is expected to be followed by another session in May, with approval for establishment of the new funds by the World Bank's Board of Executive Directors expected in early July in time for the G8 summit in Japan in July.

The World Bank's proposal threatens to undermine the current work under the (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3305>

IMF: The Times They Are A-Changin'

by Robert Weissman - 25 April 2008

Have things changed at the International Monetary Fund? Or is the world just witnessing yet another in a long series of global economic double standards? IMF Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn says that the "need for public intervention" to address the global financial crisis "is becoming more evident." Strauss-Kahn has urged for a global fiscal stimulus, writing that, "Timely and targeted fiscal stimulus can add to aggregate demand in a way that supports private consumption during a (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3308>

World Bank hosts illegitimate debt roundtable

by Jubilee Debt Campaign - 24 April 2008

After months, and indeed years, of pushing the World Bank to engage with the issue, this week the illegitimate debt campaign moved an important step forward.

On Monday the Bank hosted a roundtable discussion at its headquarters in Washington DC. World Bank staff, government representatives, academics and civil society groups took part in the discussion of ideas and possible practical action regarding odious and illegitimate debt, as well as responsible lending. The recent increased (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3307>

USA

Jubilee Act Passed by U.S. House

by Jubilee USA Network - 25 April 2008

Jubilee Act for Responsible Lending and Expanded Debt Cancellation Passes House of Representatives with Bi-Partisan Support - Senate Panel to Consider Issue April 24

WASHINGTON – Leaders of churches, development agencies, civil rights, labor, and human rights groups today praised the passage by the US House of Representatives by a vote of 285-132 of the Jubilee Act (HR 2634). The legislation calls the US Treasury Department to negotiate a multilateral agreement for debt cancellation for up (...)

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article3304>



Cheap food era is over, says ADB

“Impact of rice price increases in Asia is very, very serious”

The rice stocks across Asia “are the lowest in decades” but there is no cause for a “doomsday picture of huge scarcity,” according to the Asian Development bank (ADB). Recognising, at the same time, that the current “serious situation” of escalating food prices has had “a very severe impact on the poor,” the ADB is cautioning countries such as India and Thailand against imposing or sustaining any ban on rice exports.

ADB Managing Director-General, Rajat M. Nag, said here on Tuesday that the bank would also urge the developed countries to “re-think the bio-fuels programme, including the whole issue of subsidies” in that sphere. The developed bloc should also consider steps to “conclude the Doha Round of global trade talks for agriculture in particular.” Success on that front “will be a very major boost to the developing-Asia’s farmers.”

Mr. Nag, who was addressing the Singapore-based Foreign Correspondents’ Association, said the developing countries should, for their part, increase investments in farm-related infrastructure such as irrigation systems and rural finance. Last year, the ADB provided India with \$1 billion towards rural finance.

“We just have to accept that the era of cheap food is over, if the era of cheap oil is [also] over,” he said, but emphasised that “the impact of the rice price increases in Asia is very, very serious” for nearly 1.2 billion people, comprising nearly 600 million on each

side of the income quotient of \$1 a day. Before the current price rises, they were already spending about 40-50 per cent of their earnings on food. With these increases, the comparable figure, in some parts of South Asia at least, had now gone up to 80 per cent.

Three-time rise

Tracing the spiralling prices of rice varieties to the escalation in the cost of production as broadly caused by the fuel situation, Mr. Nag said: “In the last three years, food prices as a whole have increased by over 80 per cent; in Asia, rice is the key staple and its price has increased almost three times the levels of a year ago and almost doubled in the first months of this year.”

Outlining the “cyclical and structural factors” on the rice supply side, the top ADB executive said: “On a regional balance [in Asia], there is enough supply. I fully empathise with India or Thailand or any other country, which says” “We have got to look after ourselves first and hence ban exports. India has banned non-basmati rice exports. Thailand is considering measures. I would strongly urge them to take a regional perspective, not only because it is good to look after your neighbours in times of hardship but also because it is good economic policy nationally. Ban on exports and price controls have a counter-productive effect on the micro-decisions of farmers.” There was no indication of any move by rice-exporting countries to form a cartel.

P. S. Suryanarayana



Civil Society International Steering Group (ISG)

Submission on the Accra Agenda for Action

Draft, produced by the ISG, to be finalized by 27th May

The consultative draft 'Accra Agenda for Action' (AAA) includes several important issues, but lacks clear commitments and makes only limited suggestions for progress. Civil society organizations (CSOs) will be extremely disappointed if the final AAA does not set a far more ambitious, forward looking agenda. Over 380 CSOs from over 80 countries have signed up to Better Aid, an international civil society position paper, which details 16 recommendations for Accra, from which the following key recommendations are drawn. The ISG believes that the following issues must be covered in a meaningful way if the AAA is to be judged a success.

1. Democratic ownership is critically important

'Ownership' should be understood as democratic ownership, which means that citizens' voices and concerns must be central to national development plans and processes, through legitimate and open mechanisms involving parliaments and civil society, including women's organizations. This needs to be explicitly stated and integrated throughout the AAA, which should deepen commitments to democratic ownership of the development process, by supporting the participation of citizens, civil society and parliaments in deciding, planning, implementing and assessing national plans, policies, programmes and budgets.

We support the emerging conclusions of the Advisory Group on the importance of civil society's role.

2. Ambitious commitments must be agreed on conditionality, tied aid and technical assistance

Southern country governments and CSOs from North and South have called for a phasing out of policy conditionality; the untying of all aid; and assurances that all technical assistance will become demand-driven. We support southern government demands that concrete commitments on these issues be agreed at Accra, and were extremely disappointed with the level of ambition suggested by the AAA consultative draft. In particular, we believe that further 'codes of conduct' on conditionality would not lead to meaningful change, and that donors must demonstrate deeper commitment to supporting demand-driven TA. We suggest the following wording for the AAA:

International commitments to human rights frameworks, gender equality, decent work and environmental sustainability form the basis for shared understanding about the purposes of aid and help define the entitlements of partner countries and citizens. Partner countries have to meet a burdensome array of requirements before aid funds are disbursed. Policy conditionalities which link disbursement to changes in partners' policies interfere with democratic ownership, and will be phased out. Donors will:

- Rapidly diminish the number of policy conditionalities, so that they no longer form a part of aid relationships by 2010.
- Negotiate aid terms fairly and transparently, with participation and accountability to partner country citizens.
- Improve the design of aid programmes to respect democratic ownership and partner country leadership.

Donors commit to extending the current DAC agreement on untying to include all aid, including food aid and technical assistance, with a target of reaching 100% untied aid in policy and practice by 2010, to be independently monitored. Partner country preferences for locally procured goods and services to will be respected and supported.

Technical cooperation efforts remain largely unaligned to partner country priorities and supply-driven; the focus and results achieved are seldom clear; and well-documented lessons learned need to be much better integrated.

- Donors commit to making sure that 100% of technical cooperation is demand-driven and aligned to national strategies, with recipients monitoring the extent to which this is achieved. This will require donors changing their policies, guidance and incentives, and setting out clear implementation plans that partners can monitor.
- Partner countries will exert stronger leadership in determining priorities and strategies for capacity development.

3. Transparency is a pre-condition for democratic ownership and accountability: international transparency standards are urgently needed

Citizens, parliaments, and governments in partner countries have a right to be well informed about aid in their country. At the moment there are wide variations in the amount of information that is publicly available about aid negotiations, and the degree to which donors report their aid commitments in advance, publish the conditions attached to their aid and make key documents accessible. Unfortunately, this issue, which is a critical prerequisite for improving national accountability for aid, and for promoting democratic ownership, is barely touched upon in the consultative draft. We suggest the following wording for the AAA:

We will reach agreement, by December 2010, on high international standards of openness and transparency for aid, including:

- Timely and meaningful public dissemination of information, particularly during aid negotiations and about disbursements, including publishing reliable country-by-country timetables, based on binding agreements, for aid commitments and expenditures.
- The adoption of a policy of automatic disclosure of relevant information, in languages and forms that are appropriate to concerned stakeholders, with a strictly limited regime of exceptions.
- Southern governments, working with elected representatives and citizens' organizations, setting out open and transparent policies on how aid is to be sourced, spent, monitored and accounted for.

- The independent monitoring of the above, and of international agreements, including the Paris Declaration.

4. A vision for the future of aid: 2010 and beyond

Aid is effective when it contributes to development effectiveness: meaningful progress on human rights, poverty eradication, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. Based on this perspective, we believe that the AAA must set out a clear, ambitious agenda for the future, including:

- A commitment to develop indicators and an inclusive process of assessment of aid in terms of its actual impact on the achievement of progress on poverty reduction, gender equality, human rights and social justice.
- A reform of aid architecture to establish an equitable multilateral governance system in which to negotiate future agreements on the reform of aid. This should have clear and transparent negotiating mechanisms, equitable representation of donors and recipients, and openness to civil society.
- Aid must be separate from military, strategic, trade and other agendas. We are particularly concerned that 'whole of system' approaches mentioned in the consultative draft violate this.
- Development effectiveness should be central to other policy arenas, including foreign policy, environment, trade and agriculture. Policy coherence should aim at promoting sustainable development, poverty eradication, human rights and gender equality. The upcoming UN Financing for Development conference is particularly important for making further commitments to improve development finance.

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Nepalese farmer visit an organic farm in Bangladesh



Nepalese farmers visit a hand loom in Bangladesh

Climate change and fuel shortages begin to bite

Soaring crop prices and demand for biofuels raise fears of political instability.

Empty shelves in Caracas. Food riots in Mexico. Warnings of hunger in Jamaica, Nepal, the Philippines, and sub-Saharan Africa. Soaring prices for basic foods are beginning to lead to political instability, with governments beginning to lead to political instability, with governments being forced to step in to artificially control the cost of bread, maize, rice, and dairy products.

Record world prices for most staple foods have led to 18 per cent food price inflation in China, 13 per cent in Indonesia and Pakistan, and 10 per cent or more in Latin America and Russia, according to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). Wheat has doubled in price, maize is nearly 50 per cent higher than a year ago and rice is 20 per cent more expensive, says the U.N. Next week the FAO is expected to say that global food reserves are at their lowest in 25 years and that prices will remain high for years.

Last week the Kremlin forced Russian companies to freeze the price of milk, bread, and other foods until January 31, for fear of a public backlash with a parliamentary election looming. "The price of goods has risen sharply and that has hit the poor particularly hard," said Oleg Savelyev, of the Levada Centre polling institute.

Yemen, Mexico, Burkina Faso, and several other countries have had, or been close to, food riots in the last year, something not seen in decades of low global food commodity prices. Meanwhile, there are shortages of beef, chicken, and milk in Venezuela and other countries as governments try to keep a lid on food price inflation.

Boycotts have become commonplace. Argentineans shunned tomatoes during the recent presidential election campaign when they became more expensive than meat. Italians organised a one-day boycott of pasta a protest at rising prices. German left-wing politicians have called for an increase in welfare benefits so that people can cope with price rises.

"If you combine the increase of the oil prices and the increase of food prices then you have the elements of a very serious [social] crisis in the future," said Jacques Diouf, head of the FAO, in London last week.

Record oil prices

The price rises are a result of record oil prices, U.S. farmers switching out of cereals to grow biofuel crops, extreme weather, and growing demand from countries India and China, the U.N. said on Friday.

"There is no one cause but a lot of things are coming together to lead to this. It's hard to separate out the factors," said Ali Gurkan, head of the FAO's Food Outlook programme, on Friday. He said cereal stocks had been declining for more than a decade but now stood at around 57 days, which made global food supplies vulnerable to an international crisis or big natural disaster such as a drought or flood. "Any unforeseen flood or crisis can make prices rise very quickly. I do not think we should panic but we should be very careful about what may happen," he warned.

Lester Brown, president of the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute thinktank, said: The competition for grain between the world's 800 million motorists, who want to maintain their mobility, and its 2 billion poorest people, who are simply trying to survive, is emerging as an epic issue."

Last year, he said, U.S. farmers distorted the world market for cereals by growing 14 million tonnes, or 20 per cent of the whole maize crop, for ethanol for vehicles. This took millions of hectares of land production and nearly doubled the price of maize. President George W. Bush this year called for steep rises in ethanol production as part of plans to reduce petrol demand by 20 per cent by 2017.

Maize is a staple food in many countries which import from the U.S., including Japan, Egypt, and Mexico. U.S. exports are 70 per cent of the world total, and are used widely for animal feed. The shortages have disrupted livestock and poultry industries worldwide. The outlook is widely expected to worsen as agro-industries prepare to switch to highly profitable biofuels. According to Grain, a Barcelona-based food resources group.

This week Oxfam warned the European Union that its policy of substituting 10 per cent of all car fuel with biofuels threatened to displace poor farmers.

'Inexorable decline'

The food crisis is being compounded by growing populations, extreme weather, and ecological stress,

according to a number of recent reports. This week the U.N. Environment Programme said the planet's water, land, air, plants, animals and fish stocks were all in "inexorable decline." According to the U.N.'s World Food Programme (WFP), 57 countries, including 29 in Africa, 19 in Asia and nine in Latin

America, have been hit by catastrophic floods. Harvests have been affected by drought and heatwaves in south Asia, Europe, China, Sudan, Mozambique and Uruguay.

John Vidal, Hindustan Times, November 5, 2007



Climate change could trigger global food crisis

Experts issue warning at U.N. – backed forum on sustainable development.

Climate change and an increasing population could trigger a global food crisis in the next half century as countries struggle for fertile land to grow crops and rear animals, scientists warned on Thursday. To keep up with the growth in human population, more food will have to be produced worldwide over the next 50 years than has been during the past 10,000 years combined, the experts said.

But in many countries a combination of poor farming practices and deforestation will be exacerbated by climate change to steadily degrade soil fertility, leaving vast areas unsuitable for crops or grazing. Competition over sparse resources may lead to conflicts and environmental destruction, the scientists fear.

The warnings came as researchers from around the world convened at a United Nations-backed forum in Iceland on sustainable development to address the organisation's millennium development goals to halve hunger and extreme poverty by 2015.

The researchers will use the meeting to call on countries to impose strict farming guidelines to ensure that soils are not degraded so badly they cannot recover.

"Policy changes that result in improved conversation of soil and vegetation and restoration of degraded land are fundamental to humanity's future livelihood," said Zafar Adeel, director of the international network on water, environment, and health at U.N. University and co-organiser of the meeting.

"This is an urgent task as the quality of land for food production, as well as water storage, is fundamental to future peace. Securing food and reducing poverty ... can have a strong impact on efforts to curb the flow of people, environmental refugees, inside countries as well as across national borders," he added.

The U. N. millennium ecosystem assessment ranked land degradation among the world's greatest environmental challenges, claiming it risked destabilising societies, endangering food security and increasing poverty.

Some 40 per cent of the world's agricultural land is seriously degraded. Among the worst affected regions are Central America, where 75 per cent of the land is infertile, Africa, where a fifth of the soil is degraded, and Asia, where 11 per cent of the land is unsuitable for farming.

Soil erosion

The majority of soil erosion is caused by water, either through flooding or poor irrigation, with the rest lost to winds. Farming practices such as ploughing also damage soil, as does repeated planting in fields, which depletes the soil of nutrients.

"You can sum it up as need, greed and ignorance," said Andrew Campbell, an Australian environmental consultant. "Some pressures on soil resources come from simple human needs, where people don't have any option but to grow crops or farm animals. But in other instances world markets demand produce, so farmers. And sometimes, there will be land that's cleared that should not have been, or grazed when it shouldn't have been. All these place great pressures on soil resources."

He warned that increased competition over depleted resources would lead to conflict – "and the losers will inevitably be the environment and poor people."

Andres Arnalds, of the Icelandic soil conservation service, said the pressures on food production would have knock-on effects all over the world because of the international links in food supply.

Mr. Campbell said: "If we can improve agricultural practices across the board we can dramatically

increase our food production from existing lands, without having to clear more or put more pressure on soils.

“Simple things like good crop rotation, sowing at the right time of year, basic weed control, are what is

needed. They’re very well known but not always used.”

Ian Sample, The Hindu, September 1, 2007



Focus on India, China at Bali meet

Over 10,000 delegates from 190 nations gather as UN climate summit gets underway today

As world leaders launch marathon negotiations on how to fight global warming, all eyes are on India and China, the biggest contributors to the problem.

In India, melting Himalayan glaciers cause floods, while raising a more daunting long-term prospect: the drying up of line-sustaining rivers.

Coal burning power plants belch pollutants into the air in China, contributing to global warming that experts said has destroyed billions of dollars in crops.

The two economic giants are becoming increasingly aware of the effects of rising temperatures. Both said they will not sign any climate change treaty that would slow the pace of their development.

Meanwhile, the US, which has pumped more carbon into the atmosphere over time than any other country, said it will continue to oppose mandatory reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, especially if China and India refuse to budget.

The positions of those three countries are pivotal as delegates from 190 nations begin gathering this week on Indonesia’s resort island of Bali to discuss a successor treaty to the Kyoto Protocol.

The goal of the December 3.-14 meeting is to head off a scientific forecast of catastrophic droughts and floods, collapsing ice sheets and vanishing coastlines. Individual countries will hold hard negotiations on issues such as a commitment to cap greenhouse gas emissions that warm the Earth’s atmosphere to carbon trading as well as financing technologies that reduce GHG emissions.

India and other developing countries were not asked to make any mandatory cuts in GHG emissions when the Kyoto Protocol – the first global treaty to combat climate change – was finalised in 1997. But as the Kyoto Protocol comes to an end in 2012, developing countries like India, China, Brazil and South Africa are being told to make a commitment to cap their greenhouse gas emissions after 2012.

“We need everyone to play the game,” said Fatih Birol, chief economist at the Paris based International Energy Agency. If current trends continue, the US, China and India would account for more than half the world’s carbon emissions by 2015, he added.

“Without the big three on board we have no change whatsoever to fix the climate change problem.”

Mario D’Souza, research associate at the India’s Centre for Science and Environment, said: “India will be under immense pressure at Bali because developed countries want it to make mandatory emission cuts along with China and Brazil. It will be interesting to see how India responds to the pressure.”

Delegates from 190 nations will attend what has been billed as one of the largest environmental conferences ever, bringing more than 10,000 people to the Indonesian resort island of Bali, from Hollywood stars and Nobel laureates to fishermen and drought-stricken farmers.

Among the most contentious issues will be whether emission cuts should be mandatory or voluntary and how to help the world’s poorest countries adapt to a worsening climate.

The nearly two-week meeting comes after a Nobel Prize-winning UN network of scientists issued a historic report that concluded that the level of carbon and other heat-trapping “greenhouse gas” emissions must stabilize by 2015 and decline from there.

The solutions are within reach, they said, from investing in renewable energy to improving energy efficiency.

But without action, temperatures will rise, resulting in droughts, severe weather, dying species and other consequences, they said.

“It is already affecting the livelihoods of people we work with,” said Dr. Charles Ehrhart, Climate Change Coordinator for CARE International, citing concerns over food security and access to water. “It is

contributing to tensions within and between communities.”

The Kyoto pact signed one decade ago required 36 industrial nations to reduce carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gasses emitted by power plants and other industrial, agricultural and transportation sources.

It set relatively small target reductions averaging 5 per cent below 1990 levels by 2012. So far the US,

the number 1 offender, said it will refuse any deal that calls for mandatory reductions.

“Since developing countries are just beginning to grow their economies, it’s not reasonable at this stage to ask them to reduce their emissions,” de Boer said, referring to China and India, which oppose any measures that will impinge on efforts to lift their people from poverty.

Hindustan Times, December 3, 2007



Half of world will be in cities by 2009: UN

The report said that migration to urban areas in India would continue with more people moving to cities such as Mumbai

Half of the global population will live in cities by the end of this year for the first time in human history while the percentage of urbanised in India will only be 29 per cent, a latest projections by the United Nations show.

The report predicts that the number of people living in urban areas would rise to 70 per cent by 2050.

Currently, 3.3 billion people of estimated population of 6.4 billion by 2050 when some 9.2 billion people are expected to inhabit the earth, the report said.

But the United Nations says that there is nothing to worry about it as urbanisation shows the dynamism of the economies and rich societies are among the highly urbanised.

The report released on Tuesday said that even then India would still be not as urbanised as China where currently 40 per cent people live in cities and their number is projected to go up to 70 per cent or one billion people by 2050.

Releasing latest projections on urbanisation, Director of Department of Economic and Social Affairs’ Population Division Hania Zlotnik stressed that the migration to urban areas would continue in India despite attempts by the Indian planners to prevent people from moving to cities.

Indian planners, she said, should be trying to foster economic dynamism in rural areas where 70 per cent of the population lives and rural development implies improving agriculture and establishment of agro industries. That would mean fewer people would be needed in that sector which, in turn, would require excess labour to be moved to non farm employment which is available mostly in cities.

Zlotnik outlined two scenarios: either people would migrate to cities such as Mumbai, or one-time rural areas would transition into urban centres by generating other activities.

That process had been seen in china, and would need to happen in India. Moreover, if those areas became more dynamic, people would earn more, become more educated, and demand better services, as had been the case in Europe, the United States the Latin America, she added. Zlotnik explained that greatest expansion could happen not in metropolises but in cities which have population less than 500,000 and even some of the rural area graduate into urban area.

In India, she said, two new mega-cities – Kolkata and Chennai – which are projected to have populations of 26.6 million and 10.1 million respectively would join Mumbai and Delhi by 2025. Mumbai had a population of 19 million and Delhi 18.8 million last year.

Worldwide, the United Nations expects addition of eight new mega cities with population of 10 million or more by 2025. These would include Shenzhen in China which will become third mega city in the country after Beijing and Shanghai with a population of 10.2 million.

However, Tokyo will remain largest mega city. Its population of 35.7 million at the last count is expected to rise to 36.4 million by 2025.

Of the current 19 mega cities, Europe has only two Moscow and Istanbul and Paris is expected to join them. Africa has only one mega city Cairo in Egypt and UN projects that Kinshasa in Democratic Republic of Congo and Lagos in Nigeria would earn the coveted title by 2025.

Urbanisation is growing everywhere, but not all of the world's regions are equally urbanised, said Zlotnik. The report reflects the most recent estimates of the world's urban and rural populations, projected, for the first time, to 2050, rather than 2030, as in past Revisions.

It indicates that most of the population growth expected in urban areas will be concentrated in the cities and towns of the world's less developed regions, particularly Africa and Asia.

In Africa, 40 per cent of the population currently lives in urban areas, Zlotnik explained. That figure is expected to reach 50 per cent by 2050, meaning that the urban population of the continent would likely triple over the next 40 years, from a current 340 million to some 900 people.

If Asia continued to urbanise at its current rapid pace, the region was expected to become 50 per cent urban by 2050, with the number of urban dwellers expected to jump from 1.6 billion people today to 1.8 billion people by 2050.

Such "sobering" numbers depend on the decline of fertility rates for the world as a whole, and particularly in Africa and Asia, she continued. Should they remain constant, those regions would likely gain another 1.8 billion urban dwellers. Thus, fertility must drop in countries with relatively high rates for urban and rural growth to remain manageable.

China today is about 40 per cent urban, with more than 500 million people in its cities, and is expected to be 70 per cent urban by 2050, with a city population of over 1 billion.

In comparison, India is expected to urbanise more slowly, and therefore remain the country with the largest rural population in the coming decades. India is about 30 per cent urban – its city inhabitants numbering 300 million – and likely to reach 55 per cent urban by 2050, with more than 900 million people living in its cities.

Hindustan Times, Thursday, February 28, 2008



How the IMF has become irrelevant

Once upon a time in the non-too-distant past, the International Monetary Fund — the institution set up in Bretton Woods in 1946 ostensibly to foster global economic stability and help countries facing financial crises — used to be feared in the developing world. Economists and analysts of the IMF would "dictate" policies that would be unpalatable to those leading governments of Third World countries.

Those days have gone, un lamented. The IMF is today a pale shadow of its once-venerable self as it desperately seeks to remain relevant by belatedly throwing a few crumbs at emerging economies and developing countries. On April 28, the IMF approved an increase in the voting rights of all developing countries put together from 31.13 per cent to 34.49 per cent, much of it by increasing the voting rights of emerging economies from 23.88 per cent to 25.64 per cent.

Consequently, the share of the affluent countries in the aggregate voting rights of the IMF came down from 60.57 per cent to 57.93 per cent. It was a baby step but a move forward nonetheless for a multilateral financial institution — with 184 countries as its members — that had staunchly resisted change for over six decades.

The proposal to increase the voting rights of developing countries was, interestingly, opposed by only two major countries — Russia and Saudi Arabia — whose share of voting rights came down. The share of the countries that comprised the erstwhile Soviet Union fell from 7.09 per cent to 6.82 per cent. But the opposition to the move was brushed aside as close to 93 per cent of the vote was in favour of the proposal — the minimum requirement of approval being 85 per cent.

In September 2006, the Fund had approved an "ad hoc" increase in the voting shares of four countries: China, South Korea, Mexico and Turkey. At that time, the finance ministers had stated: "We reiterate that we support the increase in quota for the four countries (China, South Korea, Mexico and Turkey) who are the present beneficiaries of the ad hoc increase. However, the present quota calculation formula is opaque and flawed. We believe that fundamental reforms are possible only if the contours of a final outcome are defined a priori followed by genuine consultations amongst nations as equal partners. The picture that emerges at present points to a second stage that is by no means guaranteed to happen or, even if it happens, may not advance the Fund's legitimacy."

The statement was of the view that a “disturbing picture that emerges is that some developing countries will be given increases by reducing the shares of some other equally deserving countries.” The four finance ministers were categorical that this position was “unacceptable” and “further erodes the credibility and legitimacy of the IMF.” They urged the Fund management to “keep the current process in abeyance” and make a “genuine attempt... to work out a simple and transparent formula that is truly reflective of the economic standing of countries while also protecting the position of low-income countries.” The increase in the combined voting quotas of China, South Korea, Mexico and Turkey by a niggardly 1.8 per cent in 2006 had been preceded by two years of negotiations. Despite the changes that have recently taken place, the big picture has not altered substantially.

Financial assistance by the Fund used to be linked to policy conditions — the most controversial of which were the structural adjustment programmes — that were insisted on to rescue countries in acute financial distress. These conditions entailed a lowering of import barriers and the initiation of “neo-liberal” market-friendly measures that often wreaked havoc with the economies of poor countries.

Especially after the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, developing countries had become rather wary of blindly following the Fund’s policy prescriptions — often called the “Washington consensus.”

What is far more significant is the simple fact that the world in general (and developing countries in particular) does not need the IMF any more. Many emerging economies, notably China and India, have accumulated huge reserves of foreign exchange to ensure that they do not have to knock on the doors of the Fund. A most stark manifestation of the changed global reality is that the IMF is no longer a net lender of funds; it is, in fact, a net recipient.

In 2003, the IMF had loaned more than \$100 billion to various countries to “assist” them with their financial constraints, including problems they were facing in managing their external balance of payments. This figure has shrunk to less than \$20 billion a year. The IMF is today a net receiver of funds with an inflow in excess of \$20 billion in the form of repayments of past loans, much of it from developing countries. What a fall!

Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, is an educator and journalist based in New Delhi.

The Asian Age, 4 May 2008



It's not just India: Global anger as food prices rise

Hunger bashed in the front gate of Haiti’s presidential palace. Hunger poured onto the streets, burning tires and taking on soldiers and the police. Hunger sent the country’s Prime Minister packing.

Haiti’s hunger, that burn in the belly that so many here feel, has become fiercer than ever in recent days as global food prices spiral out of reach, spiking as much as 45 per cent since the end of 2006 and turning Haitian staples like beans, corn and rice into closely guarded treasures.

Saint Louis Meriska’s children ate two spoonfuls of rice apiece as their only meal recently and then went without any food the following day. His eyes downcast, his own stomach empty, the unemployed father said forlornly, “They look at me and say, ‘Papa, I’m hungry,’ and I have to look away. It’s humiliating and it makes you angry.”

That anger is palpable across the globe. The food crisis is not only being felt among the poor but is also eroding the gains of the working and middle

classes, sowing volatile levels of discontent and putting new pressures on fragile governments.

In Cairo, the military is being put to work baking bread as rising food prices threaten to become the spark that ignites wider anger at a repressive government. In Burkina Faso and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, food riots are breaking out as never before. In reasonably prosperous Malaysia, the ruling coalition was nearly ousted by voters who cited food and fuel price increases as their main concerns. “It’s the worst crisis of its kind in more than 30 years,” said Jeffrey D. Sachs, the economist and special adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon. “It’s a big deal and it’s obviously threatening a lot of governments. There are a number of governments on the ropes, and I think there’s more political fallout to come.”

Indeed, as it roils developing nations, the spike in commodity prices — the biggest since the Nixon administration — has pitted the globe’s poorer south

against the relatively wealthy north, adding to demands for reform of rich nations' farm and environmental policies.

But experts say there are few quick fixes to a crisis tied to so many factors, from strong demand for food from emerging economies like China's to rising oil prices to the diversion of food resources to make bio fuels.

There are no scripts on how to handle the crisis either. In Asia, governments are putting in place measures to limit the hoarding of rice after some shoppers panicked at price increases and bought up everything they could.

Even in Thailand, which produces 10 million more tons of rice than it consumes and is the world's largest rice exporter; supermarkets have placed signs limiting the amount of rice shoppers are allowed to purchase. But there is also plenty of nervousness and confusion about how best to proceed and just how bad the impact may ultimately be, particularly as already strapped governments struggle to keep up their food subsidies.

"This is a perfect storm," President Elias Antonio Saca of El Salvador said on Wednesday at the World Economic Forum on Latin America in Cancun, Mexico. "How long can we withstand the situation? We have to feed our people, and commodities are becoming scarce. This scandalous storm might become a hurricane that could upset not only our economies but also the stability of our countries."

In Asia, if Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi of Malaysia steps down, which is looking increasingly likely amid post-election turmoil within his party, he may be that region's first high-profile political casualty of fuel and food price inflation.

In Indonesia, fearing protests, the government recently revised its 2008 budget, increasing the amount it will spend on food subsidies by about \$280 million. "The biggest concern is food riots," said H. S. Dillon, a former adviser to Indonesia's agriculture ministry. Referring to small but widespread protests touched January, he said: "It has happened in the past and can happen again."

Last month in Senegal, one of Africa's oldest and most stable democracies, the police in riot gear beat and used teargas against people protesting high food prices and later raided a television station that broadcast images of the event. Many Senegalese have expressed anger at President Abdoulaye Wade for spending lavishly on roads and five-star hotels for an Islamic summit meeting last month while many people are unable to afford rice or fish.

"Why are these riots happening?" asked Arif Husain, senior food security analyst at the World Food Programme, which has issued urgent appeals for donations. "The human instinct is to survive, and people are going to do no matter what to survive. And if you're hungry you get angry quicker."

Leaders who ignore the rage do so at their own risk. President Rene Preval of Haiti appeared to taunt the populace as the chorus of complaints about *la vie chère* — the expensive life — grew. He said if Haitians could afford cell phones, which many do carry, they should be able to feed their families. "If there is a protest against the rising prices," he said, "come get me at the palace and I will demonstrate with you."

When they came, filled with rage and by the thousands, he huddled inside and his presidential guards, with United Nations peacekeeping troops, rebuffed them.

Within days, Opposition legislators had voted out Mr. Preval's Prime Minister, Jacques-Edouard Alexis, forcing him to reconstitute his government. Fragile in even the best of times, Haiti's population and politics are now both simmering.

"Why were we surprised?" asked Patrick Elie, a Haitian political activist who followed the food riots in Africa earlier in the year and feared they might come your way all the way from Burkina Faso you should see it coming. What we had was like a can of petrol that the government left for someone to flight a match to it."

The rising prices are altering menus, and not for the better. In India, people are scrimping on milk for their children. Daily bowls of dal are getting thinner, as a bag of lentils is stretched across a few more meals.

Maninder Chand, an auto rickshaw driver in New Delhi, said his family had given up eating meat altogether for the last several weeks.

Another auto rickshaw driver, Ravinder Kumar Gupta, said his wife had stopped seasoning their daily lentils, their chief source of protein, with the usual onion and spices because the price of cooking oil was now out of reach. These days, they eat bowls of watery, tasteless dal, seasoned only with salt.

Down Cairo's Hafziyah Street, peddlers selling food from behind wood carts bark out their prices. But few customers can afford their fish or chicken, which bake in the hot sun. Food prices have doubled in two months.

Ahmed Abul Gheit, 25, sat on a cheap, stained wooden chair by his own pile of rotting tomatoes.

“We can’t even find food,” he said, looking over at his friend Sobhy Abdullah, 50. Then raising his hands toward the sky, as if in prayer, he said, “May God take the guy I have in mind.”

Mr. Abdullah nodded, knowing full well that the “guy” was President Hosni Mubarak.

The government’s ability to address the crisis is limited, how ever. It already spends more on subsidies, including petrol and bread, then on education and health combined.

Marc Lacey, Asian Age, April 19, 2008



Low intensity discrimination continues

It occurs despite the fact that the rights of women to equality and non-discrimination are enshrined in a number of international instruments

As we celebrate International Women’s Day today (March 8) and the progress made in achieving women’s rights everywhere, we should not lose sight of the fact that widespread discrimination against women persists in law and practice, directly or indirectly, all over the world. Public outcry and headlines tend to concentrate on egregious cases of female genital mutilation, punishment of rape victims, sexual slavery, and degrading treatment of all sorts. But it is “lower intensity” discrimination, often sanctioned by law that condemns millions of women to daily hardship and suffering. Beyond sparse and mainly ritual condemnations, such pervasive conditions continue to fly below the international radar.

A recent study, commissioned by the U.N., underscores that this occurs despite the fact that the rights of women to equality and non-discrimination are enshrined in a number of international instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the U.N. Charter and, most extensively, in the Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Under this normative canvass, which is complemented by regional human rights treaties and national legislation, states have the obligation to enact and implement effective measures to promote and protect the rights of women, including repealing discriminatory laws.

One hundred and eighty five states have accepted CEDAW, suggesting almost universal endorsement of its norms. However, the persistence of laws and customs that make women second class citizens or expose them to abuse paints a different picture. It is telling that many states have taken full advantage of their right to enter reservations to CEDAW, which allow them under international law to withhold consent or postpone adoption of specific treaty provisions.

Indeed, among human rights treaties, CEDAW has been one of those subjected to the largest number of reservations, although this attitude is now changing.

Not surprisingly, most misgivings of states revolve around control of the private life of women. A key aspect of women’s legal disenfranchisement in many countries is the limitation placed on their ability to own or manage property, and their lack of entitlements to property, including inheritance, following divorce or the death of kin. Many States still grant nationality and citizenship of children exclusively through the male line. Women’s freedom of movement is hindered in some States by laws which require male guardianship. A dearth of legal protection or lack of law enforcement often allows violence against women and girls, including rape, to go unpunished. The reality check at the regional level is also far from reassuring. Although some regional normative frameworks have built and expanded on CEDAW standards, both their application at the national level leave serious protection gaps.

Latin American laws

Latin America has introduced some of the most progressive and pioneering regional legislation for the protection of women, including in 1994 the first ever human rights convention focusing on violence against women. Yet 10 years after the adoption of the convention, the Amnesty International noted that the situation of women in the region had not improved significantly because states were failing to fulfil their duties under this treaty.

In Africa, despite widespread ratification of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, which enshrine and pledge protection for the whole spectrum of women’s rights, discrimination and harmful practices, such as human trafficking, violence in armed conflict, and female genital mutilation, persist.

Asia, the largest and most populous continent is also the most diverse with regard to progress on women's rights. The region counts some vibrant National Women's Commissions. Recently enacted legislation has advanced women's rights in India and elsewhere. However, much ground remains to be covered in terms of implementation and even formulation of laws in key areas, including human trafficking.

An extensive regional human rights regime and regional and national jurisprudence have not made Europe immune from many of the inequalities that hold women back. The Equal Opportunities Commission in the U. K. has noted that, at the current rate of progress, it will take 200 years before Parliament has equal representation of men and women. Even Norway, which has consistently topped the U. N. Human rights development and gender indices, registers gaps in remuneration and access to employment between the sexes.

Clearly, the conditions of oppression and lack of voice and opportunity are as much a part of the discrimination that women experience as are the laws that hamper the enjoyment of their rights. The

combination of these incapacitating factors accounts for the fact that 70 per cent of the world's poor are women; that two out of three children not in school are girls; and that women own only one per cent of the world's titled land. Real equality demands that international obligations be upheld both in law and in practice.

At a minimum, states should review, amend or repeal discriminatory legislation, and address the negative effects that these laws have on women.

Without such political initiative, as well as dedicated financial resources, much needed and long overdue change will not happen. Governments must tangibly show their determination to empower more than half of the world's population, and thus enable women to claim and enjoy their human rights and contribute to the welfare of all.

Courtesy: U. N. Information Centre, New Delhi

Louise Arbour, *The Hindu*, March 8, 2008
(*Louise Arbour is the U. N. High Commissioner for Human Rights*)



Pariah diplomacy

The US policy of punishing regimes that don't toe its line is counterproductive

A counterproductive Washington policy in recent years has been to boycott and punish political factions or governments that refuse to accept United States mandates. This policy makes difficult the possibility that such leaders might moderate their policies.

Two notable examples are in Nepal and the Middle East. About 12 years ago, Maoist guerrillas took up arms in an effort to overthrow the monarchy and change the nation's political and social life. Although the United States declared the revolutionaries to be terrorists, the Carter Center agreed to help mediate among the three major factions: the royal family, the old-line political parties and the Maoists.

In 2006, six months after the oppressive monarch was stripped of his powers, a cease-fire was signed. Maoist combatants laid down their arms and Nepalese troops agreed to remain in their barracks. Our centre continued its involvement and nation—though not the United States—and international organizations began working with all parties to reconcile the dispute and organize elections. The Maoists are succeeding in achieving their major goals: abolishing the monarchy, establishing a democratic republic and ending discrimination against untouchables and others whose citizenship rights were historically abridged. After a surprising victory in the April 10 election, Maoists will play a major role in writing a constitution and governing for about two years. To the United States, they are still terrorists.

On the way home from monitoring the Nepalese election, I, my wife and my son went to Israel. My goal was to learn as much as possible to assist in the faltering peace initiative endorsed by President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Although I knew that official United States policy was to boycott the government of Syria and leaders of Hamas, I did not receive any negative or cautionary messages about the trip, except that it might be dangerous to visit Gaza. The Carter Center had monitored three Palestinian elections, including one for parliamentary seats in January 2006. Hamas had prevailed in several municipal contests, gained a reputation for effective and honest administration and did surprisingly well in the legislative race, displacing the ruling party, Fatah. As victors, Hamas proposed a unity government with Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah as president and offered to give key ministries to Fatah, including that of foreign affairs and finance.

Hamas had been declared a terrorist organization by the United States and Israel, and the elected Palestinian government was forced to dissolve. Eventually, Hamas gained control of Gaza, and Fatah is “governing” the Israeli-dominated West Bank. Opinion polls show Hamas steadily gaining popularity. Since there can be no peace with Palestinians divided, we at the Carter Center believed it important to explore conditions allowing Hamas to be brought peacefully back into the discussions. (A recent poll of Israelis, who are familiar with this history, showed 64 percent favoured direct talks between Israel and Hamas.)

Similarly, Israel cannot gain peace with Syria unless the Golan Heights dispute is resolved. Here again, United States policy is to ostracise the Syrian government and prevent bilateral peace talks, contrary to the desire of high Israeli officials.

We met with Hamas leaders from Gaza, the West bank and Syria, and after two days of intense discussions with one another they gave these official responses to our suggestions, intended to enhance prospects for peace:

- Hamas will accept any agreement negotiated by Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel provided it is approved either in a Palestinian referendum or by an elected government.
- When the time comes, Hamas will accept the possibility of forming a nonpartisan professional government of technocrats to govern until the next elections can be held.
- Hamas will also disband its militia in Gaza if a nonpartisan professional security force can be formed.
- Hamas will accept international control of the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, provided the Egyptians and not the Israelis control closing the gates.

In addition, Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, has expressed eagerness to begin negotiations with Israel to end the impasse on the Golan Heights. Through more official consultations with these outlawed leaders, it may yet be possible to revive and expedite the stalemated peace talks between Israel and its neighbors. In the Middle East, as in Nepal, the path to peace lies in negotiation, not in isolation.

Jimmy Carter

Bali Roadmap and the Political Economy of Climate Justice

Summary

Visibly, the road show of UNFCCC's (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) climate negotiation moves on, without its specific roadmap to Poland in December 2008 and Denmark in 2009. Whether the roadmap would be, it is apparently clear from the Bali talks that the interest of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), which would be the worst victims of climate change and increasing hydro-metrological disasters, has been grossly ignored by the developed and advanced developing countries; both are in the race of increasingly Green House Gas (GhG) emission. Bali conference fails to instigate any political commitment for quantitative reduction of GhG even within the framework of Kyoto Protocol¹. Although the protocol asked the developed countries to cut carbon emissions by an average of about 5 percent from 1990 level by the period 2008-2012 but for many reasons, especially the negligence of the countries of larger economies, the actual cuts produced by 2012 would be much smaller.

In the Bali climate debate the industrialized and the advanced developing nations both have kept ways open for carbon emission; although the consequences of delay in the process of reducing emission would result more climatic catastrophes, social imbalances and massive economic collapse in the LDCs. In the negotiation process LDCs were within the group of G 77 and China² but 'the area of interest' of LDCs and advanced developing countries were different. LDCs, being the majority in G 77 and China, could not put forward their concerns, e.g. emission mitigation, more adaptation fund, fund based technological support for capacity building etc. as these demands contradicts with the interest of G 77 leaders.

The transition plan for replacing the Kyoto Protocol, which is so far from the concern of the recent IPCC report as well as from the 'Bali Mandate' instead, entrances the power of big business and the global financial institutions to work on its behalf without committing any Parties to tangible emissions cut.

The G77 and China Politics: Sidelined LDCs Concern

In the Bali climate negotiation, the agenda of G 77 and China was clearly driven by the interest of the advanced developing countries like China, India, Brazil, South Africa etc. that only considered their economic growth through continuing carbon emissions. Although it is the historical responsibility

of the industrialized (Annex I) countries for virtually all emissions leading to increase global atmospheric concentration of GhG but, presently, the advanced developing countries are also in the race of increasing GhG emission. Thus, the Kyoto Protocol asked for 'common but differentiated responsibilities' for the advanced developing countries for GhG reduction, but in the Bali conference the USA wanted the advanced developing countries, especially China and India, for binding GhG reduction commitment. Thus the entire politics of Bali Climate conference rounds around the commitment on binding GhG mitigation by the developed and the advanced developing countries.

Finally, the G77 and China committed itself to 'measurable reportable and verifiable mitigation actions, but not measurable, reportable and verifiable mitigation commitments'. The 'firm stand' of G 77 and China group was only on the 'right' to continue polluting on the grounds as they are still in the stage of developing. That was completely counter to the agenda of the LDCs as continuing emission will put them even in the worse position.

Being the part of G77 and China Group the advanced developing countries on their part played the game very successfully. They also succeeded to ensure that the provision of emission reduction of G 77 and China, a grouping that unreasonably includes LDCs, would apply equally and uniformly to all countries including the poorest ones, as far as the legal text is concerned.

Carbon Trading: A False and Discriminatory Solution

Bali climate conference eventually focused on alternate ways of carbon capture through Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD)³ and emission reduction through Clean Development Mechanism-CDM⁴ both of which are basically on the basis of market mechanism. REDD, theoretically, would allow tropical forest countries to have incentives through preventing forest deforestation and degradation. However, the countries remained divided over on the ways of having financial incentives; either market based mechanism or fund based mechanism.

Neither the mechanism would work if committed incentives are given, managed and distributed among the related stakeholders. The Global Environment Facility (GEF), the largest of such funds, can mobilize about USD 1 billion in several years wherein the carbon market has crossed USD 5 billion in 2007 alone. Besides, the market mechanism puts developing and industrialized countries on the same

trading level which is neither fair nor realistic. In fact, carbon trading is an allure to the developing countries and a discriminatory solution of climate change. This may benefit the poor countries but will foreclose their 'right to development' and will allow the industrialized countries to keep on increasing GhG emission

In relation to fund based mechanism, it has been seen that funds are largely replenished by 'good will' from the industrialized countries and are largely unpredictable; as despite repeated call the industrialized countries are reluctant to provide 0.7 percent of their GNP to the LDCs as development aid. Developing countries might worry that a new global agreement on emissions, like many other international agreements, like aid for trade of the WTO, will leave them in disadvantageous position.

Technology Transfer or Technology Trading

In the Bali conference, for the first time, trade ministers of the WTO member countries gathered; basically to find the possible options of trading of environment friendly technologies developed by the USA and EU. Speaking on behalf of trade ministers and officials from 32 countries, Indonesian Trade Minister Mari Elka Pangestu said they agreed to intensify high level engagement on trade and climate change, and they have high hopes that the WTO will play a wider role in technology transfer. Supporting the inclusion of WTO in the trade game the US trade representative Susan C. Schwab said that the WTO, under the Doha Development Agreement (DDA), had already gave a mandate for member countries to focus on negotiation on environmentally friendly goods and services.

Here concern is how the DDA benefiting the LDCs? In writing, it is a matter of hope for the LDCs but the practicability is frustrating as the WTO members not yet realized the commitments they made under DDA, especially allowing duty-free and quota-free access of LDC's products to the developing and developed countries' market. Here role of WTO in solving the global climate crisis is 'double-standard and hypocritical'. For example, there are proposals at the WTO for removing higher taxes on cars with a higher engine capacity, or the government actions to facilitate financing of consumers' purchase of motor cars, etc. which directly contribute increasing carbon emissions.

Technology transfer to the developing countries should not just about the opening up of the environmental goods and services market, but also to capacitate the developing countries to have access and procure these goods and services.

Adaptation Fund: Too Low Satisfy the Need

The adaptation fund taken from the 2 percent of the total value of the world's CDM projects including carbon trading has now reached around USD 100 million a year and expected to grow rapidly to billions of dollars as the value of CDM continues to grow. Developed countries wanted GEF⁵ to manage adaptation fund, but the developing countries have wanted a different institution because they found the GEF funding model difficult to access. The battle, however, over the management and governance setting on the adaptation fund surprisingly solved with a consensus of establishing an independent Adaptation Fund Board—with members selected by and under the direct authority of the COP/MOP (Conference of the Parties). This board will be entitled for all the financial mechanisms of the adaptation fund, independent of the previously only operating entity: the GEF that now only will be providing secretariat services.

But concern still remains as the fund's total capital is too low. A 2007 study by Oxfam International⁶ estimates that at least approximately USD 50 billion will be needed annually to support adaptation in the developing countries if current GhG emission rates are stabilized. To date only USD 230 million has been committed to the UNFCCC's adaptation funds, of which only USD 48 million has been delivered to support LDC's adaptation.

Similarly, it is also important to increase the amounts of compensatory adaptation financing for the developing countries, both in the context of filling up the voluntary multilateral adaptation funds under the UNFCCC and on a bilateral basis and, to extend cooperation and finance to the climate change related extreme weather events, in the context of disaster preparedness, humanitarian assistance, climate disaster preparedness, emergency response and rehabilitation. These financial mechanisms should be developed and provided by the developed countries as compensation for the historical responsibility of the developed countries in being the main drivers of current global climate change.

IFI's Investment on CDM and Renewable Energy: A Double Standard and Hypocritical Measure

The prime sector of IFI's, especially of the World Bank, IMF and ADB, investment is energy sector. From 1992 Earth Summit through late 2004, the World Bank Group approved USD 11 billion for 128 fossil fuel extraction projects in 45 countries- all of which would contribute over 43 billion tons of carbon emissions. Nearly half of these Bank-supported oil, gas and coal projects (and over 80 percent of oil

projects alone) are designed for export to the global marketplace—mainly Northern countries⁷. Again from the Earth Summit in 1992 to 2004 the World Bank Group financed an estimated USD 28 billion in fossil fuel projects, including extraction, power plants and sector reforms—averaging about USD 2 billion each year. The estimated lifetime carbon emissions resulting from these projects is 43.4 billion tons, almost half of which have been or will be produced as a result of extracting industry projects aimed at exploring oil to the global marketplace.⁸

In fact, the climate crisis of the recent days is the result of unsustainable and market based approach of exploiting non-renewable resources and energies which has been instigated by the IFI's investment and its flawed development paradigm imposed on the LDCs and the developing countries. Now, in the changing scenarios of global development paradigm, the IFIs are trying to 'mask' their dirty image through financing in CDM projects and promoting renewable energies. The IFIs loan and 'aid' supposedly for CDM and renewable energies is a double standards and 'hypocritical measure' when the same institutions continue to promote a development framework and pour almost 17 times more of their fund towards projects and policies that aggravate climate.

Polluter Pay and Exploiter Pay Principle

In a broad call for climate justice the international CSOs and NGOs put forward 'polluter pay and exploiter pay principle' to save the climate-risk countries. In relation to this, an Oxfam study made countries responsible for climate crisis as; USA 44 percent, Europe 32 percent, Japan 13 percent, Canada 4 percent, Australia 3 percent and South Korea 2.5 percent.

Besides the loss caused by climate change impact, the Northern countries plundered resources from the Southern countries through colonization and strengthened their economy through industrialization. Still the colonial masters continue exploitation of the poor countries imposing flawed development paradigm by global institutions, and transnational corporations with the acquiescence and collaboration of local elites and neo-liberal economic apologists. Therefore, from the historical perspective, the Northern countries owe to the Southern poor countries for colonial exploitation, resource drainage and damage etc. which have to be considered as 'ecological debt' of the rich countries and they have to pay for this.

Conclusion

On the eve of Bali climate conference the UNFCCC Executive Secretary Yvo de Boer has pointed out

the following yardstick to measure the success of Bali climate negotiation, which includes;

- It would need to be inclusive and global in its reach
- It would need to be embedded in sustainable development
- It would need to ensure that industrialized countries continue to take the lead in reducing emissions
- And, it would need to accord equal importance to adaptation and mitigation"⁹

Considering the above yardstick one could easily see the failure of negotiation but, still, we have two more years for integrating all the things mentioned above. The most important yardstick by which to measure the success of 'Bali Roadmap' would be the extent to which the post 2012 framework provides for both environmental space and development policy choice for the developing and least developed countries. Any new climate change regime without addressing these facts will be environmentally, politically, socially, morally and economically unsustainable and unjustified. Developed countries would lead the way in reducing their emission deeply and they must also work with the developing countries for creating development space and helping transformation to low carbon green technologies.

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This article is a summary of a longer report which may be accessed from www.equitybd.org

- 1 Kyoto Protocol, an agreement made under the UNFCCC with the objective of reducing green house gases that cause climate change
- 2 G 77 and China; one of the major negotiating block comprises with more than 100 developing countries including LDCs and small island states. The advanced developing countries like China, India, Brazil led the group in the entire negotiation process.
- 3 Indonesia and fellow 10 tropical forest nations have set up a coalition to promote REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) demanding developed nations to have financial

- incentives in order to prevent forest deforestation and degradation
- 4 CDM, Clean Development Mechanism, was introduced under the Kyoto Protocol to enable developed countries to generate emission reduction credits for countries with emission cut commitments and to promote sustainable development in the project's host countries.
 - 5 GEF-Global Environmental Facility, is the financial mechanism of the UNFCCC convention, but it also the financial mechanism of desertification convention. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the World Bank, together with the UNEP and UNDP, was entrusted with the task of mobilizing financial resources needed to implement UNFCCC.
 - 6 Oxfam International, Adapting to Climate Change: What's needed in poor countries and who should pay (2007), at [http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/briefingpapers / bp104_climate_change](http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/briefingpapers/bp104_climate_change).
 - 7 Citizens United for Renewable Energy and Sustainability, 'Steps Towards a Sustainable Energy Future: Position Paper of the CURES Network for the CSD', 2006; http://www.cures-network.org/docs/cures_folder_2006.pdf
 - 8 Jim Vallette, Daphne Wysham and Nadia Martizez, 'A Wrong Turn from Rio: the World Bank's Road to Climate Catastrophe' Sustainable Energy and Environment Network, 2004
 - 9 UNFCCC Executive Secretary Yvo de Boer in his address to the European Parliament on 4 October 2007



Solve global food price crisis, review agriculture

The best way to tackle the worldwide food shortage is to raise farm productivity, the World Bank has said

'This New Deal should focus not only on hunger and malnutrition and access to food, but also on energy, crop yields, climate change, investment in agriculture, the marginalization of women, economic resiliency and growth.'

Reobert zoellick
World Bank President

- Traditionally India has kept domestic wheat and rice retail prices above international prices
- Now they now are 30-35 pc below world market prices
- Crop forecasts suggest that the region is likely to benefit from good rice and wheat harvests
- International wheat prices have fallen 40 pc compared to their peaks of February 2008

POINTS TO PONDER

- Since 2005, the price of staple foods has jumped 80 per cent
- The surge in food prices could push 100 million people deeper into poverty
- The poor are also facing higher energy costs
- Food price rise has also increased the risk of malnutrition
- The food crisis is particularly severe in poor South Asian countries
- In recent years, agricultural growth in South Asia has been less than 3 per cent
- Growth of yields of food crops has been stagnant around the world

2.1%: yields during the height of the 'green revolution' (1950-1990)

1.2%: yields since 1991

- Food prices in India are more stable than most of the world

SOLUTIONS

Short term:

- Targeted subsidies: provide grains at lower costs directly to the poor
- Increase the amount of cash-transfers and the number of people receiving low-cost grains

Long term:

- Revival of Agriculture
- Agricultural R&D critical to enhance productivity
- Productive investments in agriculture needed
- A new deal for global food policy and agriculture

Hindustan Times, 8 May 2008



U.N. Human Development Report asks all Nations to cut carbon emissions

Global warming to hit poorest

Warning nations that the world is drifting towards a “tripping point” that could lock the poorest countries and their poorest citizens in the downward spiral, with issues like malnutrition, water scarcity, ecological threats and loss of livelihood to handle due to global warming, the latest report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has asked nations to agree to a “global sustainable pathway” aimed to 50 per cent reduction of greenhouse gas emission by 2050 from 1990 levels.

UNDP’s Human Development Report 2007 has warned that global warming could have apocalyptic consequences for the world’s poor and has asked richer countries to cut greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80 per cent by 2050. The report has also urged developing countries to cut carbon emissions by 20 per cent over three decades starting in 2020.

The report, “Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World”, has mentioned that global climate change threatens to undermine India’s efforts to improve the well-being of its poor people, pointing out that while steady progress has been made to improve people’s health, education and wealth in India, a large human development backlog still exists.

“Efforts to assist the poorest people need to be scaled up if the nation’s ambition of inclusive growth is to be realised,” said UNDP resident representative Maxine Olson. India ranks 128 out of 177 countries in the human development index. The country ranked 126 in 2006.

UNDP officials said India would have ranked 128 even last year had updated data been used for other

countries. So the country has not slipped in ranking, the UNDP clarified.

Still, India has a lot of catching up to do if it wants to get anywhere close to China in terms of human development, though the two countries are often compared in terms of their economic strengths. China ranks 81 in this year’s index.

The human development report called for putting in place policies for sustainable carbon budgeting in the post-Kyoto era. But, “looking to future, no country, howsoever wealthy or powerful, will be immune to global warming”, it said.

The report has also called for expanding multilateral provisions for responding to climate-related humanitarian emergencies and supporting post-disaster recovery to build resilience with \$2 billion in financing by 2016 under arrangements like the UN Emergency Response Fund and World Bank’s global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery.

The report has recommended international cooperation to enhance access to modern energy services and reduction in dependence on biomass, which is the primary source of energy for about 2.5 billion people.

Scientists expect that some of the worst affected by climate change will be the poor in developing, countries, especially those with large populations dependent on agriculture. The report has predicted that South Asia will be one of the worst hit by global warming, with the Ganga river expected to lose two-thirds of its July to September flow, causing water shortages for more than 500 million people.

The Asian Age, 28 November, 2007

About 3 billion people are food insecure: U.N. report

A large part of land used for agricultural is now devoted to non-food agriculture

- **18,000 children die daily due to inadequate nutrition**
- **Rising commodity prices will further increase**

The total number of food insecure people was probably closer to about three billion, or about half the population of the world, according to the United Nations midyear update of the World Economic Situation and Prospects.

In addition, approximately 18,000 children die daily as a direct or indirect consequence of inadequate nutrition, the UN report says.

The U.N. Assistant Secretary General for Economic Development Jomo Kwame Sundaram has said: "The factor affecting the food situation included the fact that the uses of land had changed in the last few decades, with a greater proportion that was previously used for agriculture now being used for non-agricultural purposes. At the same time, a greater proportion of the land used for agricultural purposes was now devoted to non-food agriculture. While there has been a significant increase in grain production over the years, it had not necessarily translated into increased human grain consumption."

A U.N. communication noted that another factor that needed attention was that although there had been a tendency to dismiss all bio-fuels, some were far more cost-effective than others. Some of the feedstock used to create some ethanol and bio-diesel had not resulted in food price increases. For instance, the price of sugar had not gone up the way that of corn had, in recent times. A much more nuanced and sophisticated view was needed on the whole question of bio-fuels.

According to Mr. Sundaram, in the last two or three decades, there had been a significant increase in the concentration of power of transnational agrobusinesses that had come to dominate not only

marketing and consumption, but also the production and supply of food inputs. That problem was being exacerbated because of the strengthening of the intellectual property rights and the extension of those rights to cover agricultural inputs. The consequences had largely been at the expense of small farmers and consumers, especially the poor.

Commodity prices had seen a continued surge in 2007 and early 2008, particularly agriculture and food prices, such as rice, which increased by 215 per cent up to April, while wheat prices went up by 83 per cent. These prices were expected to increase further in 2008 and then flatten out and reduce in 2009, as a consequence of the slowdown of the global economy.

Slowdown

The author of the World Economic Situation and Prospects report, Rob Vos, who is also Director, Development Policy and Analysis Division, has said there would be a slowdown in all regions. In the Africa region, if the pessimistic scenario were to play out, economic growth would almost come to a standstill, dropping to 2.2 per cent in 2008 and 1.1 per cent in 2009. In South and East Asia, the slowdown was expected to bring down growth from 11 per cent in 2007 to 8.5 per cent 2008. Latin America, which was linked to the U.S. market, was expected to suffer very strong negative impacts of lower demand, leading to lowered growth performance. The crisis in the U.S. itself had not bottomed out yet. The problems with the dollar had not disappeared and it expected more depreciation. There was also the surge in oil and food prices in recent months.

V. Jayanth, Sunday, May 18, 2008

Statement of people's organizations on high food prices: *time for a comprehensive shift in economic policy*

The Present

1. Food price increases in Sri Lanka - higher than global increases.

World food prices increased by 40% last year and in Sri Lanka it was much higher. The price of essential food such as rice, bread and milk increased two or three times and the impact is greatest on the poor who spend about 80% of their income on food. This is part of a global crisis in which more and more people cannot feed themselves or their children. Alongside the current high cost of living increase this situation is extremely dangerous.

2. Income levels of the poor in Sri Lanka - far below the world averages.

People receiving incomes less than US \$ 2 /day are defined as poor globally. In Sri Lanka the official poverty alleviation programme (Samurdhi Movement) states that 2.1 million families receive less than Rs. 1500 /month which is US \$ 0.5 /day income. This is nearly half the country's population.

3. Nutritional status of the poor

- According to government figures, only half the population receive the minimum daily calorie intake of 2,030 kcal.
- According to the UN World Food Programme (WFP), Sri Lanka has a significantly higher child underweight rate than would be expected on the basis of its per capita GDP.
- The child underweight rate may be three times as high as what would be expected from a country with Sri Lanka's level of infant mortality.
- According to UNICEF, 14 percent of children under five in Sri Lanka showed signs of wasting and stunting, and 29 percent of children younger than five are underweight for their age. (Districts affected by conflict record higher rates).
- Continuing conflict between government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has also raised concerns regarding overall food security and nutrition levels in the conflict zone.
- There are fears that national nutritional levels will deteriorate further due to rising food prices caused by a record high inflation rate.

4. World food prices will not come down

- Food prices will not come down. The poor are compelled to go hungry to feed the greater appetite of the rich.
- More meat consumed by the rich in fast growing countries has led to more food being produced for animals than for humans.
- More fuel is produced using food and food-producing land to feed cars than to feed the poor
- More urbanization reduces the proportion of food producers compared to consumers.
- Climate change has an adverse impact on food production worldwide.

5. Attitude of the Government of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's President and Minister of Agriculture have taken steps to strengthen domestic food production by small-scale farmers and have some control over rice prices, but these measures have been half-hearted, inadequate and ineffective.

For the last 30 years government has followed the export-oriented growth model. This neo-liberal model assumes that globalization enables the country to achieve faster economic growth which "trickles down" to reduce poverty.

We are now at a high point in a process of disastrous failure of that model. There has been a lack of economic growth, no "trickle down" to the poor and in fact increased economic and social disparities. A new approach is urgently needed.

The Future

6. A radical transformation in food and agriculture is recommended globally

The final report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development [IAASTD], endorsed by 60 countries, was published in April. In a press release, "Agriculture-the need for change", April 15th, they state:

"The way the world grows its food will have to change radically to better serve the poor and hungry if the world is to cope with a growing population and climate change while avoiding social breakdown and environmental collapse".

"Modern agriculture has brought significant increases in food production. But the benefits have been spread unevenly and have come at an increasingly intolerable price, paid by small-scale farmers, workers, rural communities and the environment".

The report calls for radical changes in world farming to avert increasing regional food shortages, escalating prices and growing environmental problems.

Responding to the report, a group of international environment and consumer groups, including Third World Network, Practical Action, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, said, "This is a sobering account of the failure of industrial farming. Small-scale farmers and ecological methods provide the way forward to avert the current food crisis and meet the needs of communities."

Lim Li Chung, of Third World Network in Malaysia, said: "It clearly shows that small-scale farmers and the environment lose under trade liberalization. Developing countries must exercise their right to stop the flood of cheap subsidized products from the north."

7. Potential in Sri Lanka to avoid hunger and poverty and the crisis of high food prices

Sri Lanka can avoid the disaster of a famine by adopting a new approach. There is much that can be learnt from the past, from policies adopted by governments in early post-independence decades before the country began to be misguided by international financial powers, as well as from ancient ecological and regenerative agriculture.

Food sovereignty:

- All people should be assured of healthy food at affordable prices at all times. Small farmers should be able to make good livelihoods through agriculture. This is what is known as "food sovereignty", a concept advocated by the world's largest movement of peasant farmers, "Via Campesina", with 150 million members in 56 countries. Many people's movements, including farmers in Sri Lanka, advocate ecological agriculture.

Ecological agriculture:

- To be viable for small farmers, small-scale agriculture has to be ecological, based on the potential of small farmers, unauthorized settlers, landless people including plantation workers, small-scale fisher people and rural women.

- Conservation and regeneration of land and soil fertility is an essential aspect. Damage caused by external chemical inputs, commercial, hybrid seeds that are not only expensive but require external inputs that damage soil fertility have to be avoided.
- Methods of farming that increase soil erosion and loss of biodiversity have to be avoided.

Small-scale agriculture:

- Small-scale agriculture, basically for domestic food production, is the only way out of the present crisis. Although there are more and more programmes trying to address hunger and poverty, to be effective a more comprehensive approach is needed.

Radical and comprehensive policy changes needed:

It is essential to change current policies that are counter-productive.

- Trade in the hands of the private sector has resulted in large, private monopolies controlling food and other consumer markets which act against the interests of small-scale rural producers and consumers.
- Large investments to promote foreign investment and the private sector is one of the biggest obstacles to any strengthening of small-scale domestic production and distribution which could benefit the poorer sections of society.

A comprehensive shift away from the neo-liberal economic model that has failed for the last 30 years is essential. It is time for a radical and comprehensive shift in economic policies!

Following organisations, movements and individuals have endorsed this statement so far. We expect more will join in the coming days.

Alliance for Protection of National Resources and Human Rights (ANRHR), Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR), National Farmers Assembly (NFA), Peasant Information Centre (PIC), Centre for Sustainable Agriculture Research and Development (SARD), National Movement of Milk Farmers in Sri Lanka, Savisthri-Movement of Women in Alternative Development, National Fisheries Solidarity (NAFSO), Future in Our Hands Development Foundation (FIOH), Nilwala Nimna Govi Sanvidhanaya, Dimbulagala Independent Farmers Organisation, Ruhunupura Govi Jana Samuluwa, Pragathiseeli Govijana Sammelanaya, New Environmental Resources Alliance (New ERA), Uva Farmers collective for poison Free Agriculture, Vikalpani Organisation, Religious Unity alliance, Mahasen Govi Sanvidanaya, Osu Govi Gammana Sanvidhanaya, Oxfam, Dr. Gamini Kulathunga (Open University), Professor H. Sriyananda, Mr. D.L.O. Mendis, Sharif A. Kafi, Bangladesh Development Partnership Centre (BDPC), Shahana Begum, Nari O Mnabadhikar Foundation (NAMAF), Bangladesh, Abu Jafar Mohammad Hossain, Bangladesh Coalition for Child Rights (BCCR)

April 30, 2008

SAAPE congratulates the members of Human Rights Alliance (Regional Thematic Focal Organisation, Peace, Justice and Demilitarization) who have been elected to the Constituent Assembly. The members who have been elected are Ms Shanti Adhikari, Ms Ramrati Ram, Ms Lakki Sherpa, and Ms Sonamchhejung Lama.

SAAPE also congratulates the other members of All Nepal Women Association (ANWA) who were as well elected to the Constituent Assembly. It is indeed very pleasant and happy news and recognition of the hard work that they have invested in the communities and we are sure that their new role and responsibility will definitely contribute to the empowerment of women and protection of human and democratic rights. Their election to the Constituent Assembly is a great honour to everyone in SAAPE.

Produced and Published on behalf of SAAPE by:

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Design & Layout: Kartiki Desai