



Winning the peace

India must ensure Sri Lanka makes certain security, dignity, and prosperity for the Tamils

The visit last week of Sri Lanka's new President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to India and his extended talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi was an affirmation by the two nations to make good bilateral ties a priority for each. Mr. Rajapaksa is aware of the problems the relationship has faced, due to both the proximity between India and Sri Lanka, and the interlinked and complicated peoples' histories. In comments to *The Hindu*, he made it clear that he wants consistency and constant communication to avoid the problems of the past. In the last decade, these have included India's concerns about the pace of reconciliation in the Tamil-majority North and East, the welcoming of Chinese investment for major projects including the Hambantota port and Colombo harbour and military engagement, unhappiness over the slow pace of clearance for Indian projects, and other bilateral issues. In Colombo there has been the overhanging suspicion that Indian intelligence agencies play a role in domestic politics, including the 2015 defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa. In the hour-long conversation the two leaders had, it seemed apparent that there was some clarity on all issues and a will to build a new future. There was also a recognition that after working together closely against the LTTE, there were new threats, especially in the wake of the Easter Day bombings by an Islamic State-affiliated group that has Indian links. India's announcement of \$50-million in aid along with an additional \$400-million in development aid is proof of that. India's and Sri Lanka's security is "indivisible" Mr. Modi said, indicating the need for more high-level contacts. Mr. Rajapaksa accepted Mr. Modi's invitation to make his first presidential visit abroad to New Delhi, and has invited the Indian leader to be the first State guest he welcomes to Colombo.

However, the next few months will reveal how much the new regime will actually work to engage New Delhi's concerns. Apart from clearances for infrastructure projects in the north, port projects in Trincomalee, and the airport in Mattala, Mr. Rajapaksa will be judged on how far he regulates investment and manage debts to China. Above all, his attitude towards the less developed areas of the North and East, where most minorities did not vote for him, will be keenly watched. His stated desire to place development over devolution commitments will be a cause for worry for New Delhi as well as Chennai, that have consistently urged the Sri Lankan government to ensure what the MEA called "dignity, peace, equality and justice" for Tamils; they suffered devastating losses during the three decades of war and remain less prosperous than the rest of the Island country. While a war can be won in a defined and short span, winning the peace and healing people is an extended process that takes decades, a process that India will follow closely in Sri Lanka.

Terror in London

Efforts to stop lone-wolf attacks must use community leaders, deradicalisation plans

The knife attack on Friday near London Bridge that killed two and injured three others is yet another reminder of the threat lone-wolf assaults pose to public security. The attacker, Usman Khan, who was born in the U.K. to immigrants from Pakistan-held Kashmir, was a convicted terrorist. He was released in December 2018 with conditions after serving half his jail term. On Friday, Khan was attending a prisoner rehabilitation programme at Fishmongers' Hall, a historic building on the northern end of London Bridge. Wearing a fake explosive vest, he first threatened to blow up the building and then went on a killing spree. He was driven out of the hall by members of the public and was later shot dead by the police. This is the latest in a series of terror attacks the U.K., especially London, has seen in recent years. In June 2017, terrorists had rammed a van into pedestrians on the Bridge and stabbed people in nearby bars and restaurants. In the same month, a van ran into pedestrians outside a London mosque. In May that year, a suicide bomber killed 22 concert-goers in Manchester. With the latest attack, which the Islamic State has claimed responsibility for, Khan at least succeeded in keeping the threat of terror to London alive.

While radicalisation is the primary problem, Friday's attack also points to security, intelligence and systemic failures. While the British intelligence is often credited for foiling dozens of terrorist attacks since the 2005 London train bombings that killed 56, less sophisticated, less coordinated, often lone-wolf attacks are on the rise. Usman was convicted in 2012 for being part of an al-Qaeda-linked plot to bomb the London Stock Exchange. He was sentenced under the imprisonment for public protection (IPP) programme, which allowed the authorities to keep him, or convicts considered a threat to the public, in prison indefinitely. But when the Conservative-Liberal government withdrew the IPP, he got the verdict overturned and was sentenced to 16 years. Under the automatic early release scheme, he was freed in 2018 with an electronic tag and supposed to be monitored. But the police still could not prevent the knife attack. And with hardly two weeks to go before the parliamentary election, both Labour and the Tories have taken the issue to the political battle and promised to address the systemic issues – making policing more efficient and reviewing the early release scheme. While these could take time and are up to the next government, what is needed is a good counter-terror plan to tackle both extremism among youth and prevent lone-wolf attacks that often go undetected. For this, state agencies need to work with civil society groups as well as community leaders and have deradicalisation programmes. There is no one-stop solution to terrorism.

Taking stock of the anti-AIDS fight

The slowdown, which places targets out of reach, calls for a renewal of political commitment, finances and engagement



K. SRINATH REDDY

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), adopted by member countries of the United Nations in 2015, set a target of ending the epidemics of AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria by 2030 (SDG 3.3). The key indicator chosen to track progress in achieving the target for HIV-AIDS is "the number of new HIV infections per 1,000 uninfected population, by sex, age and key populations". In the terminology of HIV prevention and control, the phrase "key populations" refers to: men who have sex with men; people who use injected drugs; people in prisons and other closed settings; sex workers and their clients, and transgender persons.

Bridging gaps

In order to infuse energy and urgency into global efforts to combat HIV-AIDS and complement the prevention target set by the SDGs, an ambitious treatment target was also adopted through UNAIDS, the lead UN agency that coordinates the battle against HIV. The "90-90-90" target stated that by 2020, 90% of those living with HIV will know their HIV status, 90% of all people with diagnosed HIV infection will receive sustained anti-retroviral therapy and 90% of all people on such therapy will have viral suppression. The gaps in detection, initiation of drug therapy and effective viral control were to be bridged to reduce infectivity, severe morbidity and deaths from undetected and inadequately treated persons already infected

with HIV, even as prevention of new infections was targeted by SDG 3.3.

Where are we, at the end of 2019, on the road to the 2020 and 2030 targets? While much success has been achieved in the past 20 years in the global battle against AIDS, there has been a slowdown in progress which seems to place the targets out of reach. There has to be a fresh surge of high-level political commitment, financial support, health system thrust, public education, civil society engagement and advocacy by affected groups – all of which were part of the recipe for rapid progress in the early part of this century.

High and low points

It is the confluence of those ingredients that made it possible for the world to achieve a reduction in new HIV infections by 37% between 2000 and 2018. HIV-related deaths fell by 45%, with 13.6 million lives saved due to Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART). Not only were effective drugs developed to combat a disease earlier viewed as an inescapable agent of death but they also became widely available due to generic versions generously made available by Indian generic manufacturers, led by the intrepid Yusuf Hamied. A rush of public and private financing flowed forth in a world panicked by the pandemic. Ignorance and stigma were vigorously combated by coalitions of HIV-affected persons who were energetically supported by enlightened sections of civil society and the media. Never before had the world of global health resonated so readily to the rallying cry for adopting a rights-based approach and assuring access to life-saving treatments. According to a recent report by UNAIDS, of the 38 million persons now living with HIV, 24 million are receiving ART, as



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compared to only 7 million nine years ago.

Why then the concern now? At the end of 2018, while 79% of all persons identified as being infected by HIV were aware of the fact, 62% were on treatment and only 53% had achieved viral suppression – falling short of the 90-90-90 target set for 2020. Due to gaps in service provision, 770,000 HIV-affected persons died in 2018 and 1.7 million persons were newly affected. There are worryingly high rates of new infection in several parts of the world, especially among young persons. Only 19 countries are on track to reach the 2030 target. While improvements have been noted in eastern and southern Africa, central Asia and eastern Europe have had a setback, with more than 95% of the new infections in those regions occurring among the 'key populations'. Risk of acquiring HIV infection is 22 times higher in homosexual men and intravenous drug users, 21 times higher in in sex workers and 12 times more in transgender persons.

Complacency, new factors

There are several reasons for the slowdown in progress. The success achieved in the early part of this century, through a determined global thrust against the global threat, led to a complacent assumption of a conclusive victory. The expanded health agenda in the SDGs stretched the resources of national health systems, even as

global funding streams started identifying other priorities. Improved survival rates reduced the fear of what was seen earlier as dreaded death and pushed the disease out of the headlines. The information dissemination blitz that successfully elevated public awareness on HIV prevention did not continue to pass on the risk-related knowledge and strong messaging on prevention-oriented behaviours to a new generation of young persons. Vulnerability of adolescent girls to sexual exploitation by older men and domineering male behaviours inflicting HIV infection on unprotected women have been seen as factors contributing to new infections in Africa.

Even the improved survival rates in persons with HIV bring forth other health problems that demand attention. Risk factors for cardiovascular disease are high among survivors as they age, with anti-retroviral drugs increasing the risk of atherosclerosis. Other infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis can co-exist and cannot be addressed by a siloed programme. Mental health disorders are a challenge in persons who are on life-long therapy for a serious disease that requires constant monitoring and often carries stigma.

Need for vigil in India

The Indian experience has been more positive but still calls for continued vigilance and committed action. HIV-related deaths declined by 71% between 2005 and 2017. HIV infection now affects 22 out of 10,000 Indians, compared to 38 out of 10,000 in 2001-03. India has an estimated 2.14 million persons living with HIV and records 87,000 estimated new infections and 69,000 AIDS-related deaths annually. Nine States have rates higher than the national prevalence figure. Mizoram leads with

204 out of 10,000 persons affected. The total number of persons affected in India is estimated to be 21.40 lakh, with females accounting for 8.79 lakh. Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Uttarakhand showed an increase in numbers of annual new infections. The strength of India's well established National AIDS Control Programme, with a cogent combination of prevention and case management strategies, must be preserved.

Drug treatment of HIV is now well founded with an array of established and new anti-viral drugs. The success of drug treatment to prevent mother-to-child transmission, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), and male circumcision, especially among MSM population, is well-documented. Given the wide diversity of the HIV virus strains, development of a vaccine has been highly challenging but a couple of candidates are in early stage trials. However, mere technical innovations will not win the battle against HIV-AIDS. Success in our efforts to reach the 2030 target calls for resurrecting the combination of political will, professional skill and wide ranging pan-society partnerships that characterised the high tide of the global response in the early part of this century. The theme of the World AIDS day this year ("Ending the HIV/AIDS Epidemic: Community by Community) is a timely reminder that community wide coalitions are needed even as highly vulnerable sections of the community are targeted for protection in the next phase of the global response.

K. Srinath Reddy is President, Public Health Foundation of India, and author of 'Make in India: Reaching a Billion Plus'. The views expressed are personal

In telecom, time to send the right signals

The government needs to take bold action like it did in 1999; it is critical to have multiple players



ASHOK JHUNJHUNWALA

In the early 1990s, India had merely seven million telephones with a waiting time of seven to eight years to get a connection. The simple reason was that the cost of installing a landline telephone was too high and the required average revenue per user (ARPU) just to break even was ₹1,250 per month, which was too high for most Indians at that time.

Indian telecom grew at a slow pace through government budgets and subsidies. It is in this context that wireless telephony was introduced. This would bring down the capital cost, make telephones affordable in India, would be easier to install and bring in private investments for a potentially profitable business.

Rapid growth

The results have been nothing short of dramatic. The telecommunications sector has grown at a rapid pace, riding on a virtuous cycle of growing demand and increasing competition that has pushed down prices to levels not seen anywhere else in the world.

Today, the sector is at a turning point. The troubles of today are rooted in the fast-paced growth of yesterday and regulation that increased tele-density by pushing down ARPU. This drove businesses to work with a single mind focus on consumer acquisition as the base of users ballooned. It is im-

portant to take a historic look if one is to understand the imbroglia of today.

The first telecom auctions for private players were in 1995. The financial bids were unbelievably high; some international consultants proposed large licence fees without understanding Indian affordability. As the dust settled, the winners realised that the bids were economically unsustainable. Several legal ploys were used to stop the payment against bids, cases multiplied, and the telecom dream was stillborn. In 1999, when Atal Bihari Vajpayee became Prime Minister, a group of telecom academics and professionals advised him that the only way out of this imbroglia was to cancel the licence fees due to the government and introduce the "revenue share" model. He was worried that he would be accused of selling the country and causing huge "loss of revenue". But this group egged him on saying that India needed this bold step for telecom to thrive and he could do this only in his first hundred days. The Prime Minister took the bold step and licences were offered an option to switch to revenue-share instead of upfront licence fees.

This bold step got mobile telephony going. The installation cost of wireless telephony was less than one-fourth of a landline telephone. Low ARPU was no longer a big concern. By around 2003, India had around 300 million telephone lines and the urban market was saturating. Airtel, Vodafone and Idea, with their GSM mobile licence, were the leaders. The CDMA mobile licensees had grown slowly, stuck with a technology without a future and could not



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compete. Rural markets required lower tariff, but the GSM trio were happy with the urban market and resisted reduction in tariffs. The market grew at a slow pace since then.

It was around 2007 that the then government saw this imbroglia and found ways to give new GSM licences using primarily revenue-share. These newcomers, primarily Reliance Communications (RCOM) and Tata Teleservices, dropped tariffs and introduced per-second billing. Others had to follow. The market grew quickly to 900 million lines. Indian telecom was thriving. The operators were making decent money, even with lower tariffs. Till then, India was using only 2G telephony. Data and Internet was at very low speed; 3G telephony was just being introduced and operators were haggling for more 3G spectrum in 900 MHz and 1800 MHz bands. The government was periodically conducting auctions since 2010, fetching large spectrum bids.

Old versus new players

Around 2013, the Government made available some spectrum in the 2300-2500 MHz band. This was not considered suitable for 3G telephony then; 4G was in its infancy and there was some concern about technology standards and technology readiness. A new com-

pany, Reliance Jio, betted on it and won the whole spectrum pan-India through a partner company at a relatively lower price as there was little interest from established operators. Jio had to wait four years to get the technology ready and launched the 4G service late in 2016 and caught the imagination of users. It made voice calls almost free and offered good quality video on smart handsets at very low tariffs. Others did follow suit but paid higher amounts for spectrum in later auctions. Jio has been gaining market share since then. The older operators have been on the defensive, facing serious erosion in market share and profitability. RCOM and Tata Teleservices have been wiped out. Vodafone and Idea merged to just about survive. Airtel, the strongest operator two years back, continues to lose market share and profitability.

Issue of penalties

It is at this time that the revenue-sharing agreement that companies like Airtel, Idea, Vodafone and others signed in 2001 has come to haunt them. The Supreme Court ruled this October that these companies are liable to pay revenue share not just on telecom revenue but all revenues of the company – sales proceeds on handsets, renting of their towers, infrastructure sharing, and even on dividend incomes from any investment. Furthermore, they have to pay huge late-fees and penalties, totalling ₹1.3 lakh crore.

While the court has rightly interpreted the written agreement of 2001, the amounts are enormous that when paid, is likely to bankrupt these players. The industry is already saddled with debt of

₹7 lakh crore. Once again India is faced with the prospect of a telecom monopoly or duopoly. Further, except that it says so in a contract, it makes little sense to pay revenue share to the government on unrelated businesses. If the operators ever thought otherwise, they would have hived off these businesses to a sister company as many have done since then.

It is precisely in such a precarious situation, that the government needs to act, just like it did in 1999. They could offer the operators payment of principal in instalments and waive off interest and penalties. It is critical for the nation to have multiple players compete in telecom services. Besides, the time has come to relook the role of telecom in the country. The Prime Minister has rightly emphasised the role digital connectivity plays in society. If India is to reap the benefit of being fully digital, government's taxes and earnings from telecom should be limited. Today, in addition to corporate taxes, the government's telecom revenue includes Goods and Services Tax, spectrum auction, revenue share as licence fees, amounting to about 30% of customer bill. The government should not look at the telecom sector primarily as a revenue-earner. The money could be better spent by operators to improve today's average service-quality. This would help telecom reach the remotest parts of the country and the service needs to continue to be affordable.

Ashok Jhunjhunwala, a Padma Shri for his work on wireless telephony, is a Professor at IIT Madras and has advised the government on the telecom sector in the past. Through The Billion Press

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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How safe?

India is a study in contrasts – it attempts to address rising aspirations by bringing women on a par with men in terms of participation in society, the economy and political spheres. At the other end, there has hardly been any progress in making India a safe place for women. Incidents of rape and harassment are being reported every other day, bringing shame to the nation. What is worrying is growing apathy. Small steps need to be made standard across India – active policing at public places is one. There also needs to be

a better police response time. Behavioural change and gender sensitisation programmes should be conducted in schools.

ROHAN DIXIT,
New Delhi

■ The monstrous incident of the rape and murder of a young woman in Hyderabad has undoubtedly shocked the nation. Special fast track courts are essential to render speedy justice to survivors and their families. That the wheels of justice usually move slowly is obvious from the fact that those involved in the Nirbhaya case are yet to undergo extreme punishment. Measures to

help women such as imparting physical self-defence training, in all schools and colleges, need to be up immediately taken. Another idea would also be looking at arming women with mild chemical sprays which could help give them time to seek police help after immobilising their attackers.

A. MOHAN,
Chennai

Reviving Air India

While the government is on the look out for an interested buyer for Air India and new capital infusion to revive the airline has proved "ineffective, it is time that the authorities find able

managers to turn things around. People with job experience in managerial positions in private airlines must be engaged to manage the debt-stricken airline and with absolute autonomy. Air India is most often the face of India and we cannot portray a poor image of the country even before travellers land on our soil (Editorial page, "Making Air India's disinvestment work", December 2).

SOURJYA RAY,
Kolkata

In print and the reality

The article, "The fountainhead of India's economic vitality" (OpEd,

December 2), comes at a time when the economy is in a tailspin, unemployment is at a record high, and industries are struggling to survive in general, the selling of some profit-making public sector units... the list can be endless. . Whatever facts and figures the writer has provided may be good to look at in print, but the reality is that the life of the common man is stressful. Talk of a \$5-trillion economy is good to hear, but blunders

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the report titled "BJP puts up a brave face amid tribal discomfort" (Dec. 2, 2019), there was an erroneous reference to 22 ST reserved seats. It should have been 28.

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in



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