Crisis in South Asia reflected in Colombo summit

Our correspondent
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Dashing the hopes that tensions between the regimes of India and Pakistan could be defused through regional discussions, the conference of heads of state of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), held in Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, on July 29-31, ended with the gap between the two states widening.

Indian Prime Minister Behari Vajpayee rudely brushed aside the proposal of his Pakistani counterpart, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, to the opening session of the SAARC conference for the convening of a South Asian Security and Development Conference to discuss issues on security and economic arrangements. Vajpayee said: 'Differences should be resolved, in a rational manner, through bilateral negotiations.' His insistence on a bilateral approach clearly ruled out regional discussions on conflicting political issues between the countries.

The remark by Vajpayee that 'In fact SAARC reminds us that we should seek what unites us and not dwell upon our divisions' was a direct reply to Sharif, who had stated: 'The primary reason for the failure of SAARC to live up to its promise lies in the fact that it excludes the discussions of political problems.'

Informal discussions held by the two leaders, outside of the conference, also ended in total failure. When asked by a journalist what the outcome of these talks was, Sharif said bluntly, 'zero.'

So much for the cooperation between the two main capitalist regimes in the region, which are equally whipping up national chauvinism at home, particularly after the nuclear bomb testing on either side of the border, as a means of diverting and drowning the growing mass hostility towards the ruling classes.

Even the day before the conference began, on July 28, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadiragammar pleaded ignorance of a proposal for the setting up of a regional security council. His pretended ignorance only revealed his fear of antagonizing the Bharatiya Janata Party government in India, and its concern that the BJP regime, which came to power on an appeal to Hindu chauvinism, might again demand a hand in the 'settlement' of the Sri Lankan racist war against the Tamil minority.

As the newly elected chairperson of the SAARC, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga had only this much to say about Pakistan's proposal: 'The organization would take serious note of this.'

Apart from Vajpayee, Sharif and Kumaratunga, the other heads of state and government at the Colombo conference were the prime ministers of Bangladesh and Nepal, Sheik Hasina and Girija Prasad Koirala, the president of the Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, and the recently elected head of state of Bhutan, Lyonpo Jigmi Yoeser.

The annual meetings of the heads of states of the region under the banner of SAARC began in 1985. According to the former schedule the hosting of this year's conference and the group's chairmanship was due to go to Nepal. Sri Lankan President Kumaratunga successfully maneuvered to get that privilege herself in order to boost her crumbling political image in the country.

While the Sri Lankan government launched a massive propaganda campaign around the conference, it also mobilized the biggest ever security operations in the city of Colombo, in the guise of 'preventing a terrorist attack.' Over 6,000 policemen, in addition to a large number of soldiers, were deployed in the city streets to man checkpoints and patrol and guard summit meeting places and visitors.

City residents were warned not to entertain any visitors in their homes during the days of the SAARC conference. This intimidation campaign was directed mainly against the Tamil minority people in the city and suburbs. Hundreds of Tamil youths were arrested and detained in advance. In line with the militarisation of the regime, the armed forces were given an opportunity for a test run of a military siege of the city.

When the SAARC was formally launched in 1985, at a conference in Dhaka in Bangladesh, it was announced that the aim of the organization was the alleviation of poverty and promotion of social welfare of the masses by working out economic and social development programs through cooperation of the member countries. After thirteen years, this same hollow rhetoric was reiterated at this 10th SAARC summit.

The Sri Lankan foreign minister said the main topic of this year's conference was cooperation between countries under conditions of the globalisation of economic affairs. Social conditions in South Asia which gradually deteriorated over the past five decades have worsened rapidly since the ruling classes decided to do away with tariff barriers and create even more favorable conditions for international capital.

Report on social crisis

This is what the Group of Eminent Persons appointed at the conference last year in Male to assess the progress of the SAARC had to say in their report: 'There has been a perceptible dis-juncture between SAARC decisions and their implementation.'

Out of the 960 million people of India, 400 million live under the poverty line. Forty eight percent are illiterate, 250 children and young women are forced into prostitution each day for the lack of any other means of living. Fifty three percent of children under five years old are malnourished and 35 million out of 100 million children are in abject poverty and have no prospect of schooling. Only 21 percent of the population have basic amenities such as safe drinking water. The

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per capita income is US$387.

In Pakistan, 62.2 percent of the people cannot read or write--75.6 percent of these are females. Life expectancy is 58 years and the per capita income is $495.

In Bangladesh, 35.6 percent of the labor force are unemployed and 63 percent of the population cannot read or write. According to one report, every year nearly 200,000 women and children are smuggled out of the country to be sold into slavery or prostitution. The per capita income is $283.

In Nepal, the situation is even worse. Sixty percent of the population lives under poverty line. Some 72.5 percent cannot read or write. The per capita income is $225.

Forty six percent of Bhutan's people are illiterate. Life expectancy isonly 52 years. The per capita income according to official records is $ 435, but according to another report, it is only $73.

In Sri Lanka, according to 1997 statistics the top 20% of the population receives 49.93% of national income and the 40 percent in the lowest income group receives only 15.32%. The island has the world's highest suicide rate, 52 for each 100,000 people, and the main reason is poverty. The per capita income is $760.

In the Maldive Islands, the per capita income is $1,080. Although the per capita income is higher than the rest of the countries of the region, bourgeois economists and politicians highlight these statistics only to cover up the unbearable social inequalities that exist there, as in all the South Asian countries. The regime in the Maldives maintains a one-party system of rule to prevent all avenues of political expression in opposition to the regime.

Failure of bourgeois nationalism

None of the bourgeois regimes that came to power in the region since formal independence from colonial rule have been able to solve any social question. If there were some gains made in the living standards of workers and oppressed, they were accomplished only through self-sacrificing struggles of the masses during the period of the post-World War II boom in world capitalism. These 'national' bourgeois regimes not only failed to carry out the democratic tasks accomplished by the bourgeoisie in the advanced capitalist countries--national unification, the liquidation of feudal or caste barriers--they made political appeals aimed at further dividing the masses on religious, racial and caste lines.

Their nationalist economic programs were shattered as the globalisation process became the dominant force of the world economy. Now the bourgeoisie of every country has embraced the policies of 'open economy' and integration into the global market. When the Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga addressed the opening session of the conference, she spoke for all SAARC leaders, when she said: 'Splendid isolation is no answer to globalisation. The cautious, tentative attitude to external linkages which characterized SAARC in its earlier years is neither necessary nor viable.'

Behind the hollow rhetoric of regional cooperation in economic development, looms the effects of the recent economic crash in South East Asian countries. At the beginning of this year nationalist economic pundits were assuring the public that the economies in South Asia would not be adversely effected since the 'economic fundamentals' here were right and sound. But they were proved wrong within a few weeks.

Added to the crisis faced by India and Pakistan were the economic sanctions imposed by Clinton administration in the United States after the nuclear tests in May. Pakistan has almost reached the point in defaulting on its debt servicing.While the country owed US$800 million due to be paid by the end of July, Pakistan's total foreign exchange reserves had sunk to US$600 million by the beginning of the month. Prime Minister Sharif turned not to the equally poor countries in the South Asian region but traveled, begging bowl in hand, to the Arab countries, making a communal appeal based on Islam. Even so, only Kuwait came forward to offer a fraction of what Pakistan owed to foreign banks.

The banner of SAARC was used by the Indian government to remove 2,000 items from of the country's list of goods subject to import restrictions. This will help the transnational corporations to flood the Indian market with cheap goods, sending the already 'sick industries' within its borders to the wall. The economic and social crisis faced by the countries of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) will not and cannot be avoided in SAARC countries under conditions of a globalised economy.

Expressing the fears that are entertained by the ruling classes, the Sri Lankan President added in her opening report: 'Economies seemingly stronger than those of South Asia have faltered and thedebate continues on the causes and consequences... Those who are marginalised in the process of globalisation would continue to give birth to more and more movements of protest, whose destructive violence will resound not only within national boundaries, but surely spread in concentric ripples within our region and beyond to the most unexpected areas of the globe.'

Under capitalism, integration into the global market will take place only at the expense of the living conditions of the masses burdened with mounting poverty, unemployment and social misery. Communal, racial and other divisions will be incited by the ruling classes in their strategy to suppress social unrest. The real cooperation of the masses can be established only on the basis of a socialist and internationalist alternative.

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