

One million face starvation as UN cuts rations

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New context of Sri Lanka's war

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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (l) accepts a set of religious books from a Buddhist priest as Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse (c) looks on in Colombo on April 29. Ahmadinejad flagged off 1.5 billion dollar worth of projects to boost Sri Lanka's energy needs. He kicked off a 700-million-dollar project to upgrade Sri Lanka's sole refinery, but bad weather prevented him from launching a 450-million-dollar hydro electricity project. Photo Lakruwan Wanniarachchi/AFP/Getty Images

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NEWS

UK police arrest three Tamils for assisting LTTE

THREE Tamil men were arrested in London and Wales last Tuesday as part of what British police said was a "long-term" investigation into the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The police said two people have previously been charged in connection with the same inquiry.

[Last year two Tamils were arrested for organising a demonstration on July 25, 2006 to mark the 1983 'Black July' state-backed pogrom against Tamils in Sri Lanka. One of the men was also charged with buying boots and knives for the LTTE.]

A fourth man was reported to have been arrested Tuesday this week, but other reports said one of the two people arrested last year had been re-arrested.

Last week, two men aged 39 and 46 were arrested at separate addresses in Newtown, and the third man, aged 33, was held in Mitcham, London when police staged a series of early morning raids.

"It is not linked to Al-Qaeda-type activity or inspired terrorism. It is in relation to support, procurement and fundraising for a proscribed organisation, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tamil Tigers)," a police spokesman said of the arrests.

Having held the trio arrested last Tuesday for a few days, the police were granted another eight days to question them.

British government officials and senior police officers told media they believe large sums of money are collected in Britain to

fund the Tamil Tigers' armed struggle in Sri Lanka.

The arrests coincided with the landmark visit to Sri Lanka of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The British High Commission in Colombo was the first to break the news of the three arrests with a swift press release.

Sri Lanka's government did not respond.

The full text of the High Commission's press release, titled 'British Police Arrest Three Men Under Terrorism Act 2000', follows:

"At approximately 6.30 am on 29 April police officers from the Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command, supported by members of the Welsh police service, carried out searches under the Terrorism Act 2000 at a number of residential and business addresses in Wales. Further searches were carried out in Surrey in south east England and Greater London.

"Three men were arrested at separate addresses on suspicion of the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism under the Terrorism Act 2000.

"The arrests are part of a long-term investigation into the alleged funding and procurement activity in support of terrorism overseas. The investigation relates to alleged procurement, support and fundraising for the proscribed organisation, the LTTE.

"Two people have previously been charged in connection with this investigation."



British military visits Jaffna

THE MILITARY advisor to the British High Commission in Sri Lanka, Lieutenant Colonel A. S. Gash, along with two other British military officers, Lieutenant Colonel Dan Rex and Wing Commander Andy Lee flew to Jaffna last weekend on a two-day official visit to the Sri Lankan military there.

The visiting British military officers on their arrival in Palaly airbase were received by the Security Forces commander in Jaffna, Major General G.A. Chandrasiri, and were later conducted to military headquarters for a formal briefing on the security arrangements in place in the peninsula.

An estimated 40,000 Sri Lankan troops are occupying the Tamil-dominated peninsula. In the past few two years, as in the

previous phase of the conflict, from 1005-2001, Sri Lankan troops have carried thousands of abductions, disappearances and extra-judicial killings.

600 people who went missing in the three month period after July 1996, were "either tortured to death or killed in military custody," an Amnesty International report said.

Since August 2006, the Sri Lankan military has been conducting major offensives against the LTTE's frontlines in the Jaffna peninsula. On April 23, the SLA suffered a serious setback, losing almost 200 soldiers killed and 350 wounded.

However, during his briefing to the British delegation, Major General G.A. Chandrasiri gave an account regarding humanitarian

work carried out so far by the military since August last year.

The British delegation paid a visit to areas controlled by the SLA's 51 Division and 55 Division, which "enabled them to get a better picture," the SLA said.

The British delegation also met Division Commander in 53 Division area and obtained a detailed report on the conditions prevailing in its areas of control.

The SLA's 53 and 55 Divisions are those engaged in offensive operations, whilst the 51 and 52 Divisions are responsible for controlling the peninsula and its 600,000 residents.

As the last leg of their visit, they visited the Northern Naval command in Kankasanthurai and Palaly air base before they returned to Colombo on Saturday.

Sri Lanka Army chief meets Pakistan military

SRI LANKAN Army Chief Lt Gen Sarath Fonseka, who is on a week long visit to Pakistan, will hold talks with his counterpart there on various issues including purchase of arms for his forces, embroiled in an intense battle with Tamil Tigers.

Lt Gen Fonseka, who left for Pakistan on Sunday on an official tour, is slated to discuss several issues including defence purchases, the Daily Mirror newspaper reported.

During his stay, the visiting Lt. Gen. Fonseka is scheduled to meet President Pervez Musharraf. Pakistan Army.

On Monday he met with Pakistan's Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC) General Tariq Majid and Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq

Parvez Kayani

Gen. Fonseka was accompanied by a Sri Lankan delegation comprising Major General L.A.D. Amarathunga, Director General General Staff of Army, Group Captain Ajantha Silva, Defence Advisor to the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in Pakistan and Lieutenant Colonel. R. Wijesundara, Military Assistant to Lt. Gen. Fonseka.

General Majid told the Gen. Fonseka that Pakistan and Sri Lanka historically enjoyed excellent relations based on mutual trust, confidence and commonality of interest in maintaining regional peace, security and stability.

He also reiterated Pakistan's

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NEWS

Iranian leader in historic visit to Sri Lanka

THE strong relationship between Iran and Sri Lanka was on show last week with the high profile visit of Iranian President to Sri Lanka and the red carpet welcome that was extended to him by the Sri Lankan state.

Iranian President Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrived in Colombo on a Monday, April 28 on a two-day visit to Sri Lanka as part of his South Asian tour. President Mahinda Rajapakse personally received the Iranian President at the Bandaranaike International Airport and the streets of Colombo were decorated with Sri Lankan and Iranian flags. Posters with slogans reading "Traditional Asian Solidarity" "The Path to Progress" were also on display along the streets of Colombo.

Cheque book diplomacy

Addressing a joint news conference with President Mahinda Rajapaksa at the Presidential Secretariat, Ahmadinejad said: "Sri Lanka and Iran have agreed to cooperate in all spheres for the mutual benefit of each other."

Iranian President added that Iran was happy to assist a 'long standing friend such as Sri Lanka' and carry out 'mutual consultation and cooperation' and said that comprehensive cooperation

between the two countries would provide security for both in their endeavour to 'seek justice and fair play in the world.'

With the international community working towards isolating Iran over its nuclear program and raising concerns against the human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, both countries looking for new allies.

The Rajapakse administration in recent times has turned to the east towards countries like China, India and Iran, which unlike United States, Europe and Japan do not raise human rights issues as a condition for such assistance.

Iran assistance in the energy sector is crucial to the Sri Lankan government at a time when it is finding it difficult to pay for its increasingly costly oil imports. The Government of Ahmadinejad readily agreed to provide oil at concessional rates and invest heavily in improving Sri Lanka's capacity to refine oil.

Iran agreed to invest US \$ 1.5 billion in energy-related projects in Sri Lanka. One of these projects is for the production of hydel power and the other to double the capacity of an existing oil refinery in Sri Lanka. Work on the

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A new era of 'South-South' alliances?

How Sri Lanka's leading state-owned newspaper saw the new Iran - Sri Lanka partnership

Editorial

Daily News

THE successful visit to Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India by Iranian President Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad points to a greater, more assertive role by Iran in regional and global arenas. The growing ties between Iran and South Asia also indicate a general trend where more developing countries share their wealth and resources for development, instead of depending on Western aid. Such South-South cooperation is vital in the age of globalisation.

One cannot underestimate Iran's increasingly visible profile on the global stage vis-a-vis the energy issue. Iran has the second largest oil reserves in the world after Saudi Arabia and it is a key supplier of oil and natural gas to the rest of the world. It is in this context that we should appraise Iran's spearheading of the US\$ 7.5 billion Iran-India-Pakistan natural gas pipeline and two energy projects in Sri Lanka costing around US\$ 1.5 billion.

The former will be very significant for both India and Pakistan, two of the fastest developing nations in South Asia. Next to China, India has the second biggest energy consumption in Asia. Its energy needs will rise exponentially over the coming years.

Moreover, the envisaged pipeline has also become a symbol of closer rapport between India and Pakistan. Indeed, there were many positive comments about President Ahmadinejad's behind-the-scenes diplomatic skills which literally cleared the way for the massive pipeline.

As for Sri Lanka, it already imports 70 per cent of the crude oil requirement from Iran. Iran's help for the Sapugaskanda refinery expansion will help Sri Lanka to refine more crude oil, saving foreign exchange currently spent

on importing finished products such as petrol and diesel. The Uma Oya project will be a vital lifeline for the people in Uva-Wellassa and the South, irrigating thousands of acres and as a bonus, adding 100 MW to the national grid.

Although the power generation capacity is low when compared with the proposed coal power plants, it will nevertheless help address the present power needs up to a certain extent. Another significant aspect is that these projects are being implemented with local expertise, which will also lead to a substantial foreign exchange saving. It is well known that many donors specify that their construction firms be awarded the tender(s) as a prerequisite for granting aid.

Many Western countries and donor agencies also attach vari-

ous conditions to their aid packages, such as human rights. However, the key donor countries in the South including China and Iran have perceived the need to keep these issues quite separate from the development agenda.

They are of the view that such issues should not be tied with development as that could ultimately negate the very purpose for which aid is provided. Increased trade and development cooperation among the developing countries is one way of reducing or nullifying the Western influence on the world development agenda.

Although some Western countries publicly cautioned the South Asian countries not to host the Iranian leader, the fact that all three countries accorded him the

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NEWS

Amid Western criticism, Colombo turns to less picky donors

SRI LANKA has hailed Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit here Monday as an important step in cementing closer ties between the two nations.

But the trip also highlighted Sri Lanka's slow turn away from the West, which has expressed increasing concerns about Colombo's human rights record and its embrace of donors less critical of its escalating war against ethnic Tamil Tigers.

"In Asia, we don't go around preaching to our neighbors and our friends," said Sri Lanka's foreign secretary, Palitha Kohona. "This public naming and shaming process that seems to have become so popular in the West is really not so accepted here."

As if to drive home the point, the capital city of Colombo was plastered Sunday with posters showing smiling photos of Ahmadinejad and Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa over the slogans: "The Friendly Path to Progress" and "Traditional Asian Solidarity."

In the past 18 months Rajapaksa visited China twice, dropped in on India and Pakistan and traveled to Iran in November.

During that trip, Iran pledged US\$1.9 billion (1.2 billion) in soft loans and grants to Sri Lanka to help it expand its only oil refinery, develop an irrigation and hydropower project and buy Iranian oil, Kohona said.

"It is the biggest development assistance package for Sri Lanka at the moment," he said.

It is money Sri Lanka desperately needs as it continues to wage civil war with the Tamil Tigers - a fight projected to cost

US\$1.5 billion this year.

Ahmadinejad was expected to meet top officials and to tour several development projects during his two-day visit. It has not been announced whether he will come bearing further aid for this South Asian nation.

China is also giving about US\$1 billion (650 million) in aid for a massive new port, an arts center, a power plant and other development projects, Kohona said.

Meanwhile, Western nations have been giving far less money and much heavier criticism of Sri Lanka's conduct of the war.

A U.S. State Department report issued in March accused the government and allied militias of attacking civilians and practicing "torture, kidnapping, hostage-taking, and extortion with impunity."

A European Union delegation that visited last month said it had "very serious concerns" about reports of human rights abuses. It implied that if the situation did not improve, Sri Lankan exports could lose a lucrative tariff exemption.

Some Western nations and United Nations officials have also called for a U.N. human rights monitoring mission to be sent here. The government has rejected the idea as a breach of its sovereignty.

Kohona brushed off much of the criticism, saying the government had made improvements but was also in the middle of a war.

"I think it's a little unfair to beat up on a small democracy that is struggling to fight back a bitter and brutal terrorist organi-

zation," he said.

Sri Lanka's increasingly close ties with less traditional donor nations are allowing it to resist the Western pressure on its rights record, analysts say.

"It is sending a message to the international community ... that the government does have other options to keep its development policies kicking along, and those options come from its new allies," said Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, executive director of the Center for Policy Alternatives, a Colombo-based think tank.

But he warned that while Sri Lanka has always had good relations with Iran and China, it could be taking a risk by too closely embracing countries with shaky reputations of their own in the West, which remains Sri Lanka's most crucial trading partner.

"That is also the danger here that a small country trying to play big politics could end up as the big loser," Saravanamuttu said.

Sri Lanka exported more than US\$2 billion (1.3 billion) worth of goods to the United States last year and US\$1.7 billion (1.1 billion) worth of goods to the European Union in 2006. Sri Lanka also relies on loans from international financial institutions and the sale of bonds, which also require good relations with the West, Saravanamuttu said.

Kohona said Sri Lanka had no intention of shunning the U.S. and Europe.

"Aid from the West is appreciated. Our relationships are valued and we would like to continue those relationships," he said. "Our goal is to maintain and strengthen relations with everybody."



Hand in hand: the two leaders were keen to show their amity.

US admonishes Sri Lanka on 'new friends'

Mendaka Abeysekera
The Nation

THE United States Government has sent out a strong warning to Sri Lanka over the island's rapidly growing close ties and diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In the backdrop of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's scheduled state visit to Sri Lanka, US State Department Spokesperson Tom Casey clearly disclosed their concerns over the visit.

During the daily press briefing in Washington, last Monday, Spokesperson Casey said that it was up to every country to determine for itself how it was going to organise its bilateral relations with Iran and that it was up to

them to determine how best to manage them.

"We would hope that the Indian Government or any government that was engaging with the Iranians, including with President Ahmadinejad, would call on him to meet the requirements that the Security Council and the international community has placed on him in terms of suspending their uranium enrichment activities and complying with the other requirements regarding their nuclear programme," the State Department Spokesperson said.

He urged South Asian nations to urge Iran to end what he termed as "unhelpful activities with Iraq, with respect to support for terrorism, including organisations like Hezbollah and Hamas, and to otherwise become a more responsible actor on the world stage."

It is learnt that, a few weeks before Casey's remarks on the Iran connection, the US State Department had already conveyed its displeasure to Colombo, through diplomatic channels, about the Sri Lankan Government's rapidly growing bilateral relationship with Iran.

High-ranking Foreign Ministry Officials in Colombo downplayed the importance of Sri Lanka's close ties with Iran as traditional bilateral diplomatic relations between two independent countries.

But The Nation learns that US State Department officials were not satisfied with the government's response.

The US has also expressed its very serious concerns over Sri Lanka's growing ties with China and Russia.

New era ...

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highest possible welcome indicates their desire to work with Southern partners to achieve peace and prosperity.

Indeed, Southern hemisphere countries have been assuming a bigger profile in world fora and through their own groupings such as the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77.

Heads of State and Government from South Asian countries will be meeting in July in Sri Lanka for the annual SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Summit, which should be seen as yet another opportunity to cement their bonds of friendship.

While the SAARC Charter generally does not sanction the discussion of bilateral issues, the SAARC leaders would do well to ponder on development issues

affecting their region including the prevailing food and energy crises.

One prime example is India's willingness to provide rice to Sri Lanka in spite of an export ban on non-Basmati rice. The whole of Asia is being affected by the rice crisis and Asian countries must necessarily cooperate to overcome it. They should take the lead in developing higher-yielding rice varieties and helping each other to modernise paddy cultivation.

Similarly, India will help Sri Lanka to build a power plant in Sampur and lay a transmission line between the two countries.

This will make it possible for both countries to supply electricity to each other in times of need. These are fine instances of South-South cooperation which is emerging as the best solution for the woes confronting the Third World.

NEWS

India urged to play greater role in Sri Lanka

ACCORDING to a poll conducted by a local think tank its not just Indian politicians who are calling for greater Indian participation in bringing peace to Sri Lanka but also Sri Lankans of all ethnicity.

A survey by the Colombo-based think tank, Centre for Policy Alternatives, showed that cutting across ethnic lines, there is significant support in Sri Lanka for a greater Indian role on the island, both in the political and economic spheres, the think tank revealed last week.

The survey conducted in March in all but the war-torn northern province, the survey found majority support from all communities except the Sinhalese for Indian participation in peace negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Only 47.8 per cent of the Sinhalese backed that tactic whereas 62.9 per cent of Sri Lankan Tamils; 61.1 per cent of Indian-origin Tamils; and 70.6 per cent of Muslims did.

However, the three communities differed widely on the question of an Indian role in military operations against the LTTE.

While the Sinhalese and Muslims wanted Indian military involvement, the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Indian Tamils were against it. While 58.5 per cent of Sinhalese, and 61.5 per cent of Muslims approved an Indian military involvement, only 7.2 per cent of Sri Lankan Tamils and 4.9 per cent of Indian Tamils did.

Political observers point out

the atrocities committed by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) when it was deployed in Sri Lanka between 1987-1990 in the north and east.

Meanwhile, the Tamil Nadu Assembly on Wednesday, April 23 passed a resolution urging the Centre to take efforts to solve the ethnic issue in Sri Lanka by initiating dialogue between two warring factions.

The resolution was tabled by Chief Minister M Karunanidhi and was welcomed by Congress, PMK and MDMK.

After Question Hour, a Special Call Attention Motion was taken up to discuss the Lankan issue. Karunanidhi suggested that India should organise negotiations between the warring parties in Sri Lanka.

"To bring about peace in Sri Lanka, the Union government should come forward to organise useful negotiations so that a proper political solution is thrashed out," he said in an interview to The Times of India.

"When the trouble started in Lanka, men like Selva waged a non-violent protest. However when their efforts failed to yield the right results, it forced people there to take to violence only to emancipate themselves from the clutches of Lankan authorities."

"Had everyone fought unitedly then, an amicable solution would have been arrived like in the neighbouring Nepal, he observed."

Reacting to a recent resolution



Posters in Colombo criticising India for not doing more to crush the Tamil Tigers. Photo Daily Mirror

adopted by the Tamilnadu Assembly calling for India's role to arrange peace talks between the warring parties, President Rajnath Singh of Barathia Janatha Party (BJP), India's main opposition, told a press conference that India should play a "direct" role in this regard.

Asking India to play a "direct" role to end the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, the BJP said the Centre should utilise diplomatic channels to bring the warring parties in the island to the negotiation table.

"The Indian Government should play a major role to bring both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government to negotiating table," Rajnath Singh told reporters.

The recent visit of former Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi's daughter Priyanka Vadhra's on March 19 to Vellore Prison to meet Nalini, a convict in her father's assassination has created

stir both in Sri Lanka and India.

Some saw it as having strategic implications and cite the quotes, issued by Nalini's lawyer, S. Duraisamy.

"What happened to my father should not happen to any member of my family."

"If the LTTE has any anger or hatred against my family, it should be buried."

Some observers see it as a non political event. Karunannidhi also reflected this view when he said "such instances which go on to prove that there is still compassion and love among people"

However some saw it as a political gimmick in preparation for elections. Barathia Janatha Party, India's main opposition party, dismissed the visit as a political ploy and said "Her visit to see Nalini was a diplomatic tactics used by the Congress with a motive rpt motive."

India to lend Colombo \$200m

ECONOMIC Times, one of India's leading business dailies, on Sunday revealed that in spite of possible "political and diplomatic ramifications", the Indian Government was "finalizing a soft loan package of \$100 million for Sri Lankan defence department to buy arms and ammunition."

The newspaper went one step ahead and dubbed this move "the India fund for fighting Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka."

Citing reliable sources, the news report added that India was giving the loan at a "highly concessional interest rate of just 2%" though Sri Lanka did not come under the category of Least Developed Country which would enable it to secure such a discounted interest.

India was also planning to give another term loan of \$100 million to Sri Lanka for railway projects.

The combined soft loan amount of \$200 million (\$100 for defence, \$100 for development) was very high compared to India's total "bilateral disbursement of \$500 million soft loans" for the entire fiscal year 2008, the Economic Times news report said. Moreover, the daily also added that India's move was seen as "yet another attempt to eliminate the Tamil Tigers in an indirect manner."

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Iranian leader's historic visit to Sri Lanka ...

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construction of the hydel project started during Ahmadinejad's visit.

Iranian engineers have already been preparing the project report for doubling the capacity of the refinery and for modifying it to enable it to refine in future Iranian crude to be supplied at concessional rates. The existing capacity is 50,000 barrels a day.

In addition Iran is also providing low-interest loan to Sri Lanka to enable it to purchase defence-related equipment from China and Pakistan and providing Sri Lankan Army and Military Intelligence officers.

According to analysts, the interest shown by Iran in Sri Lanka since last year is attributed to its desire to counter the Israeli influence in Sri Lanka and to use Sri Lanka as a base for monitoring the movements of US naval ships between the Pacific and the

Gulf. Since Rajapakse came to power, the visit of US naval vessels and officers to Sri Lanka has increased. Even before he came to power, Israel had emerged as an important supplier of military equipment, particularly for the Sri Lankan Air Force.

Analyst also pointed the fact that even at the risk of misunderstanding with Israel, Rajapakse chose to approach Iran and accepted its ready offer of assistance underlined the serious economic situation in which Sri Lanka found itself.

In a joint statement issued at the conclusion of Iranian President's visit Sri Lanka said it supported the peaceful use of nuclear energy by Iran within the framework of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"The two sides confirmed the full and non-discriminatory implementation of Article IV of

the NPT on peaceful nuclear co-operation." The statement read.

It further said the two sides reiterated the importance of global nuclear disarmament, particularly the need for the nuclear powers to destroy their nuclear weapons, based on the decisions of the relevant international meetings.

The communiqué also expressed the recognition of the inalienable rights and the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people, stressed the need for security and peace in Lebanon and emphasised the need for the preservation of the territorial integrity and unity of Iraq.

The press release further said that Iran and Sri Lanka supported, as a matter of priority, the endeavours of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to restore peace and stability.

Explaining the importance of cultivating a close friendship with Iran, an aide close to Rajapakse

said: "Iran is the sole supplier of crude oil for the only refinery in Sri Lanka in Sapugaskanda. The oil made available to Sri Lanka is given on easy payment basis and is a boon in a situation where we are compelled to spend exorbitant amounts fighting the Tamil Tigers"

Meanwhile, government officials are busy reiterating why Sri Lanka prefers the company of its 'non-preaching' Asian cohabitants rather than the West whose critical focus on the country has only got sharper as Sri Lanka's war spirals and its human rights record further deteriorates.

"In Asia, there is no superiority complex. Asian leaders are not obsessed with preaching like the West is," a senior government official said as economists point out that it is no secret that Sri Lanka has taken its war drained financial woes to Asia in a background where the emphatically anti-war West has threatened to cut aid and remove concessions.

NEWS

EU will not cut trade concessions over human rights abuses

Dilshani Samaraweera
Sunday Times

THE EUROPEAN Commission (EC), amidst a growing debate in the media and political circles over the GSP+ being linked to human rights violations, repeated its assertion (as has been the case in recent months) that no decision has been reached on this scheme and that there is no reason to assume Sri Lanka would be disqualified from the preferential trade scheme by end of the year.

"There seems to be an impression that the loss of the GSP+ is a done deal. I want to emphasise that nothing is further from the truth. There has been no decision made yet. The review, which is a technical procedure, takes place in the fourth quarter of this year," said the Head of Operations of the Delegation of the European Commission to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, Peter Maher, last week. Maher was addressing businesses at a seminar organised by the Sri Lanka-Poland Business Council.

A new element also entered the debate with the Commerce Department warning that even if the GSP+ scheme were to be extended, benefits to Sri Lanka could reduce, if the EU implements some proposed changes to the rules of the GSP scheme. This is largely due to a proposal that calls for high domestic value addition from textile products.

The GSP+, preferential trade scheme from the EU allows Sri Lanka to export 7,200 items duty free into the EU and is credited with helping to boost Sri Lankan exports. The scheme is to be reviewed this year for its extension for another three years. Sri Lanka was awarded the GSP+ on the basis of ratifying 27 international conventions on core human rights, labour rights and environmental standards. Given the increasing allegations of human rights violations in the island, there is now growing concern that the scheme may not be extended after the end of this year.

The EC office maintains that the continuation of the GSP+ scheme depends on the implementation of the 27 conventions, but says it does not expect "absolute compliance." "No one expects absolute compliance.

This would be unfair but we need to be clear that there would be an objective assessment on the implementation of these conventions," said Maher. The conventions in question are not limited to those on human rights. Eight out of the 27 conventions are International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions to ensure rights of workers.

The Commerce Department says that even before getting the GSP+, Sri Lanka qualified for extra duty cuts, to export to the EU, because of comparatively good labour standards, for a developing country.

"Sri Lanka will have to submit a fresh application for the GSP+ by October 31, 2008, providing comprehensive information on the ratification of the 27 conventions. The EC will then examine if these conventions have been adequately implemented with the required laws," said Maher.

"The findings of international organisations will also be taken into account. Out of the 27 conventions, eight are ILO conventions on labour rights," said Maher. One convention that was disputed regarding its effective implementation was the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

However, the Supreme Court recently determined that the constitution of the country and the decisions of the Supreme Court gave adequate recognition to the civil and political rights contained in the ICCPR. The court also held that the rights recognised in the Covenant are 'justiciable' through legal and constitutional processes prevailing in the country.

"The EU has concerns on the withdrawal of the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons and UN statements and the implementation of certain conventions. However, on the ICCPR, some clarifications were made by the Supreme Court, which of course will be taken into consideration," said Maher.

The list of countries that qualify for the GSP+ scheme from 2009 to 2011 will be announced by mid-December 2008. The EC office says 'the ball is in the government's court' to make sure the country retains the GSP+ for another three years.

Sri Lanka's main export sector



Chief Executive of Britain's Marks and Spencer Group Stuart Rose (l) and Chief Executive of Sri Lanka's M&S Group, Mahesh Amalean (c) walk in procession with others to open an environmentally friendly plant in Thulhiriya, some 60kms south of Colombo on April 25. Rose opened a similar plant run by Sri Lanka's clothing exporter, Brandix Lanka Ltd. Photo STRDEL/AFP/Getty Images

M&S boss hails Sri Lanka's 'ethical standards'

IN A visit to Sri Lanka last week, Marks & Spencer's boss has hailed the country's "ethical standards" and assured that he will do 'everything possible to support Sri Lanka's application for the GSP+ concessions'.

Chief Executive Officer, Sir Stuart Rose told Sri Lankan ministers Professor G. L. Peiris and Dr. Sarath Amunugama: "I deeply appreciate Sri Lanka's ethical standards and her splendid performance in the apparel sector"

Ignoring Sri Lanka's human rights record and the European Union's (EU) recent announcement linking Sri Lanka's compliance to human rights and labor rights conventions, Rose extended his full support for Sri Lanka's application for GSP+ concessions.

"I understand how important the GSP+ scheme is for Sri Lanka. I will do everything possible to support your application for these concessions", said Rose.

After visiting MAS Intimates Thurulie, Marks and Spencer's new and Sri Lanka's first eco-friendly manufacturing plant at MAS Fabric Park, Thulhiriya Rose said: "This is one of the best factories that I ever visited"

"There are others who merely talk, but Sri Lanka is a doer, that's what makes the difference".

The innovative green plant will manufacture lingerie for M&S, UK's largest clothing retailer, which operates stores in more than 30 countries.

Describing the factory as a trend-setter, Rose noted: 'Sri Lanka set standards which others will and should follow'.

The launch of the eco-friendly plant is in keeping with Marks and Spencer new drive, called "Plan A", towards ethical trading and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

The scheme will see M&S become carbon neutral, stop sending waste to landfill and extend

its sustainable sourcing by 2012.

Whilst applauding Marks and Spencer's eco-friendly approach to business, political observers questioned Rose's wisdom on supporting Sri Lanka, a country accused of grave human rights abuses by international rights groups.

According to the Sri Lankan daily, The Island, delighted by the unexpected boost to Sri Lanka's GSP+ cause, Ministers Peiris and Amunugama who visited the factory with Rose congratulated him for the inspiring speech.

Speaking at the event, Amunugama emphasized the importance Sri Lanka attaches to the GSP+ saying this scheme sustains the country's 7% growth.

"The GSP+ is not a give away, but a hard earned reward for managing our apparel industry exceedingly well", The Island newspaper quoted him as saying.

"We rightly deserve these concessions".

using the GSP+ is the garment sector. However, local manufacturers are heavily import dependent. So the Commerce Department pointed out that the high domestic value addition requirement for textile products (50% -60%), if implemented by the EU, could disqualify most garment exporters from using the GSP+, even if the scheme were to

be extended. The department pointed out that if implanted, the new rules could divert export orders from Sri Lanka towards least developed countries (LDCs) in the region, like Bangladesh. Already Sri Lankan garment exporters are facing stiff competition from lower cost production from Bangladesh.

"For textile products, they

have proposed 50% - 60% domestic value addition for Sri Lanka, but 30% for LDCs. The LDCs are not required to undertake any obligations for this, but Sri Lanka must undertake obligations in the form of implementing 27 conventions. So this could result in trade diversion towards LDCs," said Sonali Wijeratne, Deputy Director, Department of Commerce.

NEWS

1 million in Northeast face starvation as UN cuts food rations, blaming prices

EVEN as the global food shortage worsened and price of essentials hit record levels, the UN food agency, World Food Programme (WFP) announced it is cutting down on its rations to one million people it is feeding in the war-torn North and East of Sri Lanka.

"Scarcity of food items and the subsequent escalation in the cost of essential items may result in more than one million in the country facing starvation," Mohamed Saleheen, the WFP Country Director in Colombo told the media on Friday, April 25.

As a result of the situation, the WFP in Sri Lanka is facing major crisis, he said, and urged donor countries to respond immediately to overcome the crisis.

"More than a million civilians affected by civil war depend on the relief supplies provided by WFP. Most of these are internally displaced and recently resettled people currently residing in Kilinochchi, Mullaitheevu, Jaffna, Mannar, and Batticaloa," said Mr. Saleheen.

"Each month 9200 tons of food is required to meet the needs of the people in the North including Kilinochchi, Mullaitheevu, Jaffna and Mannar. However, we are able to ship only 6000 tons. If this crisis continues our activities will become complicated, and over million people dependent on WFP-funded programme will be directly affected."

"The civilians already suffering by the effects of civil war will be seriously hurt if unable to receive food supplies. The effect of malnutrition will not be felt immediately but will be visible only after a year or two."

Saleheen said the cost of food supplies has increased by more

than fifty percent and the allocation of US\$64 million for 2008 is no longer sufficient for WFP operations and urged donors to provide immediate assistance to affected people.

"We appeal to the donor countries and the international community to realize the seriousness of the situation and immediately come to the aid of the affected people."

Commenting on the UN rations cut, the Nation Building Ministry's Project Director, R.H.W.A. Kumarasiri, said that though they have had discussions regarding the problem, there was still no final decision on reducing the rations.

However, Saleheen contradicting Kumarasiri said that from May 1 WFP would be forced by circumstances to suspend their food-for-work programme to about 175,000 people in the war-affected regions and reduce rations of others from 1,900 kilo calories to 1,665 kilo calories per day per person.

While suspending the food-for-work-programme, he said they would continue to assist the priority targets such as the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the returnees, the economically displaced, pregnant women, nursing mothers, children under five and school feeding, which he termed as "absolutely imperative".

The WFP basket of rations comprises rice, wheat flour, cooking oil, dhal and sugar. The Sunday Times learns that the quantum of rice supplied -- 200 grammes per day per head -- will remain untouched, but cuts will be in wheat flour and sugar.

Kumarasiri said there was no problem in WFP procuring items



There are over 800,000 internally displaced Tamils, including this girl from Vakarai in the eastern province. The Sri Lankan government has been hampering international aid agencies, denying visas to aid workers, holding up shipments at military checkpoints and allowing paramilitaries to seize supplies. The international community has by and large supported the government's pacification policy.

like rice from the local market. The problem was in imported food items like wheat flour which were affected by rising world prices.

But, according to the WFP, already two local suppliers who had contracted to supply rice this year had defaulted as they are unable to supply at the prices con-

tracted six months earlier. Mr. Saleheen said though they had budgeted US\$64 million this year to feed the affected people, so far they had only been able to raise less than half, leaving a gap of US\$ 35 million to be filled.

Saleheen warned that failure to meet the reality now would have its impact on ordinary peo-

ple in several months down the line as their health might get affected.

He was specifically concerned about children and pregnant women. Last year the WFP provided dry rations to affected Lankans on a budget of US\$ 50 million, with more than half of it coming from the United States.

'Silent tsunami' hits vulnerable hard

IRIN

HUMANITARIAN agencies in Sri Lanka are preparing for the fallout as increasing food prices and shortages put vulnerable populations at risk of malnutrition and leave many families no longer able to afford essentials such as medical care.

The global food crisis, referred to by World Food Programme (WFP) officials as "the silent tsunami" during a summit in London on 22 April, is hitting hard.

Munniandy Muttur, a janitor in the capital Colombo, told IRIN: "I earn only Rs350 [US\$3.20] per day, and that amount is not enough if we try to eat well. If I or my wife fall sick, we can't even think of private hospital. God willing, we will

either not fall sick, or just fall dead, that is better."

The 66-year-old man said he and his wife had cut down on meat and survived as best they could. "Everything is getting expensive, but we are not getting paid more."

Relief agencies warn that vulnerable communities will increasingly cut back on essentials just to get by.

"Poor communities are surviving from one day to another - the rise in food prices means the poor families are living in a 'survival mode', planning for their next meal, rather than making and acting on long-term plans for them and their children," Nayomi Kannangara, Child Protection Program Manager with Christian Children's Fund in Sri Lanka, told IRIN.

Kannangara warned that chil-

dren's education and healthcare may be neglected first.

"Some families may not be able to afford the bus fare to the hospital where the medical care is free and may not be able to purchase the drugs that are not available through the free clinics," she said. "Symptoms are neglected and less attention is paid to non-critical medical needs."

Rice stocks have dwindled since the government imposed price controls on 17 April. In addition, the World Food Programme (WFP) has temporarily suspended its work for food project in the war-torn northeast due to a lack of resources.

WFP country director Mohamed Saleheen told IRIN the programme had been benefiting 175,000 people.

"We held discussions with the government and agreed on what

our priorities are," he said. "Given the resources we have, we cannot take care of everything."

The suspension will remain in force until new donor commitments allow the WFP to recommence it.

The WFP in Sri Lanka is facing increasing budgetary restrictions given that food prices have shot up by more than 50 percent in the past year and the agency is facing a 40 percent funding shortfall.

"We need an additional US\$35 million to meet the funding requirements that were set on older prices, but now they have sky-rocketed," the WFP country director said.

The food price increases have been exacerbated by a 12.5 percent shortfall in domestic rice supply, the staple food of the islanders, according to govern-

ment statistics.

The government Census and Statistics Department recorded that average annual inflation rose by 16.8 percent in March 2008. A monthly 1.5 percent rise in the Colombo consumer price index (CCPI) was due to escalating food prices.

"The increase in the CCPI for March 2008 is mainly due to an increase in prices of rice, fresh milk, condensed milk, Lactogen [baby food], tea, red onions, coconut oil, butter, jam, some varieties of fresh fish, dried fish, coconuts, potatoes and some varieties of vegetables," it said in its latest CCPI report.

Agencies working with vulnerable populations have already begun to factor in the rising prices into their estimates.

"We are in discussions with

Continued on p19

EDITORIAL & OPINION

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A Time of Change

New challenges and opportunities for the Tamil freedom struggle

The pointedly symbolic visit to Sri Lanka, in between those to Pakistan and India, by the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has inevitably sparked considerable analysis as to the implications for politics, broadly defined, in the island, the region and indeed, internationally. In the recent past Iran, long in the background of Sri Lanka's dynamics, has come into the limelight as forcibly as has China. Conversely, under President Mahinda Rajapakse, the Sinhala state is making a deliberate shift to the East and away from the West. Such realignments are, of course, never absolute. Contemporary international relations are characterized by schizophrenia whereby the modern state engages in both competition and cooperation with both ally and enemy. Nonetheless, there are specific logics inherent to the Sri Lankan state's ongoing transition. In short, the long-term interests of the Sinhala-nationalist project at the heart of the post-independence Sri Lankan state are incompatible with Western ambitions of global liberalism and are better served in the company of states committed to non-interference in each others' 'internal affairs'.

The Tamil struggle against state oppression became an armed conflict during the Cold War and was promptly caught up in it. Sri Lanka's swing to the West under President Junius Jayawardene earned the Tamil militants both Western condemnation as 'terrorists' and India's active support against the Sinhala state. The armed struggle continued after the Cold War ended and global liberalism - i.e. the spread of liberal democracy and market economics - became a project pursued with evangelical zeal by powerful Western states. In this context, the Tamil armed struggle was never going to be anything but 'terrorism', no matter what horrors the Sri Lankan state visited on the Tamil people. Indeed, the latter was excused precisely because it was inflicted in the cause of 'fighting terrorism'.

The point here is that whether international actors supported or opposed the Tamil liberation struggle had less to do with what Tamils did or said than with whether their struggle and its outcome served the relevant external actor's interests or not. This is still the case. For many years, the Tamils were solemnly lectured on liberal values by leading Western actors - even as they unabashedly backed the Sinhala state's oppression. This

hypocrisy has been naked in the past decade the West repeatedly went to war all over the world in the pursuit of its own geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. The legitimating rhetoric was those of human rights, freedom, even peace. But the interests being pursued were all too often clearly visible through the veil of liberalism.

Under President Rajapakse, the Sinhala state's ethnomajoritarian ethos has become overt and overarching. Which is why the state can abuse human rights, crush media freedoms and roll back the liberal order's hard fought gains in the island and yet retain the enthusiastic support of the majority of Sinhalese. At the same time, the emergence of new poles (with their own interests and values) has raised serious challenges to the West's interests as well as the ideological values it has promoted in the service of those interests. With Western states ideologically and institutionally committed to engineering a specific configuration of liberal democracy (consider what happens when non-Westerners use democratic means to endorse leaders and actors the West doesn't like) and free market economics, the Sinhala state knows it can never be at peace within a liberal order.

Irrespective of whether the state defeats the Tamil Tigers or not, Sinhala majoritarianism (and its attendant consequences of ethnic and religious marginalisation of Tamils and, of late, Muslims) will inevitably remain in tension with the liberal order. Sinhala hegemony needs external partners unconcerned by these consequences. The logics of aid conditionalities (political or economic), notions such as 'responsibility to protect', 'power-sharing', solutions 'acceptable to all communities' etc. will simply not do. Which is why we argue that Sri Lanka's turn to China, Iran and other like-minded states - in the sense of non-interference in 'internal affairs' - is decisive. There will be relations with the West but, as many of them are already lamenting, the global liberals will have less and less leverage.

None of this is new to the West, its challengers, the Sinhala state or the Tamil liberation project's leadership. Realpolitik has always been the order of things. It's just more overt now. This is not to predict that things are going to be either better or worse for the Tamil liberation struggle, but to argue that both new opportunities and new challenges will come our way.

The Tamil liberation struggle & the new Cold War

The strategic significance of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean region.

Nadesan Satyendra

Centre for Just Peace and Democracy

Geography plays an important role (though often a silent one) in the affairs of states and nations without states. Where a state has a large internal market, the size of that internal market is itself a strategic asset. Where a state does not have a large internal market, it seems that it is often a question of location, location, location. The smaller the country, relatively more important becomes the location - and sometimes, the location itself becomes a strategic asset.

The Indian Ocean is not the largest ocean in the world. It is the 3rd largest. But it has something like 47 countries around it as well as several islands.

You can see them on the map. Coco island is not far from Myanmar where of course now the Chinese have a base. Then we have Andaman Islands, Maldives, Madagascar and of course in Gawdor in Pakistan and Kavar in India. And if you go down south you may even get to Diego Garcia with its US naval and air base. India itself projects something like 1200 miles into the Indian Ocean. And many Indians take the view that after all, the Indian Ocean is the Indian Ocean.

The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean region has been recognized for many years. US Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan said more than a century ago, "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters." Again, the British Empire owed much to British dominance of the Indian Ocean - a dominance which Hitler sought to undermine with his U-boats during Second World War.

The Indian Ocean contains an estimated 40% of the world's oil production. And today fresh

exploration continues in the Mannar seas off Sri Lanka, the Cauvery Basin off Tamil Nadu and in the seas off Myanmar.

But the significance of the Indian Ocean arises not simply from the resources it has. The Indian Ocean is a critical waterway. It includes half of the world's containerized cargo, one thirds of its bulk cargo and two thirds of its oil shipments. Its waters carry heavy traffic of petroleum products. And unlike the Atlantic Ocean, much of this traffic is to countries outside the Indian Ocean.

The sea lanes of the Indian Ocean give a graphic picture of its strategic significance.

China, which has been a net oil importer since 1993 is the world's no 2 oil consumer after the United States. It achieved that status in 2004. Before that the 2nd largest oil consumer was Japan. China has accounted for as much as 40% of the world's crude oil demand growth during the period 2000 to 2004.

Access to energy resources is a very critical factor for continued Chinese economic growth. And, not surprisingly China has stepped up efforts to secure sea lanes and transport routes that are vital for its oil supplies. The geo political strategy adopted by China has been dubbed 'the string of pearls' strategy.

Barry Desker, Director IDSS, wrote in 2005: "The emergence of new powers like China and India is expected to transform the regional strategic landscape in a fashion that could be as dramatic as the rise of Germany in the 19th century and the United States in the 20th century"

Donald L. Berlin, Head of Security Studies, Asia Pacific Centre for Security Studies, Honolulu, writes: "the Indian ocean region has become the strategic heartland of the 21st

OPINION



century, dislodging Europe and North East Asia which adorned this position in the 20th century.. the developments in the Indian Ocean region are contributing to the advent of a less Western centric and a more multi-polar world."

Hopefully, sufficient has been said to show that the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean region existed before the conflict in the island of Sri Lanka, that it continues to exist and that it will continue to exist even after the Tamil - Sinhala conflict in the island is resolved.

Here, one matter of significance is that the dynamics of the region calls for a balance of power approach rather than a straight alliance.

Adam Wolfe, Yevgeny Bendersky and Dr. Federico Bordonaro write in 'India's Project Seabird and Indian Ocean's Balance of Power', in July 2005: "...the dynamics of the region calls for a balance of power approach rather than a straight alliance.... The rise of India as a major power, coupled with the better-known - and frequently analyzed - Chinese rise, is changing the structure of the world system. Not only is U.S. 'unipolar' hegemony in the Indian Ocean facing a challenge, but the strategic triad U.S.- Western Europe-Japan, which has ruled the international political economy for the past few decades, is now also under question... We can expect the South Asian region to be one of the system's key areas to be watched in the next decade."

The balance of power in the Indian Ocean region is not a simple black and white matter. The frame is multilateral and the interactions are nuanced - and calibrated. There is a word that was coined some years ago in a different context - in the study of multinational corporations and so on. The word was co-petition. You compete in some areas but you also co-operate in other

areas. When you cooperate in some areas and compete in other areas - that's co-petition. For instance India and US do have a strategic partnership in some areas. But, New Delhi is not simply a partner of China or the United States. It seeks to march to the beat of its own drummer.

The question is: in what areas are the US, New Delhi and China competing with each other, and in what areas are they cooperating with each other? The US may welcome a 'balance of power' in Asia as a way of securing its own pre-eminence in a unipolar world (or in the terms of Condoleezza Rice, a unipolar world with a multipolar perspective). But will New Delhi and China be content with such an approach or will they be challenged by it? Is Sri Lanka an area of competition or cooperation? And, importantly, if it is an area of cooperation what is the extent of the cooperation?

This may be the appropriate stage to turn to an examination of the strategic significance of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean region.

In 1947/48 Ceylon entered into a defense agreement with the United Kingdom for the use by the United Kingdom of the naval base in Trincomalee. The Defence Agreement was a condition precedent to the United Kingdom granting independence in February 1948.

However, the strategic significance of Sri Lanka arises not only from Trincomalee. Its not as simple as that - we need to include Hambantota, the Voice of America installations and so on. Ramesh Somasundaram of Deakin University in his 2005 publication 'Strategic Significance of Sri Lanka' gives three reasons for the 'interest of the international community' in Sri Lanka: "(1) Sri Lanka is strategically situated, (2) It is ideally situated to be a major communication center, and (3) It has Trincomalee, described by

the British Admiral Horatio Nelson as "the finest harbour in the world. Sri Lanka occupies a strategic point in the Indian Ocean, whose vast expanse covering 2,850,000 sq miles, touches the shores of the Indian subcontinent in the North; Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia in the East; Antarctica in the South; and East Africa in the West."

In 1985 I was in Bhutan as a member of the Tamil delegation to the Thimpu Talks. The Research Analysis Wing of India spent some considerable time informing us of the threats that US submarines posed in the Indian Ocean and the difficulties they had and why it was important that some agreement must be achieved with Sri Lanka.

The Thimpu Talks themselves failed but two years later in 1987, the Indo Sri Lanka Accord did secure for India its strategic interests. The exchange of letters between Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lanka President J.R.Jayawardene on 29 July 1987 preceding the Signing of Agreement provided inter alia that 'Sri Lanka's agreement with foreign broadcasting organisations will be reviewed to ensure that any facilities set up by them in Sri Lanka are used solely as public broadcasting facilities and not for any military or intelligence purposes' and that 'Trincomalee or any other ports in Sri Lanka will not be made available for military use by any country in a manner prejudicial to India's interests.'

The intervention by the United States and by India in the conflict in the island has a long history.

India armed and trained Tamil militants in their struggle for Tamil Eelam. In 1998, Jyotindra Nath Dixit who served as Indian High Commissioner in Sri Lanka 1985 /89, Foreign Secretary in 1991/94 and National Security Adviser to the Prime Minister of India 2004/05

declared disarmingly "...Tamil militancy received (India's) support ...as a response to (Sri Lanka's).. concrete and expanded military and intelligence cooperation with the United States, Israel and Pakistan. ... The assessment was that these presences would pose a strategic threat to India and they would encourage fissiparous movements in the southern states of India. ... a process which could have found encouragement from Pakistan and the US, given India's experience regarding their policies in relation to Kashmir and the Punjab.... Interstate relations are not governed by the logic of morality. They were and they remain an amoral phenomenon....."

When these matters are mentioned, it is sometimes said that all this may have been relevant during the time of the cold war but that the world has moved on sine then. It is true that the world has moved on - but today we are in the midst of a new cold war. The United States may be the sole super power, but it lives in an 'asymmetric' multi lateral world where strong regional powers (including the EU, Russia, China and India) have increasing global impact. We are living in a world where the 'asymmetry' is progressively diminishing. This is the new cold war. It is a cold war because open warfare is to nobody's benefit.

Today, for Sri Lanka, China is a 'benign friend'. Sudha Ramachandran warned in the Asia Times on 13 March 2007 that "China is all set to drop anchor at India's southern doorstep. An agreement has been finalized between Sri Lanka and China under which the latter will participate in the development of a port project at Hambantota on the island's south coast. ...the significance of Hambantota to China lies in its proximity to India's south coast and on the fact that it provides Beijing with presence midway in the Indian Ocean."

In March 2007, B. Muralidhar Reddy commented on the ten year Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) signed by the United States and Sri Lanka on 5 March 2007: "The ten year Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) signed by the United States and Sri Lanka on March 5, which provides for among other things logistics supplies and re-fuelling facilities, has major ramifications for the region, particularly India. For all the sophistry and spin by the Americans, the ACSA is a military deal and, on the face of it, is loaded in Washington's favour."

These then are some aspects of the international dimension of the conflict in the island of Sri Lanka. It will be fair to say that there are two conflicts in the island. One is the conflict arising from the people of Tamil Eelam struggling to free themselves from oppressive rule by an ethno-Sinhala nation masquerading as a 'civic' Sri Lankan nation. The other is the conflict between

international actors jostling for power and influence in the Indian Ocean Region.

And the record shows that these international actors are concerned to influence the resolution of the conflict in such a way that each of their own (conflicting) interests in the Indian Ocean region are advanced - or at least not undermined. But at the same time each of these international actors often engage in public diplomacy which denies the existence of their own strategic interests.

The reluctance on the part of the international community to openly state their interests may be understandable. And we may also need to recognize that human rights and humanitarian law are often simply the instruments through which states intervene in the affairs of other states. We had for instance Helsinki Watch which played an important role in the old cold war. Now of course Helsinki Watch has matured into Human Rights Watch.

Said that, denial by international actors, of their own (conflicting) strategic interests in Sri Lanka draws a veil over the real issues that any meaningful conflict resolution process in the island will need to address.

To the extent to which we can bring these strategic interests out of the closet, we may be able to take forward the resolution of the conflict in the island in a constructive way.

This will also help the Tamil people as well as the Sinhala people to understand the harsh reality of the real politick which confronts them both. At the end of the day, however difficult it may appear to some, it is the Tamil people and the Sinhalese people who will need to have the conversation with each other about how two independent and free peoples may associate with one another.

I will end here - with something which the Leader of Tamil Eelam, Velupillai Pirapaharan, said in 1993: "Every country in this world advances its own interests. It is economic and trade interests that determine the order of the present world, not the moral law of justice nor the rights of people. International relations and diplomacy between countries are determined by such interests. Therefore we cannot expect an immediate recognition of the moral legitimacy of our cause by the international community. ... In reality, the success of our struggle depends on us, not on the world. Our success depends on our own efforts, on our own strength, on our own determination..." (Edited)

Mr. Nadesan Satyendra was a negotiator for the Tamil delegation at the Thimpu talks in 1985. A Barrister by profession, he has written and spoken extensively on Sri Lanka's conflict for 25 years. He serves as Advisor to the CJPD. The full text of this article is available in the CJPD publication 'International Dimensions of the Conflict in Sri Lanka' (2008).

DEBACLE IN JAFFNA

Over confident Sri Lanka Army again walked into a deadly LTTE trap

B. Raman
SAAG

FOR the second time in less than two years, an over-confident Sri Lankan Army (SLA) has walked into a deadly trap laid by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the Muhamalai area near Jaffna in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka on April 23, 2008, and faced a rout.

1. The SLA not only lost over 150 soldiers, who were killed by the LTTE, but also enabled the LTTE to seize a large quantity of arms and ammunition from the battle scene. The LTTE has not had such a bonanza of recovered arms and ammunition since the earlier SLA rout in the same area on October 11, 2006.

2. After the rout of October 11, 2006, the SLA, as is its wont, had played down the fatalities suffered by it and played up the fatalities which it claimed to have inflicted on the LTTE. Only after the LTTE disseminated details of the fatalities inflicted by it on the SLA, did the latter admit that 139 soldiers were killed by the LTTE. A few weeks later, Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka, the chief of the SLA, had gone to the US, inter alia, for a medical check-up in connection with the injuries suffered by him in an unsuccessful attempt by the LTTE to kill him through a woman suicide bomber. Reliable sources reported at that time that during his interactions with American military officers in Washington DC he admitted that the SLA had suffered nearly 400 fatalities on October 11, 2006. He allegedly blamed Mr. Gothabaya Rajapaksa, the brother of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who is the Defence Secretary, for hastily pushing the Army into a battle when it was not yet ready--

--that too in a terrain which the LTTE knew better than the SLA.

3. After the battle of April 23, 2008, the SLA claimed that it suffered 43 fatalities with 33 more soldiers missing in action, but the correspondent of the CNN TV channel and the Agence France Press (AFP) have reported that the fatalities suffered by the SLA were more than 100. Reliable Sri Lankan Police sources estimate the SLA fatalities at about 150. The SLA has claimed to have killed over 100 LTTE soldiers, but the LTTE has admitted only 16 fatalities. In an analysis of the casualty figures, the AFP has pointed out that in the beginning of this year, the SLA had given the total strength of the LTTE as about 3000, but the total number of fatalities which the SLA has claimed to have inflicted on the LTTE since January 1, 2008, is 3105, when one adds up the figures given by the SLA.

4. Since the beginning of this year, the SLA and the Defence Ministry have embarked on a

campaign of disinformation regarding the ground situation in the Northern Province. As part of this disinformation campaign, not a day has passed without their reporting some operation or the other resulting in large fatalities inflicted on the LTTE. The purpose of this campaign was to buttress the morale of the soldiers of the SLA and the Sinhalese people, to give themselves in public perception an aura of legendary military prowess and weaken the morale of the LTTE and its Sri Lankan Tamil supporters. According to some critics of the Government, many of the so-called battles reported as part of this disinformation campaign allegedly existed only in the figment of the SLA's imagination.

5. Many tall claims were made as part of this disinformation campaign such as: pin-point intelligence has started flowing from human sources in the Northern Province; many precision air strikes had been made on the LTTE's political and operational nerve-centres with the help of such pin-point information; the LTTE's Navy had been practically wiped out; the LTTE's hold in the North was weakening and the SLA would be able to rout it and re-establish its control over the North before the end of this year.

6. One of the basic principles of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism is that you don't indulge in disinformation in your own territory and directed at your own people. It could prove counter-productive and dangerous by creating a sense of over-confidence in your own troops and people. When the troops realise that they had been sent into battles on the basis of false information and assessments, the credibility of the political and military leadership in the eyes of the people and the soldiers would suffer. The LTTE and its Sri Lankan Tamil supporters know well the ground situation in their territory. They will not be deceived by such a disinformation campaign. It is the Sinhalese public and the soldiers, who will be deceived by it.

7. This is what happened in October, 2006, and this is what has happened now. The LTTE did on April 23, 2008, exactly what it did on October 11, 2006. After fighting for some time in the face of an SLA offensive, it pretended to withdraw and vacate a small part of the territory under its control. Thinking in their euphoria that they have defeated the LTTE and forced its retreat, the SLA soldiers rushed into the area vacated by the LTTE and found themselves surrounded by it on all sides. It moved down the soldiers before they could recover from their surprise.

8. The rout inflicted by the LTTE on the SLA would serve as a morale-booster for its leaders



The Tamil Tigers had laid an elaborate ambush for the advancing Sri Lankan military. Photo LTTE

and cadres. It shows that its capability for conventional-style battles is intact and strong in the Northern Province, where the leadership remains united. It had weakened in the Eastern Province following the desertion in March, 2004, of Karuna, a capable officer of the LTTE, who looked after its conventional style operations. It was this weakening, which had enabled the SLA to wrest control of the Eastern Province with the help of the Eastern Tamil deserters from the LTTE's army.

9. Over-all, despite the success on April 23, 2008, the LTTE's position is still weak for want of an air cover and due to depletion in its arms and ammunition holdings. The battle of April 23 has replenished its holdings to some extent, but not adequately enough. The dilution of the support and sympathy of the international community has been another handicap. However, the motivation and the determination of its cadres are still strong. Any expectations of an easy walk-over in the North nursed by the SLA are likely to be belied unless its air strikes succeed in eliminating Pirabakaran, the LTTE leader.

10. While continuing with their confrontations on the ground, the Sri Lankan Air Force is trying frantically to eliminate Pirabakaran through an air strike and the LTTE is trying frantically to destroy the SLAF aircraft on the ground. Neither has succeeded so far. Whoever succeeds first is likely to turn the tide of the war in his favour.

The writer is a former director of counter-terrorism with RAW, and, presently, Director, Institute For Topical Studies.

2,000 Sri Lankan soldiers killed last year – Army Chief

OVER two thousand Sri Lankan Army (SLA) soldiers were killed and four thousand wounded in the battles of 2007, the commander of the SLA, Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka told a conference at Army Headquarters last week, the Sunday Times reported. He claimed over five thousand Tamil Tigers were also killed last year.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government has forbidden military officials from giving interviews and launched a hunt for those leaking details to the media. The government has instructed ambulances transporting wounded soldiers from Ratmalana airport to hospitals in Colombo not to use their sirens, the paper said.

Lt. Gen. Fonseka was addressing Principal Staff Officers and Directors at Army Headquarters in a conference held every four months.

In the context of government anger over military officials leaking details of battlefield setbacks to the media, he told the 90-minute conference: "We have not given this [2007 casualty figures] to the media. If anyone present wants to give it, they are free to do so."

The Army chief, who is under

media criticism for inflating claims of military successes, also spoke on eradicating corruption and the need for discipline, the paper said.

Last month the Sri Lanka Army suffered a debacle when it attacked the LTTE's forward defence lines (FDLs) in Jaffna.

Whilst Lt. Gen. Fonseka claimed that 47 soldiers were killed and 126 were wounded, the Sunday Times said over a hundred soldiers were killed and 355 confirmed wounded.

The Sunday Times, which spoke to both officers and men in the north and in Colombo, said it had "revealed what was gathered independently from reliable sources."

Other media reports, also quoting Sri Lankan military officials, put the toll at much higher. AFP news agency quoted military sources as saying at least 165 soldiers being killed and 20 more going missing.

The LTTE said more than 100 troops were killed in the day long clashes on April 23 and handed back the bodies of 28 soldiers.

Before the LTTE's handover,

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An LTTE cadre moves past a fallen Sri Lanka Army soldier during the heavy battle in the Jaffna peninsula on April 23. Nearly 200 SLA troops died in an abortive offensive

Northern front said 'impregnable'

COLOMBO was forced into staging Mukamaalai offensive to ensure safety to troops in Jaffna which had fallen within the range of artillery, panelists said during a Political Analysis segment of National Television of Tamil-eelam (NTT) this week.

The speakers were the LTTE military spokesperson, Irasiah Ilanthiraiyan, and Chief-Editor of Viduthalaip Pulika'l, LTTE's official organ, S. Ravi, in the programme moderated by K. Veera.

Panelists added that Sri Lanka's assertion that LTTE is moving troops between different Northern fronts is a figment of their imagination, and refuted the claim that the Sri Lanka Air Force has caused detrimental impact to LTTE's war machinery.

Excerpts from the discussion held in the NTT program segment titled "Implications of Mukamaalai Battle," follow:

Veera: What could have been the military objective behind the recent confrontation; why was Mukamaalai selected as the staging ground for that objective?

Ilanthiraiyan: The Mukamaalai operation had military and political objectives. Politically, after Colombo chose military path -- with Maavilaaru operation --, without stated milestones, it had a need to demonstrate military success. Colombo currently is forced to divert internal pressures result-

ing from the international criticism aimed at human rights failings and from commodity price increase and prolonged war fatigue.

Militarily, many observers commented that the security of armed forces in Jaffna was compromised as long as the two entry points to the peninsula- Palaali and KKS - were within artillery range of LTTE guns. There was a need to move the Mukamaalai FDL further south.

Veera: What battle plan was adopted by SLA for this latest Mukamaalai confrontation?

Ilanthiraiyan: Their 55th brigade advanced through A9, 53rd through Ka'ndal area. 55th brigade participated in the battle started in the early hours of 23rd (22nd night). Mechanized Infantry participated 23rd early morning; foot soldiers were supposed to open up path for the newly developed Mech Infantry to move forward. This didn't materialize.

Veera: Would you anticipate any changes in military tactics resulting from the latest confrontations?

Ilanthiraiyan: One battle is unlikely to cause changes in war tactics. They may review the tactics used the past three confrontations - Agni Keala, 2006 confrontation, and the recent one - to advance in the northern FDL. Northern FDL is 12 km long and

runs through, Kilaali, Ka'ndal, Mukamaalai, and Naakar Koayil. They used different tactics in all three confrontations and failed.

Veera: Ilanthiraiyan mentioned that the political incentives for the Mukamaalai confrontation. What are your thoughts?

Ravi: All SLA military confrontations had political motives in the background. Sinhala media has projected the on-going war effort as the means to achieve many objectives, including capturing Kilinochchi. However, the battle front activities in recent months were not producing victory stories to satisfy the expectations of the South. The political need to assure the public by capturing a well known area, in this case, Elephant Pass, was there. The timing of the operation is also noteworthy. Week beginning on April 22, brings many historical anniversaries - Capture of Elephant Pass, failed Agni Kela operation by SLA to recapture Elephant Pass, Bomb attack on Sarath Fonseka, all fall within this week.

Veera: There is an opinion that this operation was planned to divert the attention of the people from the prevailing rice shortage; do you think there is any connection?

Ravi: Sri Lanka's politics has historically been connected to the availability of rice. There is a dif-

ference between the rice shortages in the past and the current crisis. Current crisis is portrayed as linked to the war against Tamil people. We have to wait and see which gets priority in people's mind- the war or rice. There is a fear that Sri Lanka is going to face economic hardship due to the reduction of aid and military cooperation from some countries of the international community - countries include America, European Union, Japan and Israel.

So far, the military procurement of Sri Lanka was generally through long term loans - which is close to gift because in many cases, at a future date, the country is likely to be excused from repaying loan. The war against Tamils was conducted using arms procured through this mechanism, which didn't need much economic sacrifice from Sri Lankan economy. Currently, Sri Lanka has chosen new partners to obtain military procurement - Iran, China, and Pakistan are the new contacts made for this purpose. Procurement of arms from China, Pakistan or Iran is in exchange for Sri Lanka's exports. This is bound to increase the economic woes of Sri Lanka.

Veera: Why was the Mukamaalai battle front news censored in the south?

Ravi: Sri Lanka's political lead-

ership has always tried to keep the public from knowing the true statistics of their battle front losses. It is not clear whether this deception is possible due to effective information engineering by the political leadership, or the naivety of the population which is thirsty for military victories. Always the true situation has been exposed within a few days.

Veera: SLA has simultaneously opened many war fronts in different geographical areas. This is to stretch the LTTE forces and to apply maximum pressure. How pressured is LTTE now?

Ilanthiraiyan: From SLA's point of view, they are applying maximum pressure on us. From our point of view, the current situation demonstrates that we have been ready to confront them at any FDL at all times. At the same time Mukamaalai battle started, SLA advanced from Paalaikkuzhi to Adampan with tanks - they had to retreat under heavy resistance by the Tigers. The following day they advanced in Thirukeatheswaram area from Cheathukulam; this advance was also routed. Simultaneously, there were attacks in Ma'nalaa'ru - this was also defeated. Sri Lanka has projected that LTTE is not capable of withstanding simultaneous attacks in many fronts. We have

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NEWS

Father Karunaratnam: martyred serving the Tamil people

IN our April 9th issue, in an article entitled "Iconic of the times" one of Tamil Guardian's columnists discussed the rationale behind the Sinhala-Buddhist Sri Lankan state's attacks on the Northeastern Church, among which was last month's shelling of the historic Catholic shrine of Our Lady of Madhu.

The columnist argued that more important than the theological differences between the Sinhala interpretation of Buddhism and Catholicism is the inevitable conflict between an oppressive state and the social justice doctrine of the modern Catholic Church.

The point was exemplified within days by the assassination by Sri Lankan commandos of one of the best-loved and most prominent priests and human rights activists in the Vanni, Father Karunaratnam.

His vehicle was blasted by a command-detonated landmine even as it was being towed by a recovery truck, having broken down as Father Karunaratnam returned from Sunday Mass.

He was the founder and Head of the NESOHR (North East Secretariat of Human Rights), the only local Human Rights monitoring organisation in the LTTE controlled North. NESOHR has been a vocal chronicler of government aerial attacks, killings and abductions in the North East.

More telling than the murder itself is the almost non-existent

ing forward amid ferocious resistance from the Tamil Tigers..

According to Bishop Joseph, the LTTE had agreed for the shrine to be designated a peace zone, if the Colombo government would give a similar guarantee. However Colombo rejected the Bishop's plea.

In early 2008, the Sri Lankan military intensified its efforts to capture the Madhu Church. Its artillery barrages expanded and intensified; shells began exploding around the site.

On April 2, over five thousand Tamils in government-controlled Mannar city marched in protest demanding that the Church of Madhu be declared a peace zone.

As military analysts in the Sinhala South have pointed out, there is no military value in occupying the Madhu Church and there are alternative routes into the LTTE-held North.

But ahead of the Eastern elections, scheduled for May 10, there was a clear propaganda benefit in capturing the symbolic Church – especially against the backdrop of the Army's failure since July to progress in its multiple-front onslaught against the LTTE-held Vanni.

Apart from the rebuilt towns of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu deep within LTTE defences, there are almost no landmark places that could be "taken" by an army to serve as for a propaganda coup – other than the Church of Our Lady of Madhu.

On April 3, a day after the last of the refugees fled from the relentless shelling, the Bishop of Mannar, ordered the serving priests and nuns to also flee and to take with them the 400-year old Icon of our Lady of Madhu. They reached Theevanpiddi, deeper in LTTE-held territory, April 4.

600 school children from the nearby Roman catholic school of Adampan and Vaddakandan Tamil mixed school also fled to Theevanpiddi in the same time.

According to the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation, over 12,000 internally displaced persons from the Madhu area have been relocated.

For almost two months, the Army, though a short distance from the Madhu site, had been unable to close the gap due to LTTE resistance.

Once the evacuations had been completed, the LTTE's defensive units also pulled back.

But to the fury of the Mahinda Rajapakse government, the occupation of an empty church was rendered meaningless by the departure of the revered Icon of Our Lady.

On Sunday April 6 photographic evidence emerged of extensive damage to the Madhu complex by Army shelling, justifying the Bishop's decision to evacuate, and illustrating the desperate efforts of the Army to cap-



Warzone: Sri Lanka Army officers, escorted by armed troops, pictured striding through the revered Madhu Shrine last week. Whilst the main church escaped, another church in the complex was destroyed by Army shells in the months long battle to capture the area. Photo Sri Lanka Army

'Peace is founded not only on respect for human rights but also on respect for the rights of peoples, in particular the right to independence' - Vatican's Social Doctrine

international response: o Other than former peace broker Norway, not a single foreign government commented on, let alone condemned, the assassination.

The current tension between the Tamil Catholic Church and the Sinhala Buddhist state begins with persistent attempts, over a one-year period, by the Bishop of the Diocese of Mannar, Dr. Joseph Rajapu to have the area around the venerated Madhu Church declared a peace zone.

The Madhu Church, Sri Lanka's oldest and most prominent Catholic shrine, was at the time also one of the largest refugee sanctuaries in the Tamil north.

It was also the objective of a major Sri Lankan military offensive in Mannar which began in July last year and has been inch-

ture the area.

The same day, Father Karunaratnam gave a television interview on the question of the Madhu Church, saying "The Bishop of Mannar Diocese has clearly said that this was a peace zone. Let the GoSL not cause confusion. It is a known fact that this peace zone is situated within the LTTE territory. Ranil Wickramasinghe's government may have signed the Cease Fire Agreement in 2002, ... the then President Chandrika had accepted it, as did the International Community. The [Rajapakse] Government should have respected it."

Incidentally, the Bishop of Jaffna's office also issued a formal plea that the Madhu Church be accepted as peace zone. It was clear that the Northeastern

Church were sending a clear message of unity behind the Bishop of Mannar.

However, within two weeks, on Sunday April 20, Sri Lanka Army commandos infiltrated LTTE-held Vanni and assassinated Father Karunaratnam, near Kilinochchi. A chilling message was being sent to Father Karunaratnam's peers and the rest of the Tamil community.

The targeted killing caused widespread grief amongst Tamils. Remembrance ceremonies and masses were held for Father Karunaratnam in the island and the Diaspora. Thousands paid homage to his remains in Kilinochchi, despite the constant threat of aerial bombing.

On April 22, over a thousand people gathered in the Cathedral of Army occupied Jaffna city for a

special Mass in tribute to the slain priest.

Jaffna Bishop House Principal Priest, Rev. Justin Gnanapragasam who conducted the Holy Mass, said in his speech that People in the Jaffna peninsula, had for the first time since August 11 2006, when fighting resumed on the peninsula, assembled in large numbers at one place to participate in an event.

On April 25 the government announced its "victorious" troops had "occupied" the Madhu Church. However the announcement was submerged by the fall-out of the debacle the Army suffered in a major offensive in southern Jaffna on April 23.

The government also declared the Church a "Security Zone" and

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NEWS

Eastern displaced find little joy in 'liberation' from Tigers

Sri Lanka's government resettles Tamil refugees in jungle areas

SRI Lanka's military victory over the Tamil Tigers in the multi-ethnic east of the island means little to displaced people such as 12-year-old Suna Madushandan who can not go home.

Along with the rest of his family, he ran for his life when their home in Sampur, in the northeastern district of Trincomalee, was showered with mortar bombs fired by advancing government forces in 2006.

"My stomach and leg were hit," he says, displaying the scars. His mother, Mary Sinnamah, points to the scars from shrapnel wounds near his eight-year-old sister Sandawani's ear.

"Since the start of April, there were 21,201 internally displaced people here," the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said.

That total includes 8,000 people from Trincomalee who have sought shelter in the lagoon town of Batticaloa, 303 kilometres (190 miles) from Colombo.

They were all caught in the crossfire of a struggle for land between government troops and Tamil Tigers who are fighting for an independent state in the Northeast of the island.

They have been sleeping in schools, churches, government buildings and relatives' homes since 2006 when the military began a push to flush the Tigers from their eastern stronghold.

The east is now in government hands, but 10 months on thousands still live in makeshift camps, surviving on aid agency handouts and sleeping on plastic mats on concrete floors.

"The government is working



Most of Sri Lanka's displaced are Tamils, including these children in the island's east being taught in the open after their school was destroyed in a government artillery attack. Photo Morning Leader

hard to resettle people by September," said Catholic priest Father Sylvester Sriharan, who runs three shelters.

"But Sampur has now been demarcated a high security zone and people can't go back."

The new place is jungle and there isn't enough work

The government has offered alternative land, but some people, including maths teacher N. Paramanandan and 341 other former Sampur residents, have refused to budge from their temporary shelter in Sinhala Maha

Vidyalaya in Batticaloa.

"The new place is jungle. There are wild animals. It's not safe and there isn't enough work," Paramanandan said in his "home" -- a former classroom where each family's living space is separated by a blue plastic sheet.

Mortar fire killed three of Yogeswari Thewendran's sons, while a shell burnt through her right hand.

She used to be a farm hand but now cannot find work to provide for her two remaining boys, aged six and eight.

Lack of jobs, food and water shortages, and poor sanitation are among key issues facing the people camped in Batticaloa, according to UN relief agencies.

"There are so many people looking for work alongside local residents. There's not enough work being created," Sriharan said.

Reminders of the war's destructive legacy can be seen everywhere in the windowless concrete buildings and crumbled ruins of homes that are steadily being overgrown by creepers and other vegetation.

The local economy - largely driven by fishing and farming -- was shattered by years of living under the shadow of the gun, and the December 2004 tsunami that razed beachside homes and businesses, and killed hundreds in the area.

The government wants to begin rebuilding the war-ravaged east and in March conducted polls -- the first in 14 years -- to select people to run local administrations.

Running on the government ticket the breakaway Tiger faction, the TMVP, secured the majority of votes but they have been accused by rights groups of abuses such as kidnappings, executions and recruiting child soldiers.

The polls were a curtain-raiser

for the government to hold larger provincial council elections on May 10, to give more autonomy to minority Tamils.

The May elections are part of the government's master plan for greater devolution in minority Tamil areas that it hopes will undermine the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Sri Lanka's military promised at the start of this year to wipe out the Tigers by the end of June.

Fears elections could usher in 'rule by the bullet'

But there are worries among some of the locals, such as businessman T. Perimbarajah, that the TMVP will extend its position by winning the provincial elections.

"There's a fear that if the militiamen take control, they will rule by the bullet," he said.

A strong military presence is still visible in Batticaloa with soldiers manning barbed-wire checkpoints across the district and armed troops patrolling the streets.

Former farmer Kumaraswamy Perimbarajah, 50, cycles along bumpy roads to nearby Punani village to collect 100 kilos of firewood from which he earns just five dollars a day to feed his wife and two teenage sons.

He said he was delighted to vote in the recent polls after last filling in a ballot paper in 1994.

"These elections are good," he said, but added he didn't think they would change much.

"The roads will stay potholed and I won't be able to get electricity for my house," he said.

For others, such as 52-year-old former Qatar housemaid Kanagamani Sarvanamuttu, displaced by years of war, the local elections are meaningless.

"What use are these elections? I want to go back to my village and rebuild my life. The contestants said nothing about resettling us quickly," she said.

EU support for Sri Lanka p17

Rajapakse promises capture of Vanni soon

SRI LANKAN President Mahinda Rajapakse has vowed to end Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) domination in the north of the country soon and urged the people to vote for the government-backed paramilitary group in the upcoming Provincial Council elections in the east.

"The security forces are advancing step by step in the northern theatre too. Soon the people there too would be liberated," Rajapakse said in his May Day rally on Thursday May 1 at Dehiattakandiya in Ampara district of eastern Sri Lanka.

Rajapakse used the rally to drum up support for the paramilitary Tamil Makkal Vidhuthalai Pullikal (TMVP) led by Pillayan.

"The Eastern populace is poised to hand over a resounding victory to the government at the May 10 Provincial Council Election to continue the momentum of the Eastern Resurgence

programme," Rajapakse said.

"We know the Easterners are a grateful people. They will show that on May 10. They will never let Pirapakaran take back the East."

Rajapakse told the participants at the rally that a vote for the government will be a vote for peace and development whereas a vote for the Opposition will be an endorsement of LTTE leader Pirapakaran. He urged the public to support him to take the development process forward.

Sri Lanka's main opposition, the United National Party (UNP) is backing the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)-led alliance.

Rajapakse further said that this year's May Day celebrations in the East should be dedicated to the security forces who 'spear-headed the humanitarian mission to liberate the people who were living under LTTE clutches for more than two decades'.

He further added, a Government victory in the East would further encourage soldiers to liberate the Northern masses as well.

Rajapaksa said the East would become Sri Lanka's fastest developing province in the near future.

Rajapaksa said now it was the turn of the working class to spearhead the development drive in Eastern Sri Lanka and assured all steps necessary to back the Eastern Resurgence.

"Some have pacts with Pirapakaran to betray the East. We will never allow that. The Eastern people will never allow that," the President said.

Over 1 million voters are eligible to vote in the elections for the eastern Provincial Council which covers Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Ampara districts, of which 40% are Tamils, 38% are Muslims and the remaining 22% are Sinhalese.

Debacle p10,11

NEWS

Press freedom a 'cruel joke' in Sri Lanka

MARKING the World Press Freedom Day, local and international rights groups appealed to the warring parties to refrain from hurting media workers and comply with their obligations under international law.

Free Media Movement, a Sri Lankan based media rights organisation, in a press release said 'never before has it been so dangerous to be a journalist in Sri Lanka as now'.

Referring to the World Press Freedom Day FMM said: "This day is almost a cruel joke in a country farther away from meaningful press freedom than it has ever been in living memory.

The "significant deterioration of media freedom and the freedom of expression is a marker of an inexorable erosion of democratic governance" so much so that "free media is under unprecedented siege", the statement added.

"Accurate, impartial and responsible reporting is almost impossible in Sri Lanka today in relation to the war, corruption or matters related to the regime and its constituent members".

"The arbitrary actions against media by paramilitary groups sheltered by the Government, the shocking complicity of the Police in schemes to abduct senior journalists is a situation that media is placed in Sri Lanka today that beggars belief."

Since the beginning of 2006 at least 10 media workers have been unlawfully killed in Sri Lanka. Many more have been arbitrarily detained, tortured and allegedly disappeared while in the custody of security forces.

The FMM documented more than 10 violations of freedom of expression, 63 incidents in which media and journalists were threatened; 15 journalists and media workers were arrested and more than 25 have had to leave their home and some even the country.

Listing state censorship and interference in media, FMM said three state media officials were removed from their posts without explanations; a website was blocked and another was forced to shut down without any obvious reason; and five radio stations were forced to interrupt their broadcast.

The FMM declared that the government should reverse action already undertaken that restricts press freedom and freedom of expression and refrain from any moves to introduce any form of direct or indirect censorship.

It also called on the government and the LTTE to "Immediately halt all threats, harassment, abductions and attacks against media practitioners and outlets currently being perpetrated by all parties to the conflict; undertake complete,



There is a chorus of protest against Sri Lanka's Sinhala government. Photo Amnesty International

transparent and timely investigations into the murder of media practitioners and death threats issued against media practitioners and their families; halt the dangerous and irresponsible practice of publicly vilifying media practitioners."

Amnesty International in a statement, also, urged both the parties to the conflict to stop targeting journalists.

The international rights group specifically called upon the Sri Lankan government "to respect media workers and publicly announce that killings, threats, or other attacks will not be tolerated and to investigate all cases of attacks, disappearances and killings of media workers promptly, independently, impartially and effectively, irrespective of the identity of perpetrators or victims."

AI also urged the LTTE to issue instructions to all its members against all killings, threats or other attacks on media workers.

"The importance of the media in conflict situations cannot be overstated, without reports, pictures and film of the fighting and the violence, no-one knows enough to put the pressure on the participants to ensure human rights are respected", the statement read, adding "this need is particularly strong in Sri Lanka"

Amnesty also referred to its February report Silencing Dissent, and repeated its accusations that Sri Lanka is a country where media coverage of war has effectively been silenced – through threats, restrictions and violence.

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in its statement

said: "The relationship between the State, civil society and the media has deteriorated rapidly. Weakening democratic commitments on the part of the authorities are leading in turn to an environment of impunity for corruption and human rights violations".

The IFJ said that with few willing to publicly condemn such excesses, the ground was laid for more serious threats to the safety and security of journalists and media workers across Sri Lanka.

"Physical attacks, harassment, restrictions on movement and death threats have become a part of the working lives of journalists, photographers and all those engaged in the gathering, publication and dissemination of information in Sri Lanka," the IFJ statement added.

Surge in disappearances of Tamils

Raymond Thibodeaux
Voice of America

AS violence surges in Sri Lanka, so does the number of abductions and disappearance of mostly Tamil men. That is the assessment of human rights activists and international aid groups operating in the Indian Ocean nation.

Soli Chana, 23, is trying to find out what happened to her husband. Witnesses say three men in civilian clothes stopped him, not far from his house in Vanuniya in central Sri Lanka. They handcuffed him, shoved in a plain white van and sped away. That was a year and a half ago. He has not been heard from since.

"She is shocked and very upset. She made complaints to the police, the Red Cross, the Human Rights Commission and ICRC also," Chana said. "All they can say is, 'We will search.'"

Thousands of other families across Sri Lanka are doing the same - making the rounds at human rights agencies to find family members who have disappeared.

The missing and the families left behind, most of them left struggling, impoverished without their breadwinners, are caught up in a growing list of atrocities being committed by both sides of this 25-year conflict between the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The US government and others, around the world, say the LTTE is a terrorist organization.

The numbers of disappeared are in dispute by the Sri Lankan government, but human rights groups and foreign observer say that thousands of mostly Tamil men have been abducted in the past decade and remain missing.

Palitha Kohona is Sri Lanka's

secretary of foreign affairs. He says the government is sincere in trying to locate those who have disappeared. He says the numbers are being exaggerated by Tamil activists and international aid agencies to tarnish the government's human rights record. Kohona says he helped investigate the disappearance of 355 people from list that an American diplomat recently handed to him.

"To us, one person disappearing is one too many," Kohona said. "When you have 355 it is a matter of serious concern. But, in that list, when we went through the list, there were some repetitions in it. There were 23 in that list whom we have located, up to now, and they are well and kicking. And, there are others whose names are suspiciously similar to those recorded by our immigration authorities as people who have left the country."

He says nearly half of the 355

people on the list were accounted for and that authorities are continuing their investigation.

Father Henry Miller is a Jesuit priest. He has a list of eight thousand people - mostly young Tamil men - who have been abducted in the past decade. He says most are still missing.

He says the government is touting a recent election here as a sign that democracy is flourishing in a part of the country once controlled by the LTTE.

The winner of that election - the first here in 14 years - was a supposedly-less-militarized political split-off of the LTTE, known as the Tamil Makkal Vidutalai Pullikal (TMVP), led by a former LTTE commander.

For some, their victory could usher in a new era of trust between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil community.

But Father Miller is skeptical. He says the TMVP is merely a

proxy party of the government.

And, now the government can say we have restored self-government to the people of the Batticaloa District and it has not been done," Miller said. "This is the government's program. And, with this they proclaim to the world that they have liberated and restored democratic government to the people of Batticaloa. It is a falsity."

Father Miller says that, in the government's ongoing attempt to fight LTTE, they treat all Tamils as potential terrorists. He says that, with the war flaring up once again in the Tamil-dominated north, that is not likely to change anytime soon.

A March report issued by the US State Department cited almost daily extrajudicial killings and attacks against civilians by the army, paramilitaries and pro-government militias in the government-controlled Jaffna Peninsula.

NEWS

Media echoes stark ethnic divide

THE POLARIZATION between Sri Lanka's ethnic communities is also reflected in coverage of the island's protracted conflict and has rendered 'the truth' an inevitable casualty of war, several speakers argued last week at the annual conference in London of the International Association of Tamil Journalists (IATAJ).

The day-long event at the University of Westminster was attended by one hundred invited participants and was addressed by journalists, academics and media activists, including Mr. Nadesapillai Vithyatharan, editor of the Uthayan newspaper, Mr Chandana Bandara, senior producer with the BBC's Sinhala service and Mr. Bhagwan Singh of the Deccan Chronicle.

'Media and Sri Lanka's conflict: where is the truth?', held on April 26, was intended "to facilitate an exchange of views and examine the context of Tamil media in the 21st century," the organisation said.

"There is no doubt that the media is playing a pivotal role in the Sri Lankan conflict. But when it comes to conflict resolution we cannot see any tangible contribution from the media," the presiding IATAJ representative, Mr. Gopi Ratnam, said in his welcome address.

"Apart from this, whether it is the media in Sri Lanka or the international media, we are yet experience unbiased stands on these issues," Mr. Ratnam, who is also Editor-In-Chief of the London-based Oru Paper said.

IATAJ was formed in 2005 with aim of uniting Tamil journalists scattered around the world and working for their rights, he said.

"As you all are aware, back home in Sri Lanka, Tamil journalists are in great danger. They are hounded by the authorities, paramilitary groups and politicians. There is a sizeable number of them are living in exile. Some of them are going to talk here. And some of them are seated in the audience. The conference expresses solidarity to all of them," Mr. Ratnam said, to applause.

Mr. Thiru S. Thiruchelvam, a veteran Tamil journalist who had worked for years as reporter and editor with several newspapers in Sri Lanka's embattled Jaffna peninsula, was the first panellist. He outlined the lengthy history of Tamil media in the island and the persecution it had endured after independence from Britain, especially just before and during the armed conflict.

Whilst the large commercial newspapers such as Virakesari were based in Colombo, he pointed out that several Tamil newspapers had been based in Jaffna, and at one stage four were publishing simultaneously from the ancient Tamil city. All had been targeted and suffered state violence and many had been forced to close, he said.



Sri Lanka's media is heavily polarised across the ethnic divide on almost all issues. Photo Lakruwan Wanniarachchi/AFP/Getty Images

Mr. Nadesapillai Vithyatharan, editor of the Jaffna-based Uthayan newspaper and the Colombo-based Sudar Oli newspaper, also spoke of the violent targeting of Tamil media by the Sri Lankan state.

In the present context of Tamil media reporting from the warzones, he spoke of the litany vicious attacks on Uthayan's staff by Army-backed paramilitaries.

In 2006 gunmen from the pro-government Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) had stormed the newspapers office, shooting dead at least two employees and wounding others. Nonetheless, their colleagues had courageously ensured that the days' edition was produced, printed and distributed. Mr. Vithyatharan said, to applause from the conference floor.

Two Uthayan staffers had been confined to the Uthayan's premises in Jaffna for over 18 months due to death threats, but were insisting they would remain in the Army-controlled peninsula to ensure the news of what was happening there would be brought out, he said.

He said the Uthayan's Trincomalee correspondent had been shot dead after exposing the falsehood of the Sri Lankan government's claims about the violent deaths of five Tamil students in the eastern port town in 2006.

The Colombo government had claimed that the five had died after a grenade being carried by one of them had exploded. However, the correspondent's

photographs, published in the newspaper, had clearly shown the gunshot wounds and exposed the armed forces' execution style killings. Two weeks after the photos were published, the correspondent had been shot dead.

Mr. Chandana Bandara, senior producer with the BBC Sinhala Service, Sandeshaya, spoke about the severe difficulties of reporting accurately on the conflict in the context of an enforced lack of media access in Sri Lanka.

Proper coverage of the intense battles in the island's warzones was impossible because of government restrictions on journalists travelling to those parts and under these circumstances, he said. Unless people came forward to alert the media as to developments, it was impossible to report, he said, noting the context of many people being too frightened to do so.

Reporting was thus reduced to covering the statements by the government and the LTTE, he said, adding that merely carrying second- or third-hand accounts was unacceptable conduct for professional journalists.

Moreover, discussing coverage of recent bomb blasts targeting civilian buses in both LTTE-controlled and government-controlled areas, Mr. Bandara pointed out how ethnic biases in Sri Lanka's media heavily framed present reporting.

Sinhala media uncritically accepted government versions and some even went further, unqualifiedly blaming the LTTE

for attacks in the south and some media even blamed the LTTE for the explosions in buses in LTTE-controlled areas, he said.

Taking up the same theme, Mr. Suthaharan Nadarajah, editor of the Tamil Guardian newspaper, said the sharp polarisation between Sinhala- and Tamil-language media reflected the depth of the cleavages between their respective ethnic communities.

Drawing on a study on 'Vernacular media and Sri Lanka's Peace Process' he had authored in 2005 as part of the Strategic Conflict Assessment exercise funded by the World Bank, Mr. Nadarajah said the profound impact vernacular media had on peoples' perceptions has consistently ignored by analysts of Sri Lanka's conflict.

Tamil and Sinhala media had different focuses and interests, even on the same topic, and took zero-sum approaches to peace-related issues, he said, adding that unless these strong polarizations and antagonistic perspectives are recognized and accepted, future international peace efforts are guaranteed to fail.

Dr. R. Cheran, assistant professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Windsor in Canada, pointed out that 'the truth' was socially constructed. Nonetheless, media should strive for objectivity and professionalism in their reporting.

Turning to the practices of the burgeoning Tamil Diaspora media, he called for more 'ethical

journalism' and for more principled approaches to news coverage.

The objectives of patriotism and professionalism were not mutually incompatible and, indeed, could be complimentary, he said.

He also criticised the over-commercialisation of Diaspora media, pointing out that many Tamil publications were largely full of advertisements and short of information. He also criticised many publications' disproportionate focus on cinema-related material. It is not that people shouldn't have entertainment-related news, but serious issues concerning the Tamils and deserving of proper coverage were being neglected, he said.

Mr. Bhagwan Singh, Consultant Editor with the Deccan Chronicle, warned against journalists succumbing to particularist interests of their publishers or owners of their institutions. There are many who succumb to the easy life of peddling untruth, often inspired by selfish interests to yield short-term gains through dishonest means, he said.

He spoke of the risks he took whilst reporting on the Tamil liberation struggle, including taking the perilous boat journey between Rameshwaram and Jaffna in the 1980s. Saying this was essential in reporting the truth from warzones, he contrasted this approach he and some of his colleagues took with those of other foreign

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NEWS

Serving his people...

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demanding the Icon of Our Lady of Madhu be brought back. The demand was ignored by the Northeastern Church.

On April 26 three Christian priests, including two from Tamil Nadu, were arrested and held for interrogation in Colombo.

On April 27, Army Commander Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka issued a public demand that the Icon should be brought back.

A series of correspondence between the Army and the Bishop followed, along with media statements by both sides, whereby the government insisted the Madhu priests and the Icon return to its control and the Northeast Church refused.

Meanwhile, the military said it "categorically and reservedly ridicules LTTE's blatant attempts to discredit and blame [the Army for] the murder of Father Karunaratnam"

At the same time, state controlled media, began to emphasise that Father Karunaratnam, one of the Tamil country's best known serving priests, was a staunch advocate of independence for Tamil Eelam as the only proper solution to the conflict.

Father Karunaratnam expected to be assassinated by the government. He had told his sister in Canada in their last conversation that, following the assassination of Tamil National Alliance MP Sivanesan, also by a SLA command-detonated mine, he expected to be the next victim.

Father Karunaratnam had accepted the risk of martyrdom as so many have done before him in the Church

In his last television interview before his death, he had focused on the Vatican's policy.

"As a seat of religion, Vatican

seems to observe silence, in order not to politicize it further, earnestly hoping that the GoSL will change its position. As Catholics we believe in that."

"During Communist revolutions, the communist armies destroyed Catholic churches in Russia, China and Poland. Vatican remained silent, in a spiritual way," he said. "The Vatican is the apex body of Catholic religion, but it is also a Government. As a government they would have conveyed the necessary message to the GoSL, even if they had not publicized it."

In 2004, the Pontifical Council of Peace and Justice completed the "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church". Father Karunaratnam would have considered himself guided by it.

The Social Doctrine states that a nation has a "fundamental right to existence", to "its own language and culture, through which a people expresses and promotes ... its fundamental spiritual 'sovereignty'", to "shape its life according to its own traditions, excluding, of course, every abuse of basic human rights and in particular the oppression of minorities",

Para 157 states that international law "rests upon the principle of equal respect for States, for each people's right to self-determination and for their free cooperation in view of the higher common good of humanity. Peace is founded not only on respect for human rights but also on respect for the rights of peoples, in particular the right to independence."

Para 504 states: "The right to use force for purposes of legitimate defence is associated with the duty to protect and help innocent victims who are not able to defend themselves from acts of aggression."



After the Sri Lanka Army occupied the Madhu Church, military officers brought Rt Rev Antony Victor Soosai, Deputy for Mannar, to the site before demanding the Icon of Our Lady of Madhu be brought back from where it had been taken for safety - another church deeper with LTTE territory.

Army chief in Pakistan ...

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support towards the capacity building of Sri Lankan army by offering cooperation in military training and in various other fields of common interests, the Sri Lanka Army website said..

"Reports claimed that the main purpose of the Army Chief's visit to Pakistan was to discuss the purchasing of certain required

weapons and ammunition though there was no official confirmation over such claims," the newspaper said.

A defence official said Lt Gen Fonseka is touring Pakistan on an invitation from his counterpart Kayani. "It is similar to the visit undertaken by the Army Chief to India," the official said.

Sri Lanka has been looking at China and Pakistan for increased

weapons supplies as offensives with the Liberation Tigers, which Colombo resumed in 2006, has run into difficulties.

Despite vowing to capture the LTTE-held Vanni and wipe out the Tigers this year, the government has struggled to make progress in the face of stiff resistance. Expenditures of munitions are running much higher than anticipated.



Tamil expatriates in London attended one of several memorials held in Diaspora centres for Fr. Karunaratnam who was killed by Sri Lankan commandos on April 20.