

Uneasy ties with neighbours

Rajiv's hands freed to improve relations

By Chaitanya Kalbag

NEW DELHI, (Reuters): Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's massive victory in the Indian general election has given him new freedom to tackle his country's uneasy relations with its neighbours, especially Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Rajiv, armed with a huge parliamentary majority, declared immediately after the election that good relations were his goal — although on first becoming prime minister after the Oct 31 assassination of his mother and predecessor, Indira Gandhi, took a hard line towards both countries.

His government accused Pakistan of sheltering Sikh extremists from crisis-ridden Punjab state. He also said arms supplied to Islamabad by the United States could be used against India.

Sri Lanka

Ties between New Delhi and Colombo plunged to a new low in recent weeks with Sri Lanka charging that guerrillas fighting for a separate state for the island's minority Tamil community are trained in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Rajiv in turn said during his poll campaign that Sri Lankan security forces had killed innocent Tamils and attacked Indian fishermen in the narrow straits dividing the two countries.

In a sign that Sri Lanka was anxious to repair the damage, President Junius Jayewardene was among the first world leaders to congratulate Rajiv on his triumph, saying he wanted friendship and cooperation with the Indian prime minister.

Political analysts said the hands of moderates in Rajiv's camp had been strengthened by the poll victory.

Pakistan

His Congress (I) Party, in an election alliance with Tamil Nadu's ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party, swept the state's parliamentary seats as well as elections to its state assembly.

The alliance delivered a humiliating defeat to the hard-line opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam which took up the cause of Sri Lanka's Tamils and called for armed Indian intervention in the island's ethnic crisis.

Rajiv has struck a note of cautious optimism over relations

with Pakistan.

Pakistan's President Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq called for "the development of a mutually beneficial relationship of trust and confidence ... and for strengthening peace and stability in our region."

Rajiv told reporters two days ago that Zia was very positive about better relations but the Pakistani leader's subordinates were not. "We are just hopeful he will stand by what he said," Rajiv added.

Disquiet in Rajiv's government over the situation on the Indo-Pakistani border in the northern state of Jammu and Kashmir was revived by the election victory of the state's former Chief Minister Farouq Abdullah.

Abdullah, who was toppled by Congress-backed defectors five months ago, won all three parliamentary seats in the Kashmir valley. He has vehemently denied frequent Congress charges that he is pro-Pakistani.

India and Pakistan have fought two of their three wars since the subcontinent's partition in 1947 over Kashmir, and their troops have clashed several times recently on a military control line in the disputed moun-

tain territory.

Bangladesh

The government has cause for optimism in India's troubled north-east, where guerrillas have been waging sporadic independence battles in four states bordering China, Burma and Bangladesh.

Relations between New Delhi and Dhaka plummeted after Bangladesh was accused of providing sanctuary for some of the rebel groups.

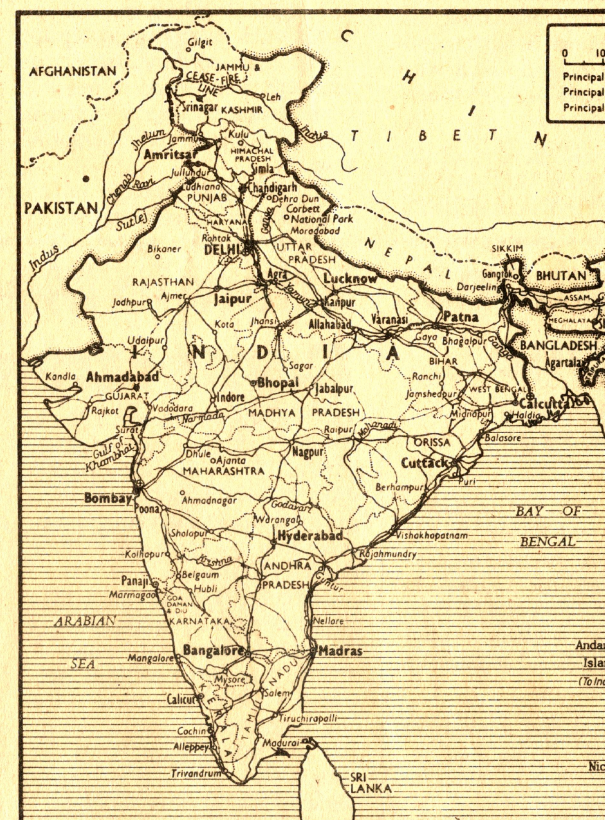
On the eve of the elections Rajiv's chief foreign policy adviser, G. Parthasarathy, reached a peace accord with Laldenga, leader of an 18-year-old rebellion in Mizoram state who returned from exile in Britain for negotiations.

In Manipur state, currently a hotbed of revolt, the elections passed off peacefully despite death threats to Congress politicians.

Rajiv's victory could help him deal more effectively with two guerrilla groups which operate from hideouts of the Burmese side of the border.

But in the state of Tripura both seats went to the ruling Marxists — a rebuff for Congress (I).

The Marxists had vigorously



India and its neighbours: Uneasy relations

opposed attempts by New Delhi to send in the Indian Army, saying their state government

was capable of tackling along the territory's with Bangladesh.