

Deaths in Mosul

The revelation that 39 Indians were killed in Iraq should have been made with sensitivity

The government's announcement that the remains of 39 Indian workers, kidnapped four years ago by the Islamic State, have been found near Mosul in Iraq, has brought a painful closure to the episode. According to External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, remains found in a mass grave have been matched conclusively with DNA samples for all but one of the men declared missing almost four years ago. Part of a group of construction labourers held by the IS shortly after the fall of Mosul in June 2014, they had last contacted their families in the middle of that month and said they were being held in a basement while fighting raged outside. Since then, there was no word from them, but for the version of Harjit Masih, the 40th hostage who had managed to escape. Mr. Masih said he was the only one to escape from being gunned down by the IS captors, and had subsequently fled with a group of Bangladeshi labourers. His account was never accepted by the government. With the recovery of the remains in Mosul after its recapture by Iraqi forces last year, the government must retrace Mr. Masih's steps in Iraq in a wider effort to end its investigations into the killings. This inquiry should also help answer larger questions about the operating procedure followed by the authorities.

On the positive side, the government followed every lead in the case, and reached out to governments in Iraq, Syria and Turkey in the effort to get any available information. However, it would have been more prudent for the authorities to be circumspect instead of unnecessarily talking up the chances of finding the men alive. At various points, the government told the families that the men had been seen at a construction site, at a church in Mosul, and even that they were being kept in a prison in Badush, a village on the edge the city of Mosul. Subsequent investigations, including visits by Minister of State for External Affairs V.K. Singh, revealed those leads to be wrong. It turned out, for instance, that the prison in Badush had been destroyed by the IS early during its occupation, something that should have been verified before such information was disseminated to distraught family members. On receiving word that the Martyrs Foundation, an Iraqi agency that helped identify the remains, would announce that they had matched the DNA of the 39 men, the Ministry of External Affairs could have shown more sensitivity by informing the families before Ms. Swaraj made the rushed announcement in Parliament. The biggest lesson from the tragic saga is the need for a thorough appraisal of procedures for Indian labour going abroad, so that they are not duped or remain uninformed about the risks of going to conflict areas.

Xi rules

The Chinese President further consolidates his power through an administrative rejig

hina is no stranger to reform. Over the past three decades the structure of the government has of reform pushed through this month is comparable to that of 1998 when Zhu Rongji as Premier shut or merged 15 ministries as part of a major liberalisation drive. This time, Prime Minister Li Keqiang has closed six ministries, two ministry-level agencies and seven vice ministry-level departments. Beijing has also created a powerful anti-corruption agency, while the Vice President, till now holding a ceremonial post, is expected to play an active role in policymaking. The stamp of Xi Jinping, re-elected President for five more years with no term limit, is visible in these reforms. A big decision is the empowerment of the Environment Ministry, which will fight air, water and soil pollution, a top priority for Mr. Xi. Two of his close aides have been appointed to key posts - Wang Qishan, an anti-corruption crusader, is now the Vice President, and Liu He, the President's top fiscal adviser, is a Vice Premier. Mr. Wang is expected to play a leading role in China's engagement with the U.S. at a time when fears of a trade war loom. Mr. Liu is to head the recently created Financial Stability and Development Commission, which will coordinate between the banking and securities regulators and work towards trimming China's debt burden. This takes away some of the powers of the Prime Minister, who has traditionally been China's top economic official. The National Supervision Commission, which is ranked above the judiciary, will have sweeping powers to fight corruption, including the power to detain sus-

The common thread in these changes is the strengthening of Mr. Xi's full-blown control over party and government. Earlier this month, by amending the Constitution to remove the two-term limit on the Presidency that was introduced during Deng Xiaoping's time, the Chinese Communist Party signalled that it was moving away from the "collective leadership" motto to a new era under Mr. Xi. With the latest measures, he is consolidating his hold. The political stability that China has enjoyed over the last two and a half decades was a result of high and sustained economic growth coupled with reform. By concentrating so much power in his hands, Mr. Xi has risked reversing the changes that have become institutionalised over the last three decades. He may enjoy a measure of popularity and have the support of the party for now, but such concentration of power is bound to engender opposition and criticism. His decision to lift presidential term limits has already triggered an uproar on China's social media networks, prompting the authorities to censor a host of words and phrases, including Animal Farm, the title of George Orwell's dystopian novel. Mr. Xi will ignore these intimations of discontent only at his own risk.

pects for up to six months without access to lawyers.

Read the distress signals

Farming must be treated as a market-based enterprise and made viable on its own terms



week-long farmers' march which reached Mumbai earlier this month, on the anniversary of Gandhi's Dandi March of 1930, was unprecedented in many ways. It was mostly silent and disciplined, mostly leanon-disruptive and non-violent, and well organised. It received the sympathy of middle class city dwellers, food and water from bystanders, free medical services from volunteer doctors, and also bandwagon support of all political parties from the left to the

Beyond lip service

Indeed, even the Chief Minister of Maharashtra said he supported the cause (not the march), but as head of government his job was to address their issues, not to agitate. The most remarkable thing about the march was that it was successful. The State government agreed to all the demands, including pending transfer of forest land to Adivasis, expanding the scope of the loan waiver and ensuring higher prices for farm produce. There was ceremonial signing of acceptance of the demands, although the Chief Minister said that he had tried to dissuade the farmers from undertaking the gruelling 200 km march itself.

The farmers, however, were determined to march to make a point, and to ensure that they received firm (signed) and publicly



assurances and lip service.

Recurrent farmers' agitations in the last few years across the nation lead us to ask: why have we come to this pass, that only extreme distress and street protests alert us to the deep and chronic problems of agriculture? Not all agitations have been peaceful or successful. Last year, in Haryana and Rajasthan they tried to block highways which led to traffic chaos. In Madhya Pradesh, in Mandsaur district, the protest turned violent, led to police firing and deaths of farmers. The electoral outcome in Gujarat too was a wake-up call (if any was needed) to the ruling party to pay attention to rural and agrarian

It is not as if governments of the day have not paid attention. Over the years and decades, there have been numerous committees, reports and commissions with extensively researched policy recommendations. Yet farming is a story of recurring distress. This implies that the recommendations are not working and need a paradigm change, or there is a huge gap in their implementation – or a bit of both. The most comprehensive recent blueprint for reforms and rehabilitation of the farm sec-

Commission on Farmers, chaired by M.S. Swaminathan. That report is already over 10 years old. Several of its ideas are yet to be implemented. For instance, decentralising public procurement of food grain to the lowest level possible, and setting up of grain banks at the district level.

What is the priority?

The "farm problem" of India is a huge mountain, but it is surmountable. The biggest priority is to reduce the workforce which depends on agriculture for its livelihood. There is considerable underemployment and low productivity but farmers are unable to exit to other livelihood options. This points to the obvious conclusion, that the solution to the farm crisis lies largely outside the farm sector. If job opportunities abound elsewhere, then we should see an exodus out of farming. That points to the urgency of accelerating industrial growth and improving the ease of doing busi-

But we also need to acknowledge that the farm sector has been shackled for far too long. Farming is to be treated as a busi-

es were kept suppressed to keep industrial wages low. This meant monopoly procurement laws and the intermediation through the Agriculture Produce Market Committees (APMC). But that was compensated by providing the farmer with highly subsidised inputs water, electricity, fertilizer, credit and seeds. But this did not benefit the really needy, subsistence farmers. Nor did it alter the terms of trade which to this day remain tilted against agriculture. Over the years the policy framework is increasingly complex and a patchwork quilt of mutually compensating measures. Thus, we have ended up with all the shackles which remain intact. The APMC is not discontinued. Monopoly procurement continues. There is little progress in direct link between farmer and buyer. Foreign direct investment in farm to fork chain is very restricted. Half the farmers don't have access to formal credit, since most of them don't own the land that they till. Contract farming remains virtually banned. Land leasing is not possible (but done informally). Moneylenders are taboo, even though they might be in the best position to address credit needs, albeit with proper

Thus the farmer's plight is full of woe, exposed to risks from prices, demand, weather, pests and whims of policy and regulation. It's no surprise that crisis is chronic, and loan waivers become imperative, more for moral and ethical reasons, than economic. Loan waivers punish those who worked hard and repaid, and the cash anyway goes to banks, not to farmers. Banks don't issue fresh loans out of their own risk aversion. Hence,

regulation.

loan waivers are a bad economic idea but often a political compulsion. The same is true of rewarding farmers with 50% more minimum support price (MSP), no matter what the cost. This paradigm of cost plus pricing is bad economics. Sugarcane grows cheaper in Uttar Pradesh in the Gangetic plains than in droughtprone Maharashtra. But with an assured cost plus MSP, there is little incentive to diversify crops to suit weather and cost conditions.

Some positive steps

To its credit some recent initiatives of the government are laudable. Neem-coated fertilizer has reduced leakage, and direct benefit transfer to the farmer-buyer will reduce subsidy further. Soil cards ensure appropriate matching of inputs to soil conditions. Giving tax holiday to the farmer producer companies is also the right fiscal incentive. The government's aim to double farm income in the next four years is a near impossible feat, but signals the right intention. The big agenda is to unshackle agriculture to make it a truly commercial market-based enterprise; to create opportunities outside farming for large scale exit of the workforce; to connect farmers to the value chain of farm to fork, including agribusiness; to remove restrictions on movement and exports of farm produce and let them tap into international market, to also allow easier land transfers including leasing; to encourage crop diversification and land consolidation that reverses fragmentation. As said earlier, the farm problem is a huge mountain, but surmountable.

Aiit Ranade is a Mumbai-based economist

Behind a growing social fissure

Sri Lanka needs to evolve into a strong but secular-minded state



KALANA SENARATNE

n Sri Lanka, the relationship between the Sinhala Buddhist lacksquare majority and the Muslim minority has steadily deteriorated since the end of the civil war. When Mahinda Rajapaksa was in power, much damage was caused when violence was unleashed on Musgama in 2014. The new government, which was elected in 2015 with the support of the minorities, promised an end to such violence. However, the recent attacks in the Kandy district, where well over 200 homes and 14 mosques were destroyed, resulting in a state of emergency being imposed and social media platforms being blocked, has shown that this government too has not been able to contain the anti-Muslim project that is gaining ground in Sri Lanka.

The state of emergency has been lifted. But the continuing nature of the struggle between the two communities calls for a dispassionate assessment of the many complexities undergirding their relationship. This involves the need to problematise certain popular assumptions about the character of the Sinhala Buddhist

mindset, the nature of the accusations being levelled against Muslims, and about ending the crisis. This is necessary to add perspective to an ongoing debate and not to condone, even indirectly, the devastation caused by tribalistic groups on the country's minori-

Sinhala-Buddhist angst

One of the popular but simple assumptions made about Sinhala Buddhists is that hatred is what predominantly defines their attitude towards Muslims. But the situation is more complex.

just as any other majority community, is keen on preserving its identity and dominance. And for various historical and geographical reasons, Sinhala Buddhists are a majority with a minority complex, existentially fearful of losing majority status in Sri Lanka either to Tamil Hindus or to Muslims.

The minorities, especially Muslims, are seen as 'aliens'. As the foremost Sinhala Buddhist nationalist, Anagarika Dharmapala, wrote in 1915, the "Muhammedan" is "an alien to the Sinhalese by religion, race and language". The majority often sees Muslims as a growing, united and economically persevering group, having an unshakeable faith in Islam, and asserting the Islamic identity. In contrast, the Sinhala-Buddhists are seen to be lacking unity – unlike Muslims, they are relaxed and liberal about reli-

gious practices/observances. The Buddha's teachings, in fact, are critical of any attachment to and promotion of identities, be they

ethnic or religious.

So, difference, fear and even jealousy play prominent roles in snaping now the majority views Muslims; though these get easily translated into hatred and violence. And Sinhala Buddhists tend to be a more liberal and self-critical community than Muslims; though it is not uncommon to hear a Sinhala Buddhist proclaiming (within his own community) the need to act 'like Muslims' if their identity is to be protected.

Thus, it is of fundamental importance to recognise that there are significant social and cultural differences in how Buddhists and Muslims are taught and trained to approach matters of religion and

Litany of allegations

Another issue concerns the complaints and allegations levelled against Muslims by the majority. Critics believe that those behind such allegations deserve no hearing, for they are mere canards. This is yet another wrong and dangerous assumption.

The allegations are many and varied. First, there are those that have a direct impact on the security of the people and state relating to such matters as the rise in radicalisation of Muslims in the Eastern province (Islamic State inspired) and the alleged promotion of anti-Buddhist propaganda by fundamentalist forces. Second, there are allegations against Muslim politicians of being engaged in land acquisitions and the illegal resettlement of Muslims. Third, meant to promote fear and hatred. These range from the absurd accusations about Muslim promotion of birth control pills and concerns about the growth in the Muslim population, expansion of Muslimowned businesses, and Sinhala families being driven away from villages by Muslims.

There is a list of different complaints, and of varying degrees of seriousness. While some of them need to be exposed for what they truly are (myths and untruths), and some defy any meaningful action (the expansion of businesses or the population), some others would need to be taken up for serious examination by the political leadership. This hasn't happened so far.

Given such a complex problem, a popular response by many (which includes local celebrities)

has been to come out with the comforting but vacuous assertion of an all-embracing 'Sri Lankan' identity or a reminder of a long history of peaceful co-existence between the two communities. Such assertions, though well-intentioned, seem to be inspired by \perp the erroneous view that the current crisis is either an aberration or caused by a disgruntled and vio-

Containing the crisis

A realistic agenda which lays emphasis on ensuring accountability through the prosecution of all persons, including Buddhist monks who have caused and incited violence, while also engaging in the difficult task of having constant dialogue between Sinhala Buddhist groups, the Muslim religious/ political leadership and the government is essential. However, to avoid a catastrophe, Sri Lanka needs to evolve into a strong but secular-minded state. This involves, in principal, a radical alteration of how the Sinhala Buddhist community, the state apparatus, and the community of Buddhist monks think about the majorityminority relationship and equal citizenship. Without such an alteration, the island nation is destined to suffer long years of political and economic stagnation.

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$LETTERS\ TO\ THE\ EDITOR\ \ \ \ Letters\ emailed\ to\ letters\ @thehindu.co. in\ must\ carry\ the\ full\ postal\ address\ and\ the\ full\ name\ or\ the\ name\ with\ initials.$

Deaths in Iraq It is shocking that a seasoned parliamentarian such as the External Affairs Minister should have committed what can be called a grave impropriety by announcing in Parliament the killings of the missing Indians in Iraq instead of first informing their traumatised family members ("39 Indians, abducted by IS in Iraq, are dead: Sushma" and "Why were we kept in the dark, ask angry families", both March 21). It is even worse for her to justify her action on the ground that she was dutybound to do so as Parliament is in session. The right of family members to be informed of the fate of their loved ones cannot be subordinated to

that of law-makers. The

S.K. CHOUDHURY,

Union Minister has shown

insensitivity and disrespect.

■ As India had always been at the forefront of rescuing its overseas citizens, it was numbing to know that the government waited for years to confirm the news. Sushma Swarai's statement is a traumatic and cold revelation, considering the fact that the families concerned were agonised over not being provided adequate information. India could at least have sought diplomatic help to trace R. PRABHU RAJ,

■ It is a well-known fact that Mosul fell into the hands of the Islamic State, an outfit which is in no way benevolent or one with which dialogue can be pursued using diplomatic channels. Asking for substantive proof at that time would have been very distant especially when anarchy was the order of the day. It was only after Iraqi forces

recaptured Mosul that there would have been a chance to do the groundwork. Perhaps it is premature to hold the government responsible. BAOUIR SADAR. Thiruvananthapuram

Right way for Left In the "Wednesday

interview" (March 21), the general secretary of the CPI(M), Sitaram Yechury, says that his party's "priority is to defeat the RSS-led BJP government". Actually, the Left's priority should be to revive itself from its lowest point reached after the Tripura Assembly election. Its earlier efforts to restrain the BJP with or without association with other parties including the Congress have miserably failed. Instead, the party needs to focus on the aspirations of the youth of India. They want economic growth more than the need to fight communal forces. An

ideological orientation which

supports equitable distribution of growing wealth rather than a curb on it is needed. Besides this, the CPI(M) should take up energetically issues that affect the much neglected unorganised labour, exploitation of labour in small- and mediumenterprises, womenemployee related grievances and all other unrepresented weaker sections. They all have considerable political Y.G. CHOUKSEY,

Pune

Water security Water security can never be achieved as long as we continue our unsustainable way of living. The development mania is not only destroying the environment but also contaminating water sources. "There is nothing which adds so much to the beauty of the countryside as water... Water in a landscape

may be compared to the eyes in a human face," scientist C.V. Raman said in his essay, "Water, the Elixir of Life". To ensure that we have real water security, we have to walk back a long distance – a walk back from development to sustainability or symbiotism ("Awash in water crises", March 21). SUKUMARAN C.V., Palakkad, Kerala

■ It is the urban population that consumes and wastes more water depriving many

of their right to potable water. Waste water from electric reverse osmosis purifiers in urban homes is a classic example. The government needs to invest time and money in educating urbanites about the need to recycle water at all times. The media should also take up this task of social responsibility and create RAHUL YADAV,

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The graphic that accompanied the front-page story "39 Indians, abducted by IS in Iraq, are dead: Sushma" (March 21, 2018) erroneously said that the announcement was made in the Lok Sabha. It should have been Rajya Sabha, as mentioned in the report.

In the Business page report, "Force Motors, Rolls Royce in engine JV" (March 21, 2018), the head deck needs to be changed to correct the erroneous reference to BMW. It should have read "German firm cites costs for shifting ... 300 crore" instead of "BMW's luxury unit cites costs for shifting 300 crore." In the opening paragraph, the erroneous reference to BMW should be dropped: Instead of "Rolls-Royce Power Systems, a part of BMW's Rolls-

Royce Group ...", it should read as "Rolls-Royce Power Systems AG, a part of Rolls-Royce plc, ..."

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