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TESO

A long, long way to go, to save Ceylon Tamils!

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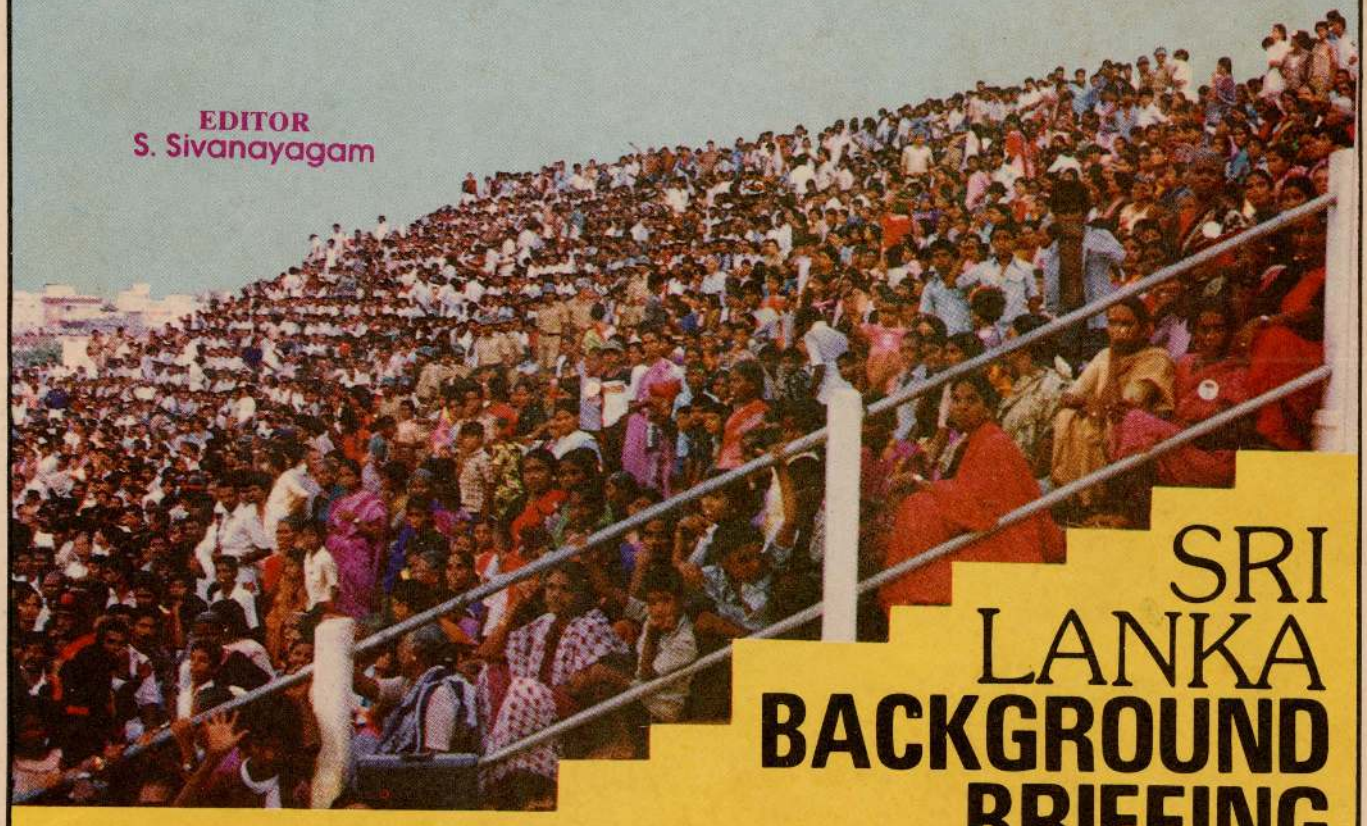

SRI LANKA BACKGROUND BRIEFING

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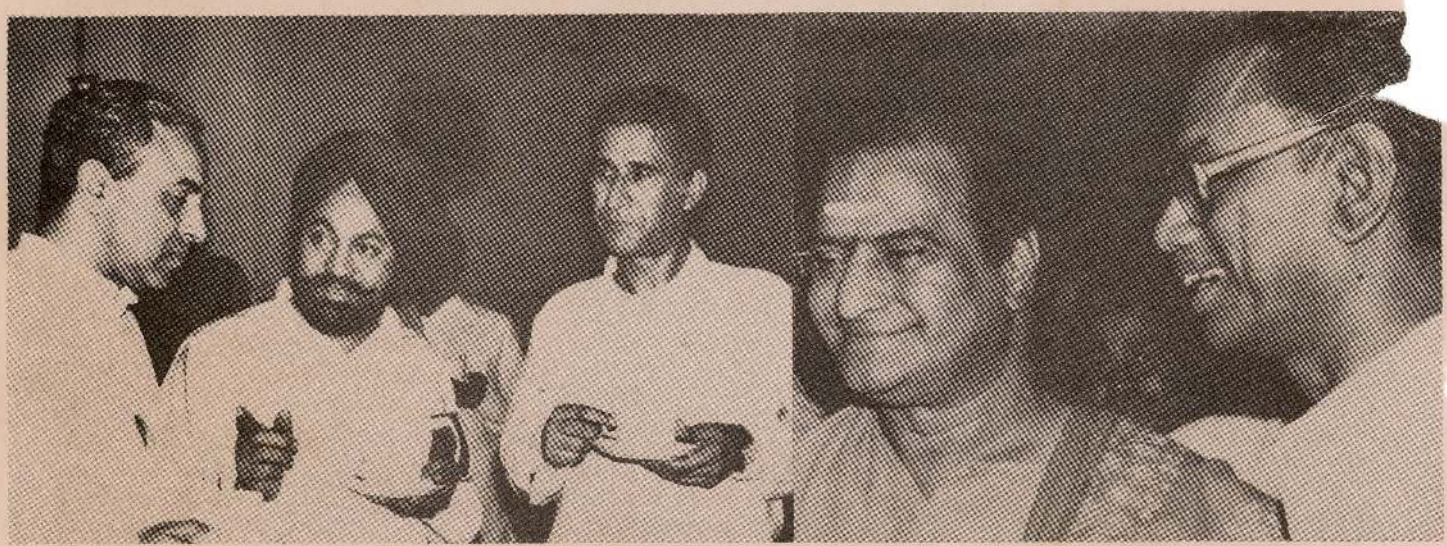
"From Kashmir to Kanyakumari"

(Left to right :) H.N. Bahuguna, M. Karunanidhi, N.T. Rama Rao and Atal Behari Vajpayee



Dr. Subramaniam Swamy , Balwant Singh Ramoowalia, Abdul Rasheed Kabuli, N.T. Rama Rao and P. Nedumaran

V. Gopalaswamy , P. Upendra, Unnikrishnan and on right K. Anbazhagan

A long, long way to go, to save Ceylon Tamils!

When events overtake human plans and efforts making them seen inconsequential, that is the time when one senses the throb of a historical force. Sunday May 4, 1986, was the day when the Tamil Eelam Supporters' Organisation (TESO) held its SAVE CEYLON TAMILS CONFERENCE at Madurai. It certainly promised to be an event of considerable political significance at that point of time. For the first time, leaders and representatives of Opposition parties, particularly from the North, with differing approaches on domestic politics were gathering in the heart of Tamilnadu on a united bid to express solidarity with Tamils of Sri Lanka. Notwithstanding the absence of the ruling party of the country, and the ruling party of the State, and the two Communist parties which were invited but declined to attend, the nation-wide representation was broad enough to attract interest. But even as the Conference began, one felt a sense of futility and as it ended a gnawing doubt. That certainly was no reflection on the motives of the organisers, the excellence of the organisation and the tremendous crowd turn-out and euphoria in Madurai that day. It simply meant that in that first week of May, while the TESO was gearing itself to cogitate on the PRESENT, the FUTURE had overtaken it! A wild rush of events, good and bad, painful and startling, in Jaffna and in Colombo, was already crowding the mind and filling the newspaper headlines. And, at Madurai the prime mover of TESO, DMK chief M. Karunanidhi looked a bemused, unhappy man, even before the conference could begin.

If there is any section of the wrold's people in contemporary times who have undergone what author Alvin Toffler called "Future Shock" – that shattering stress and disorientation that comes out of being subjected to "too much change in too short a time" – the Ceylon Tamils qualify eminently for that experience. The Ceylon Tamils as a community were never known to like Change. Whether it was their habits, their choice of a consumer item or the choice of a profession, their political attitudes or their life style, theyt ended to follow the beaten track. They clung to tried, tested brand products. Never known to experiment, never known to innovate, never known to take risks (unlike the Sinhalese), they shaped their lives under one inner compulsion – the need to have Security. They sought pensionable jobs, made Education an Industry, conserved Gold, engaged themselves in litigation (often with their kith and kin) over property and land, and made the advancement of family interest the sole preoccupation of life. But Fate dealt a heavy head blow knocking out this entire value system. The Security after which they hankered is no longer theirs. In fact. they suffer from total IN security. Gold and property are no longer preservable items. The pensionable jobs are gone, and so are family units. Families are scattered in five different continents, and every Ceylon Tamil has become a refugee, whether in his own country or elsewhere.

That was the kind of change the Ceylon Tamils were not preparede for, but had to accept willy-nilly. When author Toffler wrote of 'the roaring current of change, a current so powerful today that it overturns institutions, shifts our values and shrivels our roots", he might well have applied it to the Tamil experience. That "roaring curring of change" continues. But during the first week of May, one got the feeling that the acceleration of change was getting even more overpowering. The TESO conference in retrospect, by an accident of Fate, seems to mark a watershed in Ceylon Tamilian life, mainly because of the crowded, varied incidents that happened immediately before it, and soon after. But what of TESO's own achievements and non-achievements?

In Democracies, decision making is brought about not by government thinking alone, but also by the attitudes and stances adopted by Opposition parties. Governments work on pressure, and in a continent-like country such as India where large sections of opinion are guided by regional loyalties and where the government has to continuously meet domestic compulsions of all kinds, a gathering of Opposition leaders and the striving for an Opposition consensus on an issue affecting the foreign policy of the country, cannot be wholly unwelcome to the government in power. On the other hand, it could even make it easier for the government to fashion foreign policy on the given issue.

Let us look back. There was BJP leader and one-time Foreign Minister of India – Atul Behari Vajpayee; there was Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and leader of a powerful regional party, the Telugu Desam – N.T. Rama Rao; there was Lok Dal leader and one-time Minister in the Central Government – H.N. Bahuguna; there was the Punjab Akali Dal's General Secretary – Balwant Singh Ramoowalia; a leader of Dr. Farook Abdulla's National Conference of Kashmir – Abdul Rasheed Kabuli; the maverick of Indian politics who launched the "Hindustan Front" to help Eelam Tamils – Dr. Subramaniam Swamy; General Secretary of the Congress (S) and M.P. – K.P. Unni Krishnan Janata's Karnataka Home Minister – S. Rachaiah; also Telugu Desam front-liner and Parliamentarian – P. Upendra. And then of course DMK chief – M. Karunanidhi; that dedicated activist of the Eelam cause and leader of Kamaraj Congress - P. Nedumaran; DK leader – K. Veeramani; Muslim League leader – A.K.A. Abdul Samad..... a distinguished galaxy of leaders hardly ever seen together on any occasion, whether in the North or South. Karnataka Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde, convalescing after a throat ailment sent a special message for the Conference; and so did the leader of the Janata Parliamentary group – Prof. Madhu Dandavate.

There is no doubt at all that it was an impressive occasion; and for TESO marking one year of agitational success. Formed in May 1985 with DMK President Karunanidhi as Chairman, it had as its senior leaders P. Nedumaran, K. Anbhazhagan and K. Veeramani. It defined its objectives as :- to help the Tamil partisans to carry on the struggle against State terrorism in Sri Lanka; to help Tamil refugees; and to propagate the demand for Tamil Eelam at the national and at international levels. Within three months of the formation of TESO there came about an unfortunate turn of events which gave the organisation its first chance to test its strength. Deportation orders were served on two Eelam activists – S.C. Chandrahasan and Dr. A.S. Balasingam on 23 August 1985, and both were bundled the next day into Air India planes, the former to New York and the latter to London. The very next day TESO held a rally and "resolved that if the Centre did not revoke its orders of deportation against the Sri Lankan militant leaders, the TESO would stage black flag demonstrations when the Prime Minister, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi and the Union Home Minister Mr. S.B. Chavan, visited Tamil Nadu next" (Hindu : 26 Aug.) The Hindu report said further : "The DMK leaders, Mr. M. Karunanidhi and Mr. K. Anbazhagan, the Dravida Kazhagam General Secretary, Mr. K. Veeramani and the President of the Tamil Nadu Kamaraj Congress, Mr. P. Nedumaran, who addressed the rally, declared that the people of Tamil Nadu would raise a banner of revolt if the Sri Lankan Tamils were denied asylum in the State.

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"Don't force us to create a situation when none from the North could step into the soil of Tamil Nadu", they said. Strong words indeed. But that was not all.

Reported the HINDU : 'Mr. Karunanidhi warned the Centre that if it continued to initiate anti-Tamil militant steps, the people of Tamil Nadu would be constrained to organise training camps for their brethren to achieve their cherished goal of Eelam. He hastened to add that if the Centre found itself helpless to hammer out a solution to the ethnic crisis the people of Tamil Nadu themselves would clinch the job. "The training camps would include not only the militants but also the youths from Tamil Nadu to fight for the cause of Sri Lanka Tamils". VEILED THREAT: Mr. Karunanidhi and other leaders issued a veiled threat that the cry of "Tamil Nadu belongs to the Tamils" would gather momentum if the Centre failed to protect the legitimate aspirations of the Sri Lankan Tamils..." That was on 25 August.

On 27 August, the Madras evening daily "News Today" never known to be friendly towards the DMK, reported : "The DMK-led Tamil Eelam Supporters Organisation (TESO) today decided to stage a "rail roko" (stop train) agitation in Tamil Nadu on August 30 to press for the immediate withdrawl of the deportation orders against two Eelam activists, Dr. A.S. Balasingam and S.C. Chandrahasan. A meeting of TESO, chaired by its President M. Karunanidhi, the DMK party chief, also called on its constituent parties to hold rallies in district headquarters for 3 days from today in this connection..... Karunanidhi said the "stop train" agitation had been scheduled for Friday in order to give three days' time to the Prime Minister to revoke his government deportation order..."

One day before the planned "rail roko", S.C. Chandrahasan was back in Madras, his deportation orders withdrawn; but in a statement issued from Tiruchi, TESO Chairman Karunanidhi said the agitation would continue until the deportation orders on the other two Eelam Tamil leaders, A.S. Balasingam and N. Satyendra (who had left before the order was served) were also withdrawn. The HINDU of 31st August reported : "Train services remained suspended in Tamil Nadu, following a one-day 'rail-roko" agitation launched by the TESO.... though the State government and the Railways had repeatedly emphasised that there was no intention to stop the services, hundreds of comuters who made a beeline to railway stations, particularly in the suburban section, even from 4 a.m. were disappointed to find that the services had been suspended 'until further orders".

TESO therefore had a proven record of achievement when the Madurai "Save Ceylon Tamils Conference" was called. LTTE spokesman A.S. Balasingam too was back in Madras on October 10, one and a half months after deportation. TESO had also reason to be satisfied with the response to the Conference. Apart from the nation-wide representation of Opposition parties, all five Eelam militant groups that were invited, sent their representatives – the LTTE, the EROS, EPRILF, TELO and PLOT. The TULF trinity was there – Secretary General A. Amirthalingam, President M. Sivasithamparam, and front-liner R. Sampanthan. There were the TULF radicals, the rebels and break-aways un der the banners of two other organisations – ProTEG and TELF, – S.C. Chandrahasan. A. Thangathurai, the former TULF M.P. for Muthur, M.K. Eelaventhan and Kovai Mahesan, once Editor of the powerful Tamil weekly 'Suthanthiran". Other Eelam Tamil organisations represented at the 'closed door" meeting with the Indian leaders were the Tamil Information & Research Unit (TIRU), Madras, headed by S. Sivanayagam founder-Editor of the Jaffna-based "Saturday Review" and the Tamil Information Centre Madurai, headed by Maheswary Velautham, both present only as "special observers" and therefore declining to make any statements.

If the "Save Ceylon Tamils" conference and the huge attendance and enthusiasm at the public rally at the Racecourse grounds that same evening gave the impression that it was more an occasion for a political and personal triumph for DMK leader Karunanidhi than a tangible contribution to the Ceylon Tamil cause, what factors contributed to this impression? The Madras evening daily "News Today", as expected, came out with a report critical of the Conference outcome. It said : "Contrary to expectations, the Tamil Eelam Supporters Organisations (TESO), an out-and-out front outfit of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam led by M. Karunanidhi fell in line with other parties in the opposition and toned down its postures on the Lanka Tamils' issue. Instead of demanding a separate Eelam state for the Lanka Tamils, the TESO conference restricted its demand to an innocuous plea to unnamed countries of the world to stop all aid to Sri Lanka so that such aid could not be used for the genocide of Tamils in the island. The Lankan genocide was a crime against humanity, the conference resolution said. The resolution also drew the attention of the world to the fact that every human right was being violated with impunity by the Sri Lankan government. More than what the resolutions said, what they did not say became news because of the pre-conference postures struck by the organising outfit, the TESO. For instance, the Madurai conference did not seek "military intervention by India" for protecting Ceylon Tamils as done by TESO in the recent past. In fact, the resolutions made no specific demands on New Delhi beyond vaguely accusing it of lethargy and lack of fuller sympathy in the past (not lately, though). One resolution passed by the conference called upon the Centre to raise the issue with vigour at all international fora, like the U.N ., NAM, and CHOGM. The resolution, however said that the policy sof ar pursued by the Government of India towards Sri Lanka and the Tamil question had failed in producing any tangible result because it was "superficial, vacillating and incoherent". The resolution did not, however spell out the 'non-superficial, firm and coherent policy" that it would like the Government of India to spell out and follow.

"Talking to newsmen, the chief organiser of the conference Mr. Karunanidhi said that the various Tamil groups had given an assurance in the presence of the national opposition leaders (excepting the leaders of the two Communist Parties which didnot attend) that they would work together. This assumed comic proportions in the immediate background of the murderous clashes between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) resulting in the death of nearly 150 young Tamils and the former group claiming that it had disarmed the fighters of thelatter. On the positive side one important outcome of the conference was the decision to set up, at the all-India level, a Co-ordination Committee to constantly monitor the Lankan developments and regulate the reactions to them. Karunanidhi said that the Committee would comprise the representatives of the BJP, Congress(S), Telugu Desam, Akali Dal, J&K National Conference (Farooq) and Janata, besides of course the DMK. To begin with, Messrs Jashwant Singh (BJP), Upendra (Telugu Desam), Unnikrishnan Congress(S),

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Ramoo Walia (Akali Dal), Abdul Raheed (National conference), Subramaniam Swamy (Hindustan Front) and V. Gopalaswamy (DMK) would be members of this panel. The Janata, Lok Dal, IUML, the CPI, CIP(M) and Asom Gana Parishad would be asked to join the Co-ordination Committee....

"The TESO and DMK leader claimed that the very fact of TESO conference being attended by so many opposition stalwarts had resulted in Delhi despatching an official team to Colombo for exploring a political solution to the issue. All the Tamil groups stationed in Madras, were present at the Conference. None of them voiced , however any complaint against what India did or failed to do ..... Karunanidhi said the second Save Ceylon Tamils Conference would be held at Andhra Pradesh. The date and venue of the conference had not yet been decided. He appealed to the tiger groups of Sri Lanka to remain united...."

While the "News Today" report remains faithful to the factual outcome of the conference the critical comments appear largely pointless. Firstly, what took place was (despite the dominant presence of Karunanidhi) not a DMK conference nor even a TESO conference but a Save Ceylon Tamils Conference of Opposition parties SPONSORED by TESO, and hence resolutions were expected to, and would naturally reflect, an Opposition consensus on the Sri Lankan Tamil question. The significance of the Conference did not lie in the resolutions it passed, but in the fact that such a conference took place. It was time to show that Indian sympathy and concern for Sri Lankan Tamils was something not confined to the boundaries of Tamil Nadu, but which involved the whole of India. The TESO-sponsored conference did precisely that. It lifted the TESO concern into an all-India one, and that should surely give the government in the Centre additional political and diplomatic leverage to deal with the Sri lanka government. The strong sentiments expressed by leaders like Vajpayee, N.T. Rama Rao and Bahuguna helped demolish the Sri Lankan government propaganda that it was only the Tamil Nadu factor that was determining New Delhi's outlook on the Sri Lankan Tamil question. These were therefore positive achievements of the Madurai Conference, and if credit for it flowed to the dominant TESO partner, the DMK and its leader, it would be churlish to deny them that.

Public memory being short, it has to be said that the DMK's involvement and interest in the Sri Lankan Tamil question is not a recent one. It began in the early 70s, and the TULF leaders dedveloped a personal rapport with Mr. Karunanidhi when he was in power, at a time when the late Tamil leader S.J.V. Chelvanayakam was alive. While the question whether "bandhs" and rallies and processions which dislocate or paralyse life in Tamil Nadu are really useful or whether they are wasteful and even counter-productive is a debatable question, it must be remembered that the first successful total bandh in protest against killings of Sri Lankan Tamils was carried out, not in 1986 or 1983, but in 1977 – by the DMK. Under the headline – HARTAL ALMOST TOTAL – the Indian Express of 25 August, 1977, reported :- "The one-day hartal called by the DMK on Wednesday to express sympathy for the Tamils in Sri Lanka, was almost total in the City. The DMK also took out a huge procession from the Anna statue on Mount Road to the office of the Deputy High Commissioner of Sri Lanka.

"Mr. Karunanidhi presented a memorandum to Mr. Gautamadasa, the Deputy High Commissioner .... The memorandum condemned the efforts to "annihilate the Tamil race in Sri Lanka" and urged those interested in human rights and the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka to "stop the fall of human corpses and restore to the Tamils their legitimate rights and peaceful living" ..... Mr. Karunanidhi told newsmen later that the DMK had also sent a telegram to Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan to intervene and stop "the genocide of Tamil population of Ceylon".....

Well, that was nearly 10 years ago! Ten years is a long, long time in the life of a people who are condemned to continuous flux and change, and an incessant uprooting from their soil, and an alienation from their traditional social and cultural values. An uprooted society could prove to be a dangerous human "export", dangerous to itself as well as to other soils in which it seeks temporary refuge. Those who stay rooted to their soil, on the other hand, have been exposed to another danger – the increasing militarisation of the society. The choice for the Tamils therefore is – hard. The wrost crime that President Jayewardene has done to his country in his near-10 year rule is to have provoked and initiated a whole young generation – both Tamils AND SINHALESE, into a militarised outlook, negating the chances of Peace and stability not only in our lifetime but in the lifetime of the next generation.

But superficially, as far as the world is concerned, nothing seems to have changed. The killings in Sri Lanka have been going on, the bandhs in Tamil Nadu have been going on, and President Jayewardene is also going on. Going on in years, but yet going on. Nearly 10 years ago, a prominent newspaper in India, the Indian Express, which prided itself on its upholding of human freedoms in India, discovered Mr. Jayewardene to be "remarkably conciliatory" (Editorial: 24 August 1977), and untii recently it found no reason to change its assessment of the man. The editorial said: "..... Prime Minister Jayewardene himself confirmed in his policy statement in Colombo's Parliament earlier this month that their numerous unredressed grievances have made the Tamils of Sri Lanka turn towards separatism. Mr. Jayewardene was remarkably conciliatory and he announced his intention to call an all-party conference to resolve the problems facing the Tamil minority....". As the world knows, the all-party conference is still going on, and right now, ,Mr. Jayewardene sounds " remarkably conciliatory" again.

The basic malady appears to have been that while the conflict had widened and the problem had intensified, the responses have been inadequate and the proposed solutions have remained static and frozen. Within these 10 years the toll of human lives has risen ten-fold, (both among Tamil civilians and Sinhala armed forces), the Sri Lanka government's defence expenditure has risen ten-fold, the number of refugees both within the country and outside had gone up ten-fold, the number of refugees both within the country and outside had gone up ten-fold, the degradation of human behaviour has worsened ten-fold, but the solutions have not gone beyond the point of all-party conferences.

The TESO conference took place at a time when the conflict between the Sri Lanka government and the Tamils was moving towards a decisive phase. The impulses towards a peaceful settlement were gaining ascendancy on the one hand, while on the other, the idea of giving the Tamils a more bloody nose was increasingly tempting to a government which misread the consequences of the LTTE-TELO clash. These clashes in Jaffna coincided with the arrival of the

Chidambaram mission in Colombo, on 29 April. Let us look back at the sequence of events. Even as the Indian government delegation headed by Minister of State P. Chidambaram and comprising former Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari, Constitutional expert S. Balakrishnan and Deputy Secretary in the External Affairs Ministry Ranjan Mathai flew into Colombo at 7.10 p.m. on Tuesday 29 April, Colombo government circles were buzzing with the news of the LTTE-TELO clash, which had begun the same morning in Jaffna. How best to exploit it for military advantage in Jaffna was probably the thought uppermost in thier minds. The first round of talks between President Jayewardene and the visiting Indian delegation was scheduled for the next morning, April 30. Meanwhile National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali had gone on record with the aggressive statement that Sri Lanka's latest peace proposals might be the last chance for a political settlement. He was already angry over the bomb explosion at the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation's bulk storage compelx at Anuradhapura the previous week.

On April 30, the Indian delegation met President Jayewardene for a three and a half hours of talks, which included a luncheon. The same evening, the delegation met National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali, Foreign Minister Hameed and SLFP leader Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, and on the following day Leader of the Opposition Anura Bandaranaike, Minister of Lands and Land Development Gamini Dissanayake and Presidential adviser and President's brother H.W. Jayewardene. Meanwhile, news had come from Jaffna of an LTTE ultimatum to the TELO cadres to surrender within 8 hours, failing which the anti-TELO offensive would be stepped up. The Ministry of National Security in its supreme optimism decided to cash in on the situation, and issued the following statement : "The government learns that certain terrorists wished to surrender in view of the threats posed to their lives by rival groups, and wishes to inform such persons that they could surrender to the nearest Co-ordinating Headquarters, camps or detachments of security forces or police stations in the North and East and such persons will also be given protection by the government".

While the Indian delegation was involved in sensitive talks, the Sri Lankan media was involved in attacking the credibility of the delegation. They chose as their main target, leader Chidambaram himself. Said the "SUN" of May 2, in a front page item : "Visiting Indian Minister P. Chidambaram now in Colombo for a political solution to Sri Lanka's crisis last year publicly shouted slogans and led a demonstration demanding the "just rights of Tamilians in Sri Lanka" be politically conceded immediately. Minister Chidambaram had been a vociferous advocate of a boisterous procession of the Advocates' Association of the Madras High Court which handed over a petition to the Sri Lanka Deputy High Commissioner condemning the Sri Lanka government and asking that "genocide" be stopped forthwith. According to the Madras based "HINDU" newspaper of March 5, 1985, Chidambaram had also carried placards and shouted slogans against Sri Lanka.a Among those associated with him was N.T. Wanamamalai a lawyer who appeared for Uma Maheswaran the PLOT leader...."

Anura Bandaranaike, who as Leader of the Opposition is also known to eat off President Jayewardene's hands (provoking the recent taunt by Prime Minister Premadasa on the condolence motion on the widely respected Communist Party loner in Parliament, Sarath Muttetuwagama : "In his death we have lost the real Leader of the Opposition"!) also joined the anti-Chidambaram vendetta. Addressing the UNP May Day rally, President Jayewardene also said his piece about India. Said the SUN report : "President J.R. Jayewardene yesterday called upon India to extradite terroist leaders based in that country and declared that the government would seek military means to overcome terrorism. However, the President assured that government would continue its effort to find a political solution to the country's ethnic crisis. "India is a large country. It is capable of setting an example to the rest of Asia. Therefore it msut help us in our efforts to fight terrorism.... If terrorist leaders are extradited, he explained, they would not be put to death by bullets, but treated according to the laws of the land. "But for those who persist in the use of arms, we can only reply them with arms ourselves...."

That was on May 1. On May 2, it was talked about in Colombo that the Indian delegation might cut short its stay and leave for New Delhi, but later it was stated that the delegation would stay, having had a 2-hour session of talks with President Jayewardene. Indian High Commission sources told the SUN on the night of May 2: "A little bit of anxiety has now been apparently removed following detailed discussions. The outcome showed that Sri Lanka is willing to discuss more in detail a soution to the ethnic conflict". And on the morning of Saturday the 3rd May, occured that Katunayake airport bomb explosion. An Air Lanka Tristar plane, shortly before take-off to Male with 128 passengers, was blasted at the tarmac, killing 20 and injuring 41 others. Colombo went into a state of anger, panic and fear. Leader of the Indian delegation Mr. Chidambaram said in Colombo : "We have just learnt with deep anguish and shock that a bomb blast in an Air Lanka Tristar aircraft at the Katunayake airport this morning has resulted in the death of several passengers and seriously injuring many other passengers and functionaries at the Katunayake Airport. Such acts of violence against civilians and property are most regrettable and deserve condemnation. We extend our deep condolence to the bereaved families and next of kin to those who were killed and who are injured".

An Indian Airlines pilot Capt. Ram Mohan who had landed his plane a short while before the blast and was walking to the terminal building was also hurt in the explosion. In New Delhi, an External Affairs spokesman condemned the blast "unequivocally". But all these did not prevent a campaign of hatred towards India being turned on again. In distant Melbourne, nearly 200 Sinhalese demonstrated outside the Air India office!

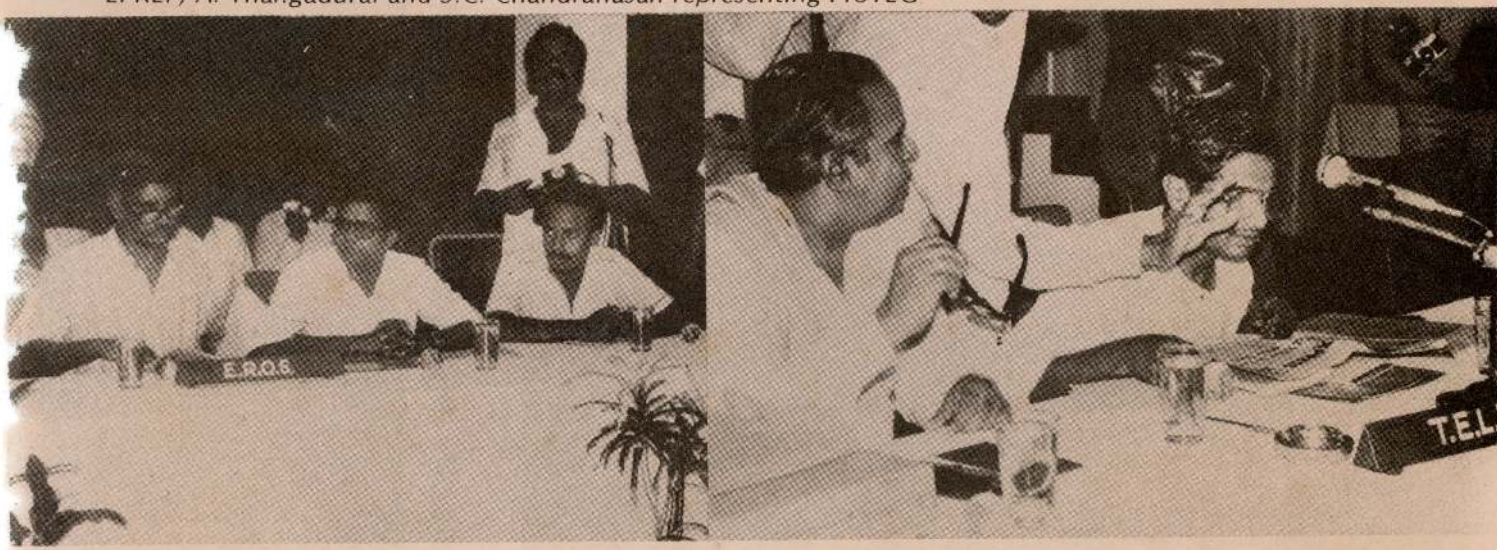
The Chidambaram delegation left on May 4 after 4 days of talks. The Indian High Commission in Colombo said that the delegation had 10 hours of talks with President Jayewardene in six meetings, six hours with National Security Minister Athulathmudali in three meetings and six hours in three meetings with Lands Minister Gamini Dissanayake. Prime Minister Premadasa had apparently no role to play. Earlier, asked by the BBC correspondent Mr. Chidambaram had dismissed reports that India will withdraw from the mediation process if talks fail. The report quoted him as saying that they would withdraw only when a solution is found. That was as good a signal to Colombo as was diplomatically possible. "No wriggling out this time" seemed to be unspoken message.

In the meantime, TESO chairman Karunanidhi, on the eve of the Madurai Conference made a desperate appeal to Tamil militant groups to stop fighting. "The killings were not creating the best atmosphere", he said helplessly. At the conference itself, both warring groups were represented, and all delegations gave a pledge in turn that they would henceforth work together. But the climax to the LTTE-TELO confrontation came two days later when TELO leader Sri Sabaratnam was himself killed. That was on May 6. On May 7, came the second bomb explosion in Colombo, exactly 96 hours after the Air Lanka blast. Eleven people died and 114 were injured when a powerful bomb wrecked the Central Telegraph Office in the heart of the busy city. The month of May ended with another bomb blast in Colombo – at the Ceylon Cold Stores – and with several bomb hoaxes in between, Colombo residents, the Sinhalese particularly, were reduced to the same sense of insecurity that the Tamils had been experiencing for years earlier.

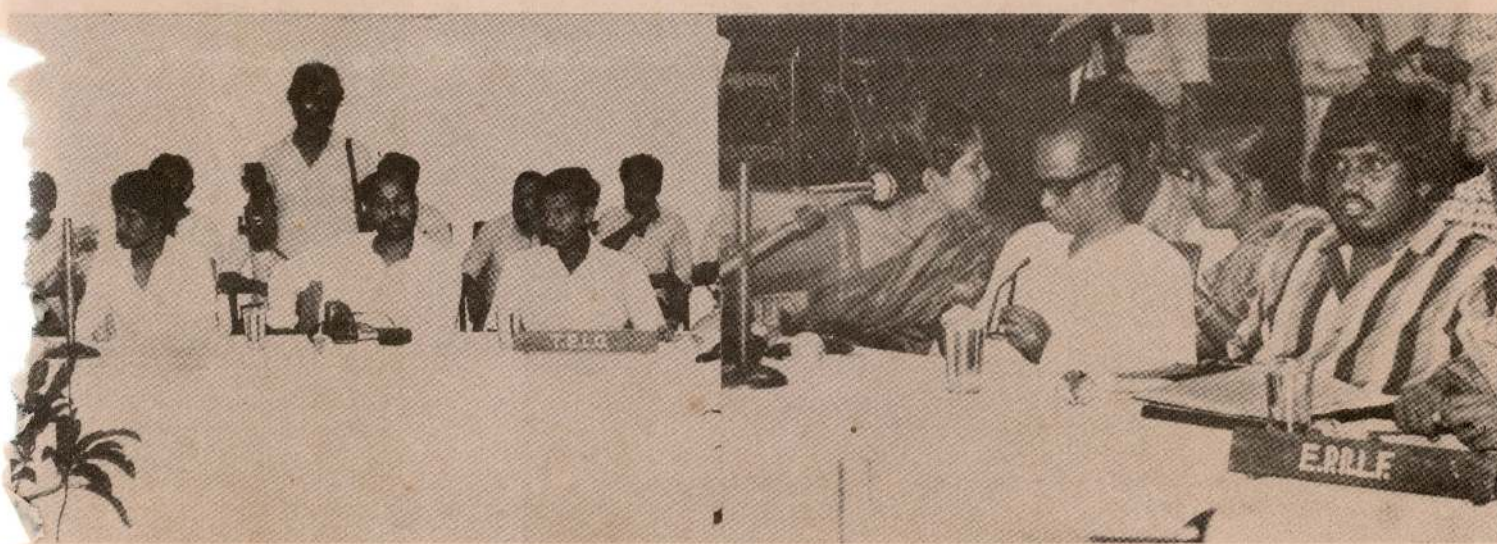
There is a new sense of fear that has overtaken both the Tamils in the north and east and the Sinhalese in the south. Fears can drive people into acts of desperation, and if that happens, there might be a long, long way to go before anyone can save Ceylon Tamils. But it is equally likely that fears on both sides can even push warring sides into an honourable settlement, provided a strong external force imposes its authority on both. The next month or two might give the answer.

Closed-door conference with Indian leaders.

(Left toright :) Thilakar of LTTE, M. Sivasithamparam and A. Amirthalingam of TULF, S. Varatharajaperumal of EPRLF, A. Thangadurai and S.C. Chandrahasan representing ProTEG



E. Ratnasabapathy and EROS delegates, Kovai Mahesan, and M.K. Eelaventhan representing TELF



On left, the TELO delegates with spokesman Mathi on right, and on right Maheswari Velayutham of Tamil Information Centre, Madurai and S. Sivanayagam of the Tamil Information and Research Unit (TIRU), Madras (both present as special observers) and Ruban of EPRLF. The PLOT representatives arrived at the conference hall late, when photographers were not permitted.

An estimated 3-4 lakhs of people turned up at the Race-course grounds for the rally.