

Pakistan stares into economic abyss

By Barbara Plett
BBC News, Islamabad

The September bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad shocked Pakistanis and strengthened fears that the state was unable to stem a spreading Islamist insurgency.

But it's not just the endemic violence that has created a sense of imminent collapse in Pakistan. The country is going through its worst economic crisis in a decade, with massive trade and budget deficits, plunging foreign currency reserves and capital flight.

"It's a crisis of the money economy, and that is very serious," says economist Qaiser Bengali.

"If we are unable to meet our debt repayment, if we're unable to pay for imports, then the wheels of agriculture and industry will certainly come to a stop. Given that Pakistan imports its oil, our aircraft and lorries will not be running without oil."

Security fears

That's the worst case scenario, but for Ittehad Steel, it's already bad enough.

The factory on the edge of Islamabad employs 400 people who used to work shifts almost 24 hours a day, feeding a construction boom. But sales have slumped by 25%, it's had to cut production, and may have to lay off workers.

The company's director, Mohsin Khalid, admits Pakistan has seen economic trouble before, but says this time deteriorating security has compounded the crisis.

"Law and order, security, that's the primary reason why you see such a level of despair in overall economic, political and social circumstances," he says. "I think people are taking their investments abroad, they don't see the security situation improving."

A few kilometres down the road is one of Islamabad's main markets. People come here to do their weekly shopping. It's cheaper than elsewhere, but still shoppers feel overwhelmed by raging inflation. That together with the fear of bombs has slowed down trade.

"Because of the economic situation I've lost half my customers," says vegetable seller Abdul Aziz. "If I used to get 100 now I get 50. Plus, because of the explosions, those 50 have now been reduced to 25."

"I come here every Friday, and every Friday the prices go up," says retired veterinarian Rafiq Raja. "Last Friday we came, and today it's double now."

For the middle class, it's a hard landing after nearly a decade of growth. Economists say the boom was a bubble that's now burst, because of a rise in oil prices, the security situation and global economic uncertainty.

At the back of the market is a government store selling staple goods at subsidised prices. The middle class may be feeling the pinch, but it's the poor who are really struggling.

"I just came to buy a bag of flour - throughout this market I failed to find even a single bag of flour," says shopper Pervez Hussain. "And I was wondering, what will the people do if they will have no flour, if this new democratic government fails to provide the flour?"

Structural change

Many here acknowledge that the government inherited a mismanaged economy from its predecessor. But some accuse it of failing to provide economic leadership during its seven months in power.

"I think it's not only an economic crisis. It's a crisis of governance as well, a crisis of governance on a scale we haven't seen before," says Mohsin Khalid. "I don't think consumer or investor confidence has ever been this low in this country."

Whatever the case, the government is now in emergency mode. It's asking the world for a multi-billion dollar rescue package to help it pay for imports and restore confidence, and it's trying to reassure Pakistanis.

"Pakistan is not a public limited company that can go bankrupt," President Asif Ali Zardari said recently. "During our tenure we'll sort out the problems facing us, like the war on terror and the economic crisis. We are negotiating with the international community to help address the situation."

He was speaking at the launch of a \$400m programme of income support for the poorest.

Such measures may help Pakistan weather the storm, but Qaiser Bengali, who's in charge of the fund, admits neither it nor a bailout would resolve the crisis, because the roots of the problem are structural.

"What Pakistan has done over the last 30 years is to take money out of industry and agriculture," he says, "and instead of investing in the infrastructure for these sectors, we have invested in the military, in luxury housing, in the civil administration.

"We are like a company that invests all its revenues on improving its head office building, and paying an army of security guards, and there is no money left for spare parts and raw materials. I think that structural change will have to be made."

Changing economic priorities would be a long term strategy. But for more and more Pakistanis right now, life has become a struggle for survival with little hope for relief.

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Nosedive in Afghan-US relations

Relations between President Karzai's Afghan government and Washington are at an all-time low. As Richard Holbrooke - President Obama's envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan - prepares to make his first visit to the region since being appointed, the BBC's Ian Pannell in Kabul looks at why the relationship has soured.

Hamid Karzai has become increasingly vociferous in his criticism of American military tactics and has been making half-hearted threats to shift his allegiance to Moscow if he does not get his way.

Washington has yet to publicly declare its hand but a series of well-placed leaks, briefs and snubs have raised the prospect that it could move its support elsewhere in this year's presidential election.

One Afghan newspaper spoke of "a new cold war".

A senior Afghan government official says the new Obama administration has insulted President Karzai and one prominent MP accuses America of "running a shadow-government".

'Narco-state'

The decline in relations began with a visit last year by Joe Biden, now the vice-president, to Kabul.

At the time, as the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, he attended a private meeting with Mr Karzai.

A well-placed source describes Mr Biden, exasperated at not getting "straight answers" on drugs and corruption, launching into a verbal tirade and storming out of the meeting.

In a country where honour and decorum are second only to God and country, this was less than tactful.

On the campaign trail and more recently in confirmation hearings, senior members of President Barack Obama's team have questioned the effectiveness and honesty of Hamid Karzai's government.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's written statement to Congress during her confirmation hearing called Afghanistan a "narco-state" that was "plagued by limited capacity and widespread corruption".

She may have been wise enough not to use the phrase in her public testimony but by the time it was reported on the front page of the newspapers in Kabul, it did not really make much difference.

'Potential impediment'

Earlier in January the Nato secretary-general wrote an opinion piece about the lack of leadership in the country, laying the blame not at the feet of the Taleban but the lack of governance.

Then there was a recent article in the New York Times. Quoting anonymous "senior administration officials", it said Washington planned to take a tougher-line with Kabul and that Hamid Karzai was now regarded as "a potential impediment to American goals" in the country.

Hamid Karzai is an avid reader of the Western press and is known to be highly sensitive to criticisms they may have of him. Publicly he has not responded but he is now under considerable pressure.

His government's writ is limited to Kabul, the north and a few urban spots elsewhere in the country.

His own popularity has fallen and some whisper privately and mischievously about his "state of mind".

When asked whether the country was heading towards a crisis, one senior political figure responded that the country was already in one.

Old Afghan hand

President Karzai has been holding a series of meetings with former Mujahedeen commanders in the past few weeks amid suggestions that he is trying to align the country with Russia.

That has certainly been his public stance. As well as a deliberately leaked "letter of understanding" with Moscow, President Karzai publicly warned America that unless it supplied the military hardware he wanted, he would look to other countries for support.

No-one was in a moment's doubt who this meant. The Russian ambassador, Zamir Kabulov, an old Afghan hand, was seen strutting around parliament last week.

He has warned that the US and Nato are repeating the same mistakes of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. As he was posted to the Soviet Embassy at the time, his opinion is worth considering.

Now President Karzai has sent a document to Nato outlining new "rules of engagement". If implemented they would substantially alter the mandate for foreign forces in the country.

It seems inconceivable that there could be a real and lasting schism between Kabul and Washington. It will be the job of Richard Holbrooke, the US Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, to ensure that does not happen.

But the date has been set for Afghanistan's presidential election and the West's disappointment with Hamid Karzai can no longer be disguised.

A number of challengers are jostling for American support and in the current climate, their chances are starting to improve.

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Pakistan nuclear scientist 'free'

A court in Pakistan has freed disgraced nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan from house arrest.

Mr Khan, who has been under tight restrictions since 2004, can now leave home and receive visitors.

He must give 48 hours' notice if he wants to leave Islamabad but said on Friday he had no plans to go abroad.

Mr Khan admitted transferring nuclear secrets to other countries in 2004 but was later pardoned by former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

The US has repeatedly said it wants to question Mr Khan but Pakistan has always refused access.

'Free citizen'

"I am answerable only to my government," a jubilant AQ Khan told journalists shortly after the court order was announced.

But he said he had no plans to join politics or go abroad.

Mr Khan, the former head of Pakistan's nuclear programme, said he would use his freedom to concentrate on educational projects.

His wife said she would wait to see how and whether the court's judgement was executed.

Mr Khan's lawyer, Iqbal Jaffry earlier told the media: "The high court has declared him a free citizen. He will have all rights available to people under the constitution and the Koran."

Over the past year, the government has eased some of the restrictions on Mr Khan. It says those that remain are for his own security.

The BBC's Barbara Plett in Islamabad says that despite Friday's ruling Mr Khan's proliferation activities still arouse international concern, although Pakistan regards the case as closed.

Nuclear 'father'

In January, the US imposed sanctions on people and companies linked to Mr Khan.

Last July, Mr Khan told the media that Pakistan had transported uranium enrichment equipment to North Korea in 2000 with the full knowledge of the country's army, then headed by Gen Musharraf.

The former leader has repeatedly stated that no-one apart from Mr Khan had any knowledge of the transportation of nuclear technology.

Mr Khan is seen as the father of Pakistan's nuclear industry and is still regarded a hero by many in the country.

But despite the court ruling, Dr Khan's proliferation activities still arouse international concern, says the BBC's Barbara Plett in Islamabad.

Last year, a UN nuclear watchdog said Dr Khan's network had smuggled blueprints of nuclear weapons

to Iran, Libya and North Korea.

Pakistan regards the case as closed - it says it has cooperated with international investigators, although it has refused continued requests to let Dr Khan speak directly to them, our correspondent adds.

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Pakistan's spreading Taleban war

By Damian Grammaticas
BBC News, Peshawar

There are growing fears in Pakistan that the war against the Taleban is widening.

Pakistan's army is opening up new fronts against the militants, who are responding by spreading the conflict, destabilising even the city of Peshawar in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).

Deep in Pakistan's frontier a war is raging.

Pakistan's army is on the offensive, pushing into the tribal agencies of Bajaur and now Mohmand, fighting a slow, hard battle against Taleban fighters.

Bit by bit, and at huge cost, territory is being seized back.

With tanks, artillery and airstrikes, the army is trying to clear villages, towns and roads of militants, attempting to drive the Taleban from the sanctuaries they have occupied.

Once each village or town is taken, bulldozers move in, flattening houses so the Taleban cannot sneak back and occupy them again.

Across the tribal areas that border Afghanistan, unmanned US aircraft have also stepped up their activity in recent weeks, launching missile strikes every few days against al-Qaeda targets.

The war against the Taleban has come to Pakistan's tribal districts and the consequences are being felt across NWFP.

Standing among the ruins of the town of Loi Sam, Pakistan's chief army spokesman Maj-Gen Athar Abbas, told the BBC last month that its capture had put the militants "at a great disadvantage and had broken their back".

Battered the Taleban may be, but they are retaliating.

Under pressure from the Pakistani offensives and the American missile strikes they are being forced further inland, resulting in the conflict ballooning and spreading to new areas.

First they have struck back near the Khyber Pass, hijacking and burning trucks driving towards the Afghan border.

The vehicles they have been targeting are trucks carrying supplies meant for Nato forces in Afghanistan and the Afghan army.

In the most brazen attack a fortnight ago, Humvee armoured cars destined for Afghanistan were seized.

The Taleban filmed themselves triumphantly driving off with their booty of Nato vehicles.

The alliance's supplies heading for the border were suspended while security was stepped up, and the convoys have only recently restarted.

Just a few kilometres from the tribal areas our BBC team, including cameraman Paul Francis and producer Peter Leng, discovered Nato equipment stacked up in guarded compounds.

It all now needs a military escort to reach the border.

There were Humvees piled on trailers and huge armoured trucks lined up and hidden under tarpaulins. All is vital equipment that has now been held up.

Ransom

Almost 75% of all supplies for Nato forces in Afghanistan come through Pakistan, the majority through Peshawar. That means that Nato's most important supply route is under threat.

One trucker, Haji Haghaley, showed me his vehicle. It was riddled with holes made by Taliban bullets a few days ago.

Haji Haghaley says three Taliban fired from the side of the road and he drove as fast as he could.

Other drivers we met taking a break at a roadside tea stall have had similar escapes. One, too afraid to talk openly, said his cousin was attacked last week.

"He was carrying US army trucks, and the Taliban stopped him," the man told me. "The Taliban burnt his truck. They took my cousin. They demanded 10 lakh rupees in ransom (\$11,500), but then lowered it to 35,000 rupees (\$400)."

Also under threat is the NWFP capital, Peshawar.

The war is pushing the Taliban deeper into Pakistan. So Peshawar is now on edge. Westerners have fled, there are none to be seen.

In recent weeks there have been a spate of attacks targeting foreigners.

An American diplomat escaped an assassination attempt because her armoured car protected her, but a US aid worker was killed in a second attack.

'Better equipment'

Iranian and Afghan diplomats have been kidnapped and foreign journalists injured in shootings.

The police have stepped up security in the city, there are new checkpoints, more armed patrols. But Peshawar's police say they are outgunned and ill-equipped for the fight on their hands.

"The militants I think have far better equipment, they have rocket-propelled guns and we have none," Ins Gen Malik Naveed Khan, the head of police for NWFP, told me.

"We have no helicopters, no aerial mobility, in transport we are 50% down on peacetime requirements and presently we are at war," he said.

As for the Taliban's tactics, Ins Gen Khan says they are clear.

"They would like to destabilise the city centres so they can put pressure on the government to get concessions in the tribal areas," he says.

"And they want to open up more fronts for us to dilute the effect of the law enforcement agencies.

"Their agenda is to cause problems for the government to check its commitment and resolve in the war against terror."

On the edge of Peshawar we watched as police searched vehicles entering the city.

There were just a handful of officers, armed only with machine guns, no sand-bagged positions, no heavy weapons, no armoured vehicles.

Beyond the checkpoint lay the tribal areas, the realm of the Taleban.

The few police officers and their light weapons were all that was protecting the outskirts of Peshawar, keeping the Taleban at bay.

Deeper in the tribal lands Pakistan's army is opening up new fronts. Now it's fighting in Mohmand, closer to Peshawar.

The war will probably spread much further too. But just as Nato has found in Afghanistan, the Pakistani security forces are now discovering too that the Taleban is a foe that is hard to corner, even harder to defeat.

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Shifting strategies on Afghan border

By Barbara Plett
BBC News, Islamabad

The apparent contradiction in Pakistani and American military strategies along the Afghan border is becoming difficult to ignore.

Last week in Islamabad the prime minister told parliament that unilateral US air strikes on militant targets inside Pakistan had become intolerable and the army chief of staff, on a visit to Brussels, urged Nato to stop them.

At the same time a series of US military officers claimed that co-operation between the two armies was improving and, in fact, had been taken to the "next level" of co-ordination and intelligence sharing.

So which statement is right? Probably both.

Fleeing insurgents

The two armies are working together closely on a section of the border that divides the Afghan province of Kunar and the Pakistani tribal area of Bajaur.

Pakistan launched a serious and sustained operation there after its forces were besieged by local Taliban militants supported by foreign fighters from Afghanistan.

The Americans say this is having a significant impact in curbing cross-border militancy, and have moved to block the escape of fleeing insurgents.

"We are doing things today on the ground (in co-ordination with Pakistani forces) that we weren't even talking about five or six months ago," the commander of American troops in Afghanistan, Gen David McKiernan, said recently.

Pakistani commanders express similar sentiments.

"I've seen an improvement where I'm operating," agrees the officer in charge of the Bajaur operation, Maj Gen Tariq Khan.

"We've set up a system in which we're in some kind of regular touch. We've seen practical on-ground adjustments (by the Americans and Afghans) in relevance to our operations."

Yet a series of US air strikes against militant targets in another part of Pakistan's border region - the tribal areas of South and North Waziristan - continues unabated despite strong Pakistani protests that this is stoking rage among tribesmen and undermining public support for its own counter-insurgency efforts.

Here the Americans insist they are eliminating senior militants linked to the Taliban and specially al-Qaeda. The new chief of the US Central Command, Gen David Petraeus, is reported to have claimed that at least three extremist leaders were killed in recent months.

"We are helping you by hitting your bad guys," he told Pakistani officials on a recent visit to Islamabad, according to the local Dawn newspaper.

Conflict of interest

American media says that privately the Pakistani government has actually given tacit approval for the attacks, but continues to denounce them publicly to save face.

This is something officials here have denied.

Whatever the case with the political authorities, other sources say at least for the army there is a real conflict of interest because, in its eyes, the militants being hit by US missiles are not Pakistan's "bad guys".

Security officials here complain that despite their encouragement the US has failed to target the Pakistani Taleban commander who is fighting the Pakistan army and blamed for most of the suicide bombings in the country, Baitullah Mehsud.

Instead, American air strikes overwhelmingly hit the territory of local Taleban leaders who have ceasefires with Pakistan's military, but still send fighters to attack Nato in Afghanistan.

Recently, these commanders - Mullah Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur - have blamed the Pakistani government for complicity in the US attacks and threatened retaliation, feeding fears of upsetting the army's precarious policy of divide and rule among the different Taleban factions in the border region.

"We don't have the capacity and capability to deal with all the Taleban groups at once," said a military official. "If you go for all out confrontation, you lose whatever control you have."

The Americans are particularly concerned about the Afghan Taleban commander Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son, Sirajuddin, who are said to be based in North Waziristan.

Trust deficit

The US blames the Haqqani network for much of the violence in south-eastern Afghanistan, as well as the attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul last July.

"Haqqanis are for us what Baitullahs are for you," Dawn quoted Gen Petraeus as saying to Pakistani commanders.

Other US officials suspect that Pakistan's army and main intelligence service, the ISI, not only refuses to go after the Afghan Taleban, but actively supports them.

These American suspicions have created a trust deficit between the two nations.

But there are reasons why the Pakistani military does not pursue the Afghan Taleban the way the US would like it to, says an informed observer speaking off the record.

"The ISI does have links with the Afghan Taleban because it wants to use them as a bargaining chip in Afghanistan," he says.

"The Pakistani army wants to have a bigger say in whatever new regional dispensation America is planning. And the view within the army and the ISI is that if the Afghan Taleban is abandoned, this will strengthen the Afghan government, as well as India in Afghanistan, at Pakistan's expense."

Military training

There is no question the army is worried about India's increasing influence in Afghanistan.

Delhi has made major investments, including a motorway that links Afghanistan's road system to the Iranian border and will eventually give access to Iranian ports on the Iranian Gulf, potentially marginalising Pakistan's new sea port of Gwadar.

It has also offered to help train the Afghan military and has reopened consulates near Pakistan's border.

And it has close ties with an Afghan government dominated by the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taleban grouping hostile to Pakistan.

"The more I talk to the establishment, the more I'm convinced that hatred and fear of India has increased," says a Pakistani analyst, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

"It's a major driver. And now [the fear is] India together with America."

With the United States supporting India as the dominant regional power, as well as bombing Pakistan's tribal areas, many military officials here are convinced that Washington is colluding with India and Afghanistan to weaken and perhaps dismember the world's only Muslim nuclear power.

This may sound like paranoia, but long time observers of the military maintain that it is prone to conspiracy theories.

However, it does not help that 60 years after its establishment, Pakistan's borders are still in dispute: with India in the east over the Himalayan territory of Kashmir; and with Afghanistan in the west where no Afghan government has ever recognised as legitimate the British-drawn Durand Line that separates it from Pakistan.

Given these festering disputes, the Pakistani army is expected to continue using the cards it has to push for what it sees as its interests in Afghanistan.

And one of these cards, it seems, is the Afghan Taleban - viewed by many in the military establishment as at least a non-hostile force in a country where there is no shortage of other enemies.

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Taleban bring new fear to Peshawar

By M Ilyas Khan
BBC News, Islamabad

The city of Peshawar in north-west Pakistan faces a heightened threat from Islamist militants barely five months after a military operation cleared them from its outskirts.

Back in July, suspected militants based in the tribal region surrounding the city started bombing music stores and warning barbers against shaving their clients' beards in several areas of the city's outskirts.

They also picked up some prostitutes from the city to punish them for their "sins", and kidnapped more than a dozen members of the minority Christian community.

The perpetrators were widely believed to be criminal gangs connected to the tribal underworlds operating out of Darra Adamkhel and Khyber tribal regions - both lying just outside the administrative boundaries of Peshawar.

Different threat

The authorities at that time tried to explain the activities of these groups as an attempt to take advantage of an increasingly demoralised police force.

A month-long operation by the security forces followed, pushing the militants deep inside the tribal region and dismantling their headquarters there.

The nature of threat has since changed.

Since Tuesday, the militants have struck in the city three times.

First, a suicide bomber narrowly missed the governor and some ministers of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) as they were leaving a stadium in Peshawar after the closing ceremony of national games.

At least three people were killed in the attack.

On Wednesday, unidentified gunmen shot dead a US national who was working for a USAid-run project for the development of the Taleban-occupied tribal areas.

They have now kidnapped a Peshawar-based Iranian diplomat after killing his bodyguard.

Attacks on American, Afghan and Chinese nationals have taken place before, but this is the first time that suspected militants have kidnapped the diplomat of a country which, like them, is professedly anti-American.

'Guerrilla tactics'

Many point out, however, that the puritanical Sunni Taleban are ideologically opposed to Shia Muslims, and consider them a legitimate target.

Iran is a Shia Muslim state.

This sequence of events has sent a shockwave through the city, with many people fearing that the

security system of the government is collapsing.

But the NWFP Information Minister, Mian Iftikhar Hussain, has another explanation.

"The militants are resorting to guerrilla tactics and it doesn't mean that our security is lax," he told the media after the kidnapping of the Iranian diplomat.

"We expect these incidents to increase in coming days, because the militants are responding to the military operations we are conducting against them in some of their strongholds," he warned.

The Pakistani military says it has killed dozens of militants in Bajaur and Swat regions where security operations have gone on for several months now.

A number of foreign nationals have been killed or kidnapped in north-western Pakistan in the past four years.

In 2004, a militant group in South Waziristan region kidnapped several Chinese engineers working on a dam project in the area. They were freed in a subsequent army operation.

There have also been several attacks on high-profile individuals in the north-west since August, when gunmen in Peshawar tried to kill a top US diplomat, Lynne Tracy.

She was saved because she was travelling in a bullet-proof vehicle.

Since September, at least three Afghan officials are believed to have been kidnapped by suspected Taliban members, including Abdul Khaliq Farahi, the Afghan consul-general in Peshawar.

None of them has been recovered so far.

An Afghan foreign ministry official, Ahmad Baheen, told Pakistani journalists in Peshawar in October that while the Pakistani government was taking an interest in the recovery of Mr Farahi, "it is important that certain other Pakistani institutions also extend help in this regard".

Afghan officials have long blamed the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI, for helping and funding the Taliban to destabilise Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, militants based in Darra Adamkhel claim they are holding a Polish engineer who went missing from the Attock area of Punjab province some months ago.

One of two Chinese engineers kidnapped from Dir district in late August also remains missing. The other escaped from his captors in October. He was one of the lucky ones.

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Banned Pakistan militants gather

Militant groups, some of them banned by Pakistan, have met publicly in Pakistan-administered Kashmir for the first time since Mumbai.

An alliance of 12 groups attended the meeting in Muzaffarabad, capital of Pakistani-administered Kashmir.

They called on the Pakistani government to release imprisoned activists.

India has accused the Lashkar-e-Taiba group of being behind the Mumbai attack and has demanded that some of its leaders be extradited to Delhi.

More than 170 people died when 10 gunmen attacked India's financial capital in November.

India has also accused some "state elements" in Pakistan of involvement. Islamabad and Lashkar-e-Taiba deny the allegations.

Armed struggle

The BBC's Zulfiqar Ali in Muzaffarabad says that the authorities made no effort to stop the meeting, despite the ban on some of the groups taking part.

Among those attending were representatives of leading Pakistani militant groups including Jaish-e-Mohammad, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and Jamat-ud-dawa, a charity linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba.

The conference called on the ban on Jamat-ud-dawa to be lifted.

Our correspondent says that the only security at the conference was a line of policemen who surrounded the venue.

The 12 groups who attended the conference called on the Pakistani government to release about 150 Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamaat-ud-Dawa activists who were arrested by Pakistan after the Mumbai attacks.

Some of them also agreed on a motion which said that armed struggle was the only way to bring about a successful conclusion to the Kashmir conflict.

They also accused the Pakistani government of continuing "the failed and cowardly policies of former President [Pervez] Musharraf" in relation to the Kashmir dispute.

The meeting was organised by the United Jihad Council - an alliance of Kashmiri groups fighting Indian forces in Kashmir.

Pakistan and India have fought two of their three wars over the divided region.

There has so far been no response from India to the meeting.

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UN to launch Bhutto probe 'soon'

UN chief Ban Ki-moon has said he will launch "very shortly" an independent inquiry into the killing of Pakistani ex-Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

Mr Ban made the comments came after talks with senior Pakistani officials.

Ms Bhutto was killed in a suicide attack on a rally in 2007. Her death triggered riots across the country.

Islamabad's current government has rejected official Pakistani reports on the killing, and called for a wider inquiry by the UN.

Five people have been arrested in connection with the killing, but no-one has been convicted.

After talks in Islamabad, Mr Ban said: "I intend to establish very shortly an independent commission of inquiry headed by a very distinguished person, whom I'm going to nominate in a very short period of time."

"I have been in consultation with the government of Pakistan on its request for the establishment of a commission of inquiry on the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

"This is a crime that shocked and offended the world, and I know this is a matter of great importance to the government and people of Pakistan," Mr Ban said.

The Pakistani government - dominated by Ms Bhutto's PPP party - and US officials have accused tribal warlord Baitullah Mehsud of plotting the attack on Ms Bhutto, although he denies the allegation.

In December, a spokesman for Mr Ban said that the UN leader was optimistic that a commission into her killing could be established, but more consultations with Pakistan were needed to examine its "scope and mandate".

Mr Ban's visit to Pakistan is his first since taking office in 2007.

His trip comes amid growing unrest in Pakistan's border areas, with Taleban rebels attacking Nato supply routes into Afghanistan while government forces engage the Taleban in the Swat valley of North West Frontier Province.

'Safe release'

Officials earlier said that in Pakistan Mr Ban was also expected to discuss last year's attacks on the Indian city of Mumbai (Bombay) which left more than 170 people dead.

Also on the agenda was the kidnapping of a UN official in the province of Balochistan on Monday.

Mr Ban has called for the "immediate and safe release" of John Solecki, the head of the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) in the city of Quetta, who was snatched at gunpoint after his driver was killed.

Mr Ban began his regional visit earlier in the day in Afghanistan, where he said the country would be a priority for the UN in 2009.

After Pakistan, he will visit India.

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US 'distrust' worries Musharraf

By Asif Farooqi
BBC Urdu service, Islamabad

Former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has said there is a "serious lack of trust" among the new US leadership for the South Asian nation.

In only his second interview since resigning, he also said there was great concern over the country's inability to fight extremism on its borders.

Mr Musharraf was Pakistan's ruler when it joined the "war on terror" in 2001.

He came to power in 1999 after staging a coup as head of Pakistan's army. He resigned in 2008.

Mr Musharraf did so after his allies lost heavily in national elections following a campaign against his rule.

'No change'

"A change in policy is dependent upon a change in the situation on the ground, not by a change in faces", Mr Musharraf said in the interview conducted by the BBC Urdu service in the garrison city of Rawalpindi.

"The fact remains that there has been no change in the overall situation in Pakistan and the tribal areas over the recent past."

Mr Musharraf was speaking at the residence of the chief of Pakistan's army, a post he vacated last year.

The former president had just returned from a trip to the US, where he met several senior US leaders.

According to him, Pakistan's new government had been unable to establish a strong relationship with the new US administration.

"This should be a matter of great concern for Pakistan," he said.

He emphasised that despite expectations in Pakistan, US policies in the region would not undergo any serious changes.

On a personal note, he said he was enjoying his retirement and had been invited to give lectures on Pakistan and the South Asian region from around the world.

He said the first invitation he had accepted was from India, where he expected to speak at a conference in Delhi next month.

Mr Musharraf said he had done a lot of research on the problems of governance in developing countries and intended to share his experiences.

He also said he wanted to counter the suspicions and misunderstandings being spread about Pakistan and its institutions.

Since resigning from office last year, Mr Musharraf has mostly chosen to stay out of the limelight despite a great deal of interest in his views.

He stepped down after striking a deal with Pakistan's current government which, some analysts say, still fears his continued role in the country's affairs.

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Sri Lanka rejects dialogue appeal

The Sri Lankan government has rejected a call by international donors for Tamil Tiger rebels to negotiate terms of surrender with the government.

Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa told the BBC that the government would accept only "unconditional surrender".

The US-led donors have urged the Tigers to consider laying down their arms to avoid further bloodshed after a series of major defeats on the battlefield.

Fears are rising for tens of thousands of civilians trapped by the fighting.

Meanwhile officials say the army has captured the last known rebel naval base in the north-east of the island.

'Suicide attacks'

Mr Rajapaksa told the BBC: "There is no question of negotiations on surrender. The rebels should surrender unconditionally. They should lay down their arms first."

He ruled out any amnesty for top rebel leaders, but said that "lower level cadres" would be "given amnesty, retrained, given vocational training and integrated into mainstream society".

Mr Rajapakse also rejected US-led calls for a ceasefire, saying that the rebels had used ceasefire time "only to regroup and attack security forces".

"When the government declared a 48-hour ceasefire period last week, the rebels used the period to launch suicide attacks near the frontlines using three trucks loaded with explosives," he said.

There has been no word yet on the latest developments from the rebels, who are boxed in by troops in a shrinking piece of territory in the north-east.

However the pro-rebel TamilNet website on Thursday again accused the army of shelling a hospital following similar claims throughout the week.

Meanwhile army spokesman Brig Udaya Nanayakkara said troops had captured "the last major Tamil Tiger naval base on the eastern coast".

He said that at least 15 rebels, including three senior commanders, had been killed in the fight for the Chalai base on Wednesday.

There is no independent confirmation of the claim as independent journalists are not able to reach the front lines.

The military has already made it clear it is in charge of the seas, following the last major clash between the two sides last month in which the navy said four rebel boats were sunk in the north-east.

It says that its control has been strengthened as rebel territory diminishes and the length of coastline they control is reduced to about 30km (18.7 miles).

Yet despite these reported setbacks, pro-rebel websites have also been critical of the suggestion the Tigers consider laying down their weapons.

Both sides have been urged to declare a ceasefire to allow casualties to be evacuated from the war zone in the north-east. Up to 250,000 civilians may be trapped.

The government says more than 1,500 people have crossed from rebel-held areas to government-held territory in the past four days.

The Tigers have said they will not lay down their arms until they have a "guarantee of living with freedom and dignity and sovereignty".

Meanwhile, heavy fighting between the government forces and soldiers is continuing in the north-east of the country, says the BBC's Anbarasan Ethirajan in Colombo.

A military spokesman said the army had beaten back counter attacks by the rebels in the Mullaitivu area.

On Wednesday, the United Nations said that 52 civilians had been killed in 24 hours of fighting.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa has said the rebels' defeat is imminent.

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Sri Lanka army 'closes rebels in'

The Sri Lankan army is closing in on remaining Tamil Tiger positions, confining them to an area of about 200 sq km (124 sq miles), officials say.

Troops are near Puthukudiyiruppu village, which officials describe as the last major rebel position.

State media say 2,500 civilians managed to flee the conflict zone recently.

The Red Cross, which says scores of civilians have died in the fighting, reported on Friday that its Colombo offices had been stoned by protesters.

UN chief's call

The BBC's Ethirajan Anbarasan says that if the army captures Puthukudiyiruppu, the rebels will be confined only to small villages, coastal areas and jungles, where close-quarter fighting will be intense.

Senior Tiger leaders have not commented on the latest military claims. The UN says it now has no communication links with them.

However the pro-rebel TamilNet website again accused the army of shelling a hospital. It released photos of dead people at Puthukudiyiruppu hospital, which it said came under fire on Wednesday and Thursday.

Independent journalists are prevented by the government from travelling to war-hit areas, so there is no way of getting independent corroboration of either side's claims.

Aid agencies and the UN continue to remain concerned about the plight of thousands of civilians who it is feared are trapped between the two sides.

The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation said that more than 2,500 civilians have recently managed to flee the diminishing area the rebels still control and another 3,000 were "waiting to come over."

A government spokesman said that UN chief Ban Ki-moon has telephoned President Mahinda Rajapakse to discuss the plight of the non-combatants. It said he was given an "assurance" they would not be harassed.

On Friday the International Committee of the Red Cross said its main office in the capital was stoned by around 200 protesters who accused it of supporting the rebels.

A spokesperson said: "A group of people came and shouted slogans and then started pelting stones at our office around noon.

"A few windows were damaged, but there were no injuries to our staff... We are really concerned about this."

Correspondents say that attacks on aid agency premises in Colombo over the last decade have not been uncommon.

Exhibition

On Thursday, the Sri Lankan army said that troops had captured a large quantity of automatic rifles, detonators and hand grenades from three rebel camps in the district of Mullaittivu.

The army says that one of the camps belonged to the "Ratha unit" which provided security to rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The military also said on Thursday that it had captured the last major rebel naval base in the north-east. It said that the deputy leader of the rebel Sea Tigers unit was among the senior commanders killed in the fighting.

Correspondents say that the fall of the Chalai base means that the Tigers now only have access to 20km (12 miles) of coastline in the north-east.

The government earlier insisted there would be no ceasefire with the rebels, despite international calls for talks.

"There is no question of negotiations on surrender. The rebels should surrender unconditionally. They should lay down their arms first," Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa said.

He rejected any amnesty for top rebel leaders, but said that "lower level cadres" would be "given amnesty, retrained, given vocational training and integrated into mainstream society".

Meanwhile the government has opened an exhibition in Colombo showcasing materials, weapons and photos it says have been recently captured from the rebels.

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S Lanka army in ghost 'Tiger' town

By Chris Morris
BBC News, Mullaitivu

Heavy monsoon rains were falling as we approached the outskirts of Mullaitivu in a Sri Lankan armoured personnel carrier.

"We had to fight here for one week or so," said Colonel Arun Aryasinghe, as he showed us a huge earthen defence line constructed by the Tamil Tigers. "It was a very hard battle."

Mullaitivu used to be one of the Tigers' most important bases. Now the Sri Lankan flag flies overhead, and government troops are in complete control.

But they have inherited a ghost town, full of broken buildings. Apart from men in uniform, a stray dog wandering through a burnt-out shop was one of the only signs of life.

When the Tamil Tigers were forced out, they took Mullaitivu's civilian population with them into the surrounding jungles.

Guerrilla tactics

For almost a year, as Sri Lankan troops have advanced from the south, the story has been the same. They have taken territory, boosted by better weapons and weight of numbers.

But the local population has melted away in front of them.

Why has the army suddenly had such striking military success?

It is partly because they have taken on the Tigers at their own game - guerrilla warfare.

They have deployed small teams of fighters deep in the jungle, and sent out highly manoeuvrable boats to take on the Tigers' fledgling navy.

Now the rebels have their backs to the wall, holding a shrinking but still significant piece of land. Estimates of their remaining strength vary, but they are unlikely to go down without a fight.

Some of the fighting is pretty close to Mullaitivu. The sound of shell fire echoes through the empty streets.

Just to the north is the final stretch of Sri Lankan coastline under rebel control. If - and they will say when - government forces reclaim it, the Tigers will be surrounded and cut off from the sea.

'Exaggerated' numbers

International aid agencies say a quarter-of-a-million civilians are already trapped in the war zone, and hundreds of people have been killed and injured. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has spoken of a major humanitarian crisis.

But the man running this war, Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, told me that the numbers were exaggerated.

"It's wrong information," he said, "it is all propaganda. I'm not saying the Red Cross is lying but they are

exaggerating."

People who have been into rebel-held territory paint a very different picture, of traumatised civilians moving from place to place with little shelter and no security.

A United Nations spokesman told me that UN staff had seen dozens of people killed by shell fire.

But with his troops patrolling the streets of Mullaitivu, and other towns which had previously been under rebel control, Gotabaya Rajapaksa is scenting victory.

The defence secretary categorically ruled out the prospect of any kind of ceasefire for humanitarian reasons.

"No ceasefire," he said. "Why should we?"

"Every time there is a ceasefire, the LTTE [Tamil Tigers] use that to their own advantage. That's why this war has been dragging on for 30 years."

And his aim now?

"The mission is... eradicating terrorism and destroying the LTTE completely."

But once again - away from the eyes of the world - it is the civilians of northern Sri Lanka who are suffering.

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Winning war and peace in Sri Lanka

By Ethirajan Anbarasan
BBC News, Colombo

The fall of the last major rebel-held town of Mullaitivu in north-eastern Sri Lanka has further raised questions over the ability of Tamil Tiger rebels to withstand the current Sri Lankan military offensive in the coming weeks.

Since the beginning of January, the rebels have lost their de facto capital, Kilinochchi, Elephant Pass, a land bridge that links the Jaffna peninsula with the mainland and recently the coastal town of Mullaitivu, which acted as one of their key military bases.

Now the rebels or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will be confined to smaller towns, villages and in the jungles in the north-eastern region.

After having attained unprecedented success in its fight against the rebels, the Sri Lankan military is unlikely to give them any breathing space.

The military says it has now cornered the rebels on all three sides and the rebel-held area is fast shrinking.

Supply route

The army says the rebels are now holding less than 400 sq km of territory. The Tamil Tigers still control about 30km of coastline.

The Sri Lankan navy has deployed its naval vessels along the north-eastern coast to prevent the rebels from escaping by sea.

Mullaitivu was not only the last major rebel-held town in the north-east but also acted a crucial military supply base.

"The LTTE's main supply route, especially military equipment and hardware, were supplied through Mullaitivu," Dharmalingam Siddharthan, a former Tamil militant turned politician, told the BBC.

Sri Lanka's government is confident of victory in the war, which began a quarter of a century ago. Some officials have predicted the army will completely recapture the north from the Tamil Tigers in the coming weeks.

So, why are the Sri Lankan forces winning now?

The political leadership is strongly backing the military, which has nearly doubled its numbers in recent years. The government has also increased the firepower of security forces by buying new arms from Pakistan and China.

In addition to this, the army has changed its tactics and become better able to cope with the kind of warfare waged by the guerrillas. It also started to stretch them thin by opening up a number of fronts in the north.

However, many military analysts believe that the army may need thousands of additional soldiers to hold on to the territory it had recaptured from the rebels in the long-run.

The Tigers have shown resilience in the past and with most of their heavy weapons and cadres intact,

they may spring a surprise. Even if the rebels lose control of other smaller towns and villages in the remaining areas, they may revert back to guerrilla warfare.

Now, the key question is what has happened to the Tigers' leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

Sri Lankan officials think he may have fled the country.

But speaking to the BBC Sinhala service, senior rebel leader B Nadesan said it was nothing but malicious propaganda and their leader was very much within the north-east leading the movement.

He also shrugged off recent military setbacks saying "in the past we have withdrawn many times and bounced back to achieve big victories".

Many Tamils here warn that the capture of territory from the rebels alone will not end the ethnic conflict and that they need a political solution for a lasting peace.

"Everything depends on the government. If it fails to devolve powers to the Tamil-dominated north and east after sometime the same problem will come up again," warns Mr Siddharthan.

But the Sri Lankan government says it is working on a political solution and it requires time to evolve a consensus among political parties in the south.

"The political solution is evolving as we watch in Eastern province. We've had elections and had a chief minister, who's a Tamil and a former child soldier being elected to office. This is part of the political process," says Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohonna.

"If anybody were to expect the revelation of a political solution in one morning it is not going to happen like that. It will happen slowly. It will be an evolution rather than a sudden declaration," says Dr Kohonna.

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Is the end near for Sri Lanka's rebels?

By Alastair Lawson
BBC News

The Sri Lankan army's capture of Elephant Pass, the strategic causeway linking the Jaffna peninsula with the mainland, is arguably one of the military's greatest successes over the past two decades of war.

It follows last week's fall of the town of Kilinochchi - the rebel's political and administrative centre - providing the government with two significant military and strategic breakthroughs within a fortnight.

It can also bask in the propaganda value of the army's latest advance. Elephant Pass has already been described by those close to the government as "symbolic of the unity that exists between the north and the south of our country".

The army can now re-supply its troops in the north by land instead of carrying out expensive and sometimes dangerous air and sea operations to avoid rebel territory.

Ruthless

On the face of it, President Mahindra Rajapaksa has fulfilled his election promise to defeat the Tamil Tigers and end their military campaign for a separate homeland in the north and east of the country for good.

But dig a little deeper and the matters become much more complicated.

Although the Tamil Tigers are unquestionably on the back foot, it would be dangerous to discount them as a spent force. They have proved time and time again over the past 20 years that they are a disciplined, organised and at times ruthless guerrilla outfit.

"The rebels began their separatist campaign in the late 1970s as a separatist guerrilla group so defeat on the battleground means that in many respects they are returning to their roots," says Saroj Pathirana of the BBC Sinhala service.

"But that still does not mask the fact that the Tamil Tigers have probably come to their lowest point since the war began, and given recent military advances it must now only be a question of time before their last remaining stronghold - the eastern town of Mullaitivu - also falls."

Most analysts agree that Mullaitivu may prove a harder nut to crack because the town and the area immediately surrounding it are long thought to have been the centre of the rebels' military power.

It is estimated that the rebels have between 1,500 to 3,000 armed personnel still prepared to fight and that there are around 300,000 civilians in the Mullaitivu area.

But assuming it does fall - and few doubt that it will - what then will be the next step of the Tamil Tiger leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, who has run his organisation over the years with a vice-like grip?

Guerrilla war

Some argue that he may choose to flee to India. But that would have to be under cover because he is wanted by the Indian authorities for his role in the murder of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi while election campaigning in 1991.

Another option would be for him to remain hiding in the thick jungle of northern Sri Lanka - but that too would be risky as the Sri Lankan military presence grows stronger in the area.

A third possibility is the rebel leader re-starting a guerrilla war in the south as well as the north. Whatever option he chooses, it is unlikely that Mr Prabhakaran - who advises his cadres to swallow cyanide capsules if they are captured - will be taken alive.

Even if Mr Prabhakaran is taken out of the equation, demands for a separate Tamil state are unlikely to go with him. Over the years the Tamil diaspora in the US, Europe and Asia has provided large amounts of cash for the cause - and that money supply cannot be expected to dry up over night.

While President Rajapaksa celebrates it is not clear whether all his countrymen are equally elated. When news of Elephant Pass falling was announced in Colombo on Friday, there was mixed public reaction in contrast to the fire crackers and dancing on the streets that greeted the capture of Kilinochchi.

Ransacked

Interspersed between the military gains were two events that upset many Sri Lankans, especially those who support the opposition United National Party.

On Thursday, the editor of the Sunday Leader newspaper, Lasantha Wickramatunga, was shot dead in Colombo.

Mr Wickramatunga was one of the country's most well-known journalists - a prominent critic of the government and sympathetic towards the opposition.

Human rights groups said that his death was a hammer blow for press freedom in the country, with some even arguing that the president himself must bear some responsibility because he and his associates "incited hatred" against the editor and "allowed an outrageous level of impunity to develop as regards violence against the media".

And just days before Mr Wickramatunga's murder, gunmen armed with grenades ransacked offices of the largest private TV broadcaster in the country.

"All this has created a climate of fear in Sri Lanka which many people feel has darkened the success of the military in the battlefield. Some people feel that anyone who questions the government's actions are automatically rebel-sympathisers and enemies of the state," says Saroj Pathirana.

While President Rajapaksa has arguably made more progress than any of his predecessors to end Sri Lanka's war, his military and political battles are far from over.

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Ruined remains of rebel 'capital'

By Roland Buerk
BBC News, Kilinochchi

Attack helicopters flew overhead, tanks spluttering black smoke squealed and rattled through town on tracks rusty from the last monsoon, and soldiers with bandoliers of bullets slung around their necks posed for photographs in front of Tamil Tiger war memorials.

Two days after the fall of Kilinochchi, the town that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had used as their de facto capital was firmly under military control.

Almost all journalists have been refused access to much of northern Sri Lanka for a year and a half.

But the government was keen to show off its greatest prize so far in this phase of the war, so reporters were crammed into an Mi-17 transport helicopter for a ride to the front.

It was so full some had to stand.

The pilots flew very low and very fast, at treetop height over jungles recently captured from the Tigers, a precaution against being shot down.

Wild peacocks on the ground below staggered to get away in the down force as we rushed overhead.

The helicopter landed south of Kilinochchi and we drove into the town in armoured personnel carriers, up the main A9, dubbed the Highway of Death in Sri Lanka because so many have been killed fighting for its control.

At one place soldiers were waving metal detectors over the middle of the road, probing for mines.

In Kilinochchi there was hardly a building with a roof. Shops were in ruins or pockmarked with bullets, a huge water tower was lying on its side.

Trappings of state

On the western side of town, the bodies of rebels who died fighting for independence for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority still lay in a huge cemetery, under long rows of identical grey cement tombstones. The ornate gates, which used to feature ironwork of upturned AK-47s, had been destroyed.

The Peace Secretariat, where the Tigers met visiting diplomats and journalists during the failed 2002 ceasefire, was a shell. The windows and furniture had gone, the paving stones in the car park had been torn up.

A commando armed with rocket-propelled grenades guarded the gate. Nobody is talking peace now.

Kilinochchi was a potent symbol of the Tigers' separatist aspirations.

There they had established the trappings of the state for the Tamil minority for which they have fought for a generation.

They had law courts there, administrative offices, a tax system, even their own bank.

All that has now been smashed and abandoned.

"It's the capital of the LTTE," said Maj Gen Jagath Dias, who led the 57th Division of the Sri Lankan army into the town. "We have captured their prestige. It's a very important milestone, it's a great achievement."

But the military has taken a town virtually devoid of people. Apart from soldiers the only signs of life on the streets were stray dogs.

The vast majority of the remaining population left with the Tigers towards the east, the jungles and Mullaitivu.

The government says they have been forced to go with the rebels as human shields.

The Tigers say they have gone of their own accord because they support their aims.

About 20 people who were in Kilinochchi had been gathered in a waiting room at the otherwise empty town hospital.

There, while a large number of soldiers and officers looked on, they told us they were happy to see the back of the Tigers.

One 14-year-old girl said the rebels had forced her to fight.

The Tigers' former headquarters town will now be used as a staging post for the next phase of the offensive against them.

Already government forces are advancing beyond Kilinochchi, and the sound of artillery fire thumped steadily over the jungles and fallow paddy fields.

Special forces troops bedecked with weaponry could be seen readying for the battle.

The remaining strategic targets for Sri Lanka's military include Elephant's Pass to the north on the narrow isthmus that leads up to Jaffna, and Mullaitivu, the last remaining town under Tiger control, which is on the north-east coast.

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Sri Lanka: Views from the conflict

The Sri Lankan military has secured a string of military successes over the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] in recent months.

As the army announces it has seized full control of the Jaffna peninsula in the north, people across the country give their views and experiences of the latest phase in the conflict.

KILINOCHCHI

Muttiah Mahalingam, 29, Vatakachchi

I was living in Vatakachchi and I was displaced because of a shell attack. The conflict spread to my village east of Kilinochchi town and I was displaced along with my family; my parents, wife and a one-month-old baby.

We all went to Dharmapuram. Last Monday I left Dharmapuram and went back to my house to pick up some things. I went in a small group and when I went there, some soldiers suddenly came and they took me.

I was taken to Kilinochchi hospital and from there I was taken to the Vavuniya camp for internally displaced people (IDPs).

But my family is still in Dharmapuram.

They don't know what has happened to me. I am very worried because I have no contact with my family. The officials will not allow anybody to leave the camp. Life has been very difficult for us. The cost of living has been going up, there have been no jobs.

I just want to go back to my house and family. I just don't know what has happened to them.

Kantharubi Sivanathan, 28, mother-of-two, Paranthan

On the night of 9 January my family was among a group of 58 people trying to cross over to army-controlled area.

It was night-time when we were going and I think that we ran into some army people who were lying there. Suddenly there were reports of gun fire and suddenly we all fell down.

A bullet hit my husband and he was instantly killed.

Everyone was crying and shouting. After half an hour, the soldiers came to help us and they took us and the injured and the dead bodies to Kilinochchi hospital and from there we were taken to the IDP camp.

I escaped without any injuries but I lost my husband. We came into army-controlled areas for safety but I have lost my husband. I don't know what I am going to do with my two small children.

I don't know what is going to happen to my family in the future. I am all alone without my husband. As it was too dark I don't know who fired the shots but the army helped us.

COLOMBO

Anura Shaminda Kumarasingham, shipping worker

I am a patriotic person but I come from both sides of the conflict. My father is Tamil and my mother is Sinhalese. I was brought up in the south but we went on holidays to Jaffna.

Most Sinhalese people worship Tamil Gods. Even the military, before they go to the north to fight, worship in Hindu temples in Kataragama. I am a Buddhist. But in this one country people are fighting each other. Both sides are killing innocent people.

I feel caught by the conflict. Even when the military operation is over, there will still be hardship. I can't support the killing of innocent people - Tamil or Sinhalese. So many people are going through hardship in the [northern] Wanni [region].

I am totally against a separate state but Tamils must have a chance to get some recognition, to show their identity.

All places captured are part of Sri Lanka. Why is it such a big thing? If the government captured Tamil Nadu, then I could see why they might celebrate. Not for Kilinochchi.

Azam Bakeer Markar, corporate executive

There is a strong feeling that the war is finally being fought professionally. Previous governments meddled with the military, they have not been able to do their job properly. Now, the war is being fought well.

It is natural, when your team wins, to keep supporting it. I think there is broad-based support for defeating the LTTE - because the LTTE has a serious track record of brutality.

Winning the war is a victory, but the greater victory cannot be won by soldiers alone. It has to be won by all citizens of Sri Lanka. This is about ensuring all people are given respect, justice and prosperity. Making sure all Sri Lankans believe they are equal.

Devolution may be part of the solution. We need to get into the hearts and minds of Tamil people and see what the problems are. LTTE and government propaganda politicise everything.

There are ministers who believe that the only real race are the Sinhalese and the Muslims and Tamils are visitors. Extremists must not sabotage the majority view.

Asoka Jayasinha, business consultant

The government's credibility is very high. The feeling here is that the war is almost going to end. I believe the majority of Tamils are also against the LTTE - they are with us.

The LTTE want civilians as a shield so they can say civilians are being bombed and killed.

Some Western governments are asking for a political solution - they are asking the wrong people. They need to ask the opposition who are backing out of all solutions.

No political solution is possible with LTTE holding guns. Only when they are destroyed will Tamils come forward as they are scared of the LTTE.

The government has avoided bombarding civilian areas. But air strikes are necessary when LTTE leaders move around the place.

TRINCOMALEE

Anonymous Tamil man, office worker, 50s

This is the time for the government to come with a proposal. A lot of people are suffering. But we can't believe the government. They say they are fighting for the liberation of the Tamil people.

After the LTTE are destroyed, we don't know how the government will really act. Most Tamil people want a settlement to this ethnic problem.

The government are celebrating in a big way. They have captured the same land they have had before. But it's as if they have captured a different country. They are killing people of the same nationality. We are all Sri Lankan. Because of the way they are celebrating here, I don't think most Tamils are comfortable.

What we want is peace. And after the assassination of the editor, [Lasantha Wickramatunga] everybody is scared to talk. Even this phone may be tapped.

In Sri Lanka it is now difficult to express alternative views and to do anything against the government. I keep my political views to myself.

MORATUWA

Dinushka Kalutota, student

When it comes to military advances, we can all be happy because we are all Sri Lankan: Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim.

The LTTE wants conflict here in Sri Lanka. It was fine to communicate their problem to the world. But to get weapons and start military activity is another matter.

In the university I attend, there are many Tamils who support the LTTE. Everybody knows that but we don't go and beat them up. In 1983 it happened, innocent Tamils were hammered and it worsened the conflict.

I am satisfied with how the army has progressed. The president has done a good job with the army and air force. Now we must think of human lives, a political solution.

But we have been in this situation before where we have had territory and lost it. We don't know what the Tigers are going to do. There are rumours that Black Tiger suicide bombers have come down south.

Even though you finish the war, the conflict may never end. Weapons can't talk.

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Sri Lanka journalists 'risk death'

By Chris Morris
BBC News, Colombo

They stormed into the building at about two o'clock in the morning.

A group of heavily armed men, their faces covered, they smashed windows, broke down doors and tried to blow up the control room at the Sirasa TV studios on the outskirts of Colombo last month.

This is the other side of Sri Lanka's war - a violent crackdown on dissent.

Inside the control room there are shards of glass and bits of debris on the floor. The walls and ceiling are covered in thick black grimy soot.

There are TV screens burnt out of shape, and recording equipment and wires lying in mangled heaps.

On one wall three plastic buttons - red, yellow and green - have melted in the heat. The plastic has leaked down the wall like bits of bubble gum.

The government has categorically denied any role in this attack, but someone is trying to silence the critics.

'Climate of fear'

I have been shown around by the station director, who for understandable reasons is cautious.

"As to why this happens, you just don't want to say," I suggest.

He looks at me, he looks at my colleague, he looks at the floor, and he gives a slight smile.

I nod and turn away. His silence speaks volumes. Some things are too sensitive to discuss.

Two days after the attack at Sirisa TV, a prominent newspaper editor Lasantha Wickramatunga - a feisty government critic - was shot dead as he drove to work.

At least nine journalists have been killed in Sri Lanka in the past three years.

Lasantha's brother Lal now runs the newspaper. He shows me Lasantha's empty office - left as it was on the day he died.

"There is a climate of fear. More than the fear is the uncertainty of where it will strike next," he says.

The government has strongly denied any involvement in this murder as well.

But in a posthumous editorial, which gained widespread publicity around the world, Lasantha Wickramatunga was chillingly certain about what would happen to him.

"When finally I am killed," he wrote, "it will be the government that kills me."

'Fighting for the country'

Lasantha's wife, Sonali Samarasinghe, is one of at least 10 journalists who have fled from the country in the wake of his murder. Reporting has become a perilous business.

Others have been assaulted or threatened. JS Tissanayagam, a Tamil journalist, has been in custody for nearly a year.

But the government's position is clear. There is a war on, and the country comes first.

"People seem to be scared of you," I say to Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa. "Should they be?"

"This is wrong propaganda," he replies. "The only thing I have done is fight the terror."

"I have only two groups - the people who fight terrorism and the terrorists."

"Does that mean," I ask, "that you think dissent or criticism during a time of war is treason?"

"Yes," he says. "We are fighting to save our country - the sovereignty of our country."

Sri Lanka will mark Independence Day this week with a huge military parade on Galle Face Green in the heart of Colombo.

For many it will be a celebration of victory, of a civil war almost won.

But for anyone who disagrees with prevailing official opinion, these are dangerous times.

Some of it is about internal political rivalries, but much of it is not. It is about the freedom to express an alternative view.

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Country profile: Bhutan

Bhutan is a tiny, remote and impoverished kingdom nestling in the Himalayas between its powerful neighbours, India and China.

Almost completely cut off for centuries, it has tried to let in some aspects of the outside world while fiercely guarding its ancient traditions.

The Bhutanese name for Bhutan, Druk Yul, means "Land of the Thunder Dragon" and it only began to open up to outsiders in the 1970s. The Wangchuck hereditary monarchy has wielded power since 1907. But Bhutan became a two-party parliamentary democracy after elections in March 2008. This gave a landslide victory to the pro-monarchy Bhutan Harmony Party of former prime minister Jigme Thinley. The opposition People's Democratic Party also supports the monarchy.

Bhutan's ancient Buddhist culture and breathtaking scenery make it a natural tourist attraction.

Tourism is restricted; visitors must travel as part of a pre-arranged package or guided tour. Backpackers and independent travellers are discouraged.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck - the father of the present monarch - went to great lengths to preserve the indigenous Buddhist culture of the majority Drukpa people. This ethnic group has a common culture with the Tibetans and other Himalayan peoples.

National dress is compulsory - the knee-length wrap-around "gho" for men and the ankle-length dress known as the "kira" for women.

The Bhutanese monarchy has also promoted the philosophy of "Gross National Happiness" (GNH), which strives to achieve a balance between the spiritual and the material.

But by the 1990s, attempts to stress the majority Buddhist culture and the lack of any political representation had led to deep resentment among the ethnic Nepali community in the south.

Violence erupted and tens of thousands of Nepali speakers fled to refugee camps in Nepal.

Some 100,000 refugees live in UN-supervised camps in Nepal. Out of this refugee population have sprung a number of insurgent groups - the Bhutan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist), the Bhutan Tiger Force and the United Revolutionary Front of Bhutan.

The Bhutanese security forces believe they are behind the wave of bombings that rocked the kingdom in the run-up to the 2008 parliamentary elections.

The leaders of Nepal and Bhutan had promised to try and repatriate the refugees before the elections. However, there has been little progress on this front.

India does not allow the refugees onto its territory which lies between Bhutan and Nepal, and although the US and some other countries have agreed to accept tens of thousands of the refugees, some refugee leaders say that the only acceptable path is complete repatriation to Bhutan.

- **Full name:** Kingdom of Bhutan
- **Population:** 658,000 (UN, 2007)
- **Capital and largest city:** Thimphu
- **Area:** 38,364 sq km (14,812 sq miles)
- **Major language:** Dzongkha (official)
- **Major religions:** Buddhism (official), Hinduism
- **Life expectancy:** 64 years (men), 67 years (women) (UN)

- **Monetary unit:** 1 ngultrum = 100 chetrum
- **Main exports:** Electricity, timber, cement, agricultural products, handicrafts
- **GNI per capita:** US \$1,770 (World Bank, 2007)
- **Internet domain:** .bt
- **International dialing code:** +975

Head of state: King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck

Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck succeeded his father, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in December 2006 after the former monarch announced his abdication. His formal coronation was postponed until after the country's transformation into a parliamentary democracy had been completed and did not take place until November 2008.

The new king, who was 26 when he became head of state, promised to build on his father's efforts to democratise Nepal. His predecessor had already given up some of his absolute powers in 1998 and ruled in conjunction with the government, an assembly and a royal advisory council.

Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck studied in the US and at Oxford University, where he completed an MA in politics.

After graduating, the future monarch was encouraged by his father to travel abroad as an ambassador for the Bhutanese people.

He insisted that it was critically important for Bhutan to complete the process of becoming a constitutional monarchy, despite the reluctance of many Bhutanese to see a diminution of the monarch's powers.

In the run-up to the March 2008 elections, he travelled extensively around the country, encouraging people to take part in the vote.

The high regard in which the Bhutanese monarchy is held, and the former king's foresight in scaling back its powers, makes it unlikely that it will suffer the same fate as the royal family in Nepal.

Prime Minister: Jigme Thinley

Jigme Thinley became Bhutan's first elected prime minister following the country's first polls in March 2008.

He is the leader of the Bhutan Harmony Party, which won most votes in the parliamentary election.

The election was intended to mark the completion of the country's peaceful transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one. The move to democratic rule was ordered by the state's popular royal house, the Wangchucks.

Mr Thinley has served as prime minister on two previous occasions, although the post has hitherto rotated among members of the council of ministers.

He can be expected to wield more power and serve as long as he retains the confidence of parliament and the king.

Born in 1952, he was foreign minister between 1998 and 2003 and later served as home affairs minister.

Television did not come to Bhutan until 1999. For years, the country cut itself off, fearing that outside influences would undermine its monarchy and culture.

Radio broadcasting began in 1973 and the internet arrived in 1999.

Media freedom is restricted. Reporters Without Borders says the monarchy "makes few allowances for pluralist news".

There are no private broadcasters, but cable TV thrives, with rival services offering dozens of Indian and

international channels.

The first daily newspaper was launched in October 2008.

There were some 40,000 internet users by March 2008 (ITU).

The press

- Bhutan Today - private, daily
- Kuensel - autonomous weekly
- The Bhutan Times - private, bi-weekly
- Bhutan Observer - private, weekly

Television

- Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) - state-owned

Radio

- Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) - state-owned

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Timeline: Bhutan

A chronology of key events:

1907 - Ugyen Wangchuck is chosen as hereditary ruler.

1910 - Treaty signed with British giving them control over Bhutan's foreign relations.

1949 - Treaty signed with newly-independent India guaranteeing non-interference in Bhutan's internal affairs, but allowing Delhi influence over foreign relations.

1952 - Reformist monarch Jigme Dorji Wangchuck succeeds to throne.

1952 - National assembly established.

Modernisation

1958 - Slavery abolished. Other social reforms follow in subsequent years.

1959 - Several thousand refugees given asylum after Chinese annex Tibet.

1964, 1965 - Prime minister killed in dispute among competing political factions. Unsuccessful attempt to assassinate monarch.

1968 - First cabinet established.

1971 - Bhutan joins United Nations.

1972 - King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck dies and is succeeded by his son, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who continues policy of cautious modernisation.

1974 - First foreign tourists allowed in.

Ethnic tension

1986 - New law granting citizenship on basis of length of residence in Bhutan.

1988 - Census leads to branding of many ethnic Nepalis as illegal immigrants. New measures adopted to enforce citizenship law. Government also introduces other measures to stress Tibetan-based Bhutanese culture, antagonising minority ethnic Nepali community.

1989 - Nepali ceases to be a language of instruction in schools.

1990 - Violent ethnic unrest and anti-government protests in southern Bhutan pressing for greater democracy and respect for Nepali rights. Bhutan People's Party begins campaign of violence. Thousands of ethnic Nepalis flee to Nepal.

Democracy and human rights

1992 - Leader of illegal Bhutan People's Party sentenced to life imprisonment.

1993 - Bhutan and Nepal try to resolve refugee problem.

1996 - Nepal demands all 80,000 or so refugees should be accepted back by Bhutan.

1997 - Amnesty International raises serious concerns over human rights situation in southern Bhutan.

1998 - King cedes some powers to national assembly, giving up role as head of government; cabinet now elected by assembly; famous "Tiger's Lair" Buddhist monastery damaged by fire.

1999 - Limited television and internet services allowed; several dozen political prisoners released.

2000 - First internet cafe opens in Thimphu; Bhutan hit by landslides following severe flooding in region, causing at least 200 deaths.

Refugee issue

2001 August - Bhutanese, Nepalese ministers meet to discuss the repatriation of Bhutanese refugees living in Nepal. Some 100,000 ethnic Nepalese say they were forced out of Bhutan in the 1980s and 1990s, alleging ethnic and political repression.

2002 January - Indian state of Assam says two rebel groups still have camps in Bhutan, despite Bhutan's deadline for them to leave the country by the end of 2001.

2003 December - Bhutanese soldiers fight Indian separatist rebels in an attempt to drive them from their bases in the south of the country.

2005 March - Proposed constitution is unveiled. It envisages a parliamentary democracy and will be adopted or rejected in a referendum.

Succession

2005 December - King Jigme Singye Wangchuck says he will abdicate in 2008, when democratic parliamentary elections are held. The crown prince will take over as monarch.

2006 June-August - Bhutanese refugees in Nepal demonstrate over several weeks to press for third-country resettlement.

2006 September - Preparations start in earnest for first ever elections in 2008. Officials begin training for the polls which will appoint a government to take over from the absolute monarchy.

2006 December - King Jigme Singye Wangchuck abdicates; Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the crown prince, assumes the throne. The former monarch had been expected to stay in power until 2008.

2007 February - Bhutan signs a landmark agreement with India which revises ties with its neighbour, giving Bhutan more say over its foreign and defence policies.

2007 April - Mock elections are staged to familiarise voters with the concept of parliamentary democracy ahead of planned polls in 2008.

2007 July - Prime Minister Khandu Wangchuck resigns so he can compete in elections planned for February and March 2008.

2008 January and February - A string of bomb blasts hits the country ahead of elections set for March 24. The attacks are blamed on groups fighting for the rights of ethnic Nepalis exiled in 1991.

2008 March - Pro-monarchy Bhutan Harmony Party wins 44 out of the 47 seats in the country's first parliamentary elections. Another pro-monarchy party wins the remaining seats.

2008 November - Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck is crowned king.

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Bhutan experiments with democracy

By Chris Morris
BBC News, Thimpu

The day after its first parliamentary election, the world's newest democracy is already learning that politics can spring a surprise.

High in the Himalayas, Bhutan has always revelled in its isolation.

That is why a somewhat reluctant electorate was apprehensive about what democracy might bring.

The two political parties ran for power on similar manifestos, utterly loyal to their king.

So the result was rather unexpected: a huge victory for one party - the Bhutan Prosperity Party - winning all but three of the seats in parliament.

But do not expect revolutionary change in this traditional Buddhist kingdom.

The transition to democracy has been deliberately designed to be slow and steady.

Both the new government and the opposition say they are committed to the king's own five-year plan, and to the royal philosophy of Gross National Happiness, or GNH.

But what exactly does GNH mean?

"It means there has to be a better balance between the spiritual and the material," said Karma Tsheetem, the Secretary of the Gross National Happiness Commission.

"Whatever choices we make from now on - whether it's to do with urbanisation or globalisation or the type of economy we develop - we will make sure it is in harmony with our tradition, our culture and the environment."

Unsettled minority

But GNH or not, some people are not happy.

Tens of thousands of ethnic Nepalese, who used to live in Bhutan, were forced to take refuge in camps in Nepal more than a decade ago. Their status is still in dispute.

We arranged a meeting in Thimpu with an ethnic Nepalese man whose parents are in exile in the camps.

That family connection, he said, makes him a second class citizen in Bhutan.

"So many people have problems with the police clearance," he said, "which is required for things like passports, promotion at work or even opening a small business."

He did not want his name to be used for fear of reprisal.

The Bhutanese authorities deny any discrimination. And in fact, nine ethnic Nepalese have been elected to the new parliament.

But the status of an unsettled minority remains an unresolved problem for the new government.

Uncharted waters

There is no doubt, however, that the election itself was a success. It was well-organised and peaceful.

Long lines of patient voters in national dress ensured a turn-out of nearly 80%.

But sometimes there was too much control, and not enough choice - a point made by election observers from the European Union.

"We do think that plurality of viewpoints, and giving the voters a genuine choice of alternative ideologies, is important in democracies," said EU observer Holly Ruthrauff.

"And this is one of the things we will highlight to the Bhutanese authorities, something they might want to work on in the future."

Perhaps the next generation will face more choice, as the political system develops.

But many people remain nervous about entering uncharted political waters.

For the moment, the country is already focussing on the next big event in this year of change - the formal coronation of their young king.

It is a reminder - if any were needed - that even in these new democratic times, the monarchy will continue to play the central role in Bhutanese life.

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