

Pakistan's nuclear Pak. Defaul Strategy

By M.H. Askari

TUESDAY's tsunami, off the coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, which took a toll of a minimum 50,000 lives belonging to several countries, and battered thousands of miles of the coastline stretching from Indonesia in the east to Tanzania in the west, has forced India to shut down its nuclear facility at Kalpakkam, 80 miles south of the Tamil Nadu capital of Madras.

While first reports from the area suggested that the shutdown was a precautionary measure, it was later stated that the Tsunami may have forced water into the Indira Gandhi Energy Centre at the site and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was to chair a meeting to review the possible damage.

A private TV news channel also said that 1500 families (a substantially large number) living at Kalpakkam, had been evacuated to safety. Which suggests that the feared damage to the facility could have been substantial but nothing definite could be said without a further review by a committee appointed by the prime minister. About 2290 scientists work at the facility.

An accident at Kalpakkam could have resulted in an unestimable damage to life and property. What is a matter of direct concern to Pakistan is the fact that the damage may not have remained confined to the nuclear facility. The damage in the event of accidents at nuclear installations do not remain within a confined area and the fallout directly or indirectly hits the surrounding region as well. The ongoing peace talks between India and Pakistan now in their tenth month have yet to extend their attention to the

Institute, working on peace and security, to remark: how many such 'unusual occurrences were there in Pakistan last year (1994) or the year before? "only the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) knows and they are not telling". Dr. Zia Mian may not actually be exaggerating the facts for such matters seldom get reported to the public in Pakistan.

The right of the people in Pakistan to know precisely how they stand vis-a-vis the potential threat by the nation's nuclear programme, to their health and security cannot be overemphasised. The Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PPFPD) and the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA) and other public-spirited public organizations frequently raise the demand for the people to be kept informed on such matters.

Only the other day a group of Indian doctors on a goodwill visit to Pakistan at a seminar hosted by PPFPD and their Pakistani hosts passed a formal resolution repeating the demand.

The Indian Sindhi writers and intellectuals led by the renowned Dr. Suresh A. Keswani, of the Indian Sindh Academy currently in Pakistan, also raised the demand at a conference in Hyderabad in memory of renowned Sindhi literary figures of Pakistan also wholeheartedly endorsed the India - Pakistan efforts for peace. However, it cannot be said that the talks between the top-level of policy makers in the two countries are progressing at the rate which the people expected at the outset.

It is generally agreed between the intelligentsia in Pakistan and India that going by our experience of the past 57 years, peace between the two countries deserves the highest priority. Unfortunately, nuclearization of the two countries has frightening implications. For

the subcontinent.

Experts are of the view that an accident to a nuclear facility situated in the proximity of a city or a river could mean enormous damage to human life and property. The worst recorded accident at a nuclear reactor was at a power plant at Chernobyl in the then Soviet Union in 1986 when hundreds of people were directly affected by the fallout radiation and at least 135 people in fact practically everyone within about 30 kilometres of the facility - had to be evacuated.

Accidents at nuclear plants and their storage are lethal and their potential to cause damage to human habitation can perhaps never be accurately known. There is in any case strict secrecy about nuclear facilities and nuclear products; this is in the very nature of a nuclear programme. The explosion at a Russian site used for storing nuclear waste in the late 1950s was believed "to have killed hundreds of people and poisoned thousands of square miles in the countryside".

The potential damage from an accident at Kalpakkam affecting Pakistan and other neighbouring countries of India can perhaps not be accurately estimated, primarily because India would conceivably never make all the information about its facility public. India like Pakistan is not a signatory to the non-proliferation treaty (NPT) nor does it have a bilateral understanding with Pakistan.

According to what is known, based on published information, the Indian nuclear power plant is believed to be similar to the Karachi Nuclear Power Plant (KANUPP). The well known Indian writer on nuclear problems, Praful Bidwai, has said that the reported "unusual occurrences" (with accidents not ruled out but not reported as such) in India in 1992-1993 were a frightening 147 — an accident every two and a half days. Bidwai also maintains that 1992-1993 was not an unusual year and that "India's 27-year long experience with atomic electricity generation is a story off accidents, flagrant violations of safety rules, avoidable exposures of workers and public to radiation and toxic substances"

This has prompted the internationally known Pakistani scientist and peace activists, Dr. Zia Mian, one-time research fellow at the Sustainable Development Policy

there were believed to be a number of a threats of a possible resort to nuclear weapons. Mercifully, the threats were not carried out.

The preface to the remarkable publication South Asia on a Short Fuse, co-authored by two Indian writers, Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik (the latter has held senior positions on the faculty of the Jamia Millia-Islamia in New Delhi) makes the unbelievable 'dis-closure' that "Indian and Pakistani high officials exchanged nuclear threats directly or indirectly no fewer than 13 times in just five weeks during the Kargil crisis; it is said that these varied from warnings that "they won't hesitate to use 'any weapon' to threatening devastation in answer to the adversary's nuclear threat". The best one can is that one hopes this is not true.

It is perhaps surprising that one of the most impassioned pleas for denuclearization in the subcontinent came from a retired major General of the Pakistan army, Mahmud Ali Durrani, in his book The Cost of Conflict and Benefits of Peace, published in 2001. That the same elements in India also share Gen Durrani's concern about nuclearization is evident from the fact that the executive editor of New Delhi's daily, The Hindustan Times, which has a background of being the mouthpiece of the hard-est of India's hardliners, wrote the foreword to the book.

It is difficult to disagree with Maj. Gen. Durrani's observation that "inflated egos, emotional rhetoric and deep-rooted mistrust are a common heritage of India and Pakistan which predates their independence in 1947 ... With jaundiced vision either adversary can easily misinterpret the other's intentions and initiate devastating action".

Post-script: A most encouraging view favouring denuclearization has been expressed, unexpectedly, by a retired Lt-Gen, Mujibur Rehman, of the Pakistan army who for several years served as Gen Zia-ul-Haq's information secretary. Gen. Mujib has said: "Some of our nuclear strategists and defence analysts supported by some prominent journalists have propagated the theory of nuclear deterrence as the nuclear strategy for Pakistan. ... But nuclear defence is nothing more than a myth. The myth needs to be explored so that it is exploded before any harm comes to our national security".