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A summary of current events
in Sri Lanka

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New supporters and new set-backs for relief work

REHABILITATION Minister Lionel Jayatillake, announced wide-ranging new proposals for the relief and resettlement of refugees in Sri Lanka at the beginning of July. Speaking in Colombo the Minister outlined plans to expand local and district relief work to encourage those who had fled the violence in the North and East to return to their homes.

Claims for compensation and relief assistance could now be endorsed by local Grama Sevakas (village headmen) rather than the Government Agent's office in the light of continuing militant pressure on the civil administration. Different Government departments would co-operate to ensure that displaced persons were provided with employment and housing.

The Ministry was there to assist any civilian affected by terrorist activities said Mr Jayatillake, but some observers have said that such a definition already excludes many families in the North and East who have suffered loss of life and livelihood as a result of the various Army operations in the last five years. Most of the money spent on rehabilitation comes from foreign aid and Non Governmental Organisations.

Western nations pledged Sri Lanka a further 612 million dollars US, in aid for 1988/9 at a meeting of the Aid Group for Sri Lanka chaired by the World Bank in Paris on 30 June. Donor countries were said to have expressed concern over the continuing deterioration of the Sri Lankan economy, the difficult balance of payments position, and the uncertain security situation throughout the island.

They urged a more effective implementation of the medium-term economic adjustment programme agreed with Sri Lanka last December and a reduction in Government spending and in the number of Government employees.

Relief and rehabilitation work carried out by NGOs in the North and East was already under threat after the series of attacks on human rights workers last month.

Scandinavian aid agencies suspended their funding of the Tamil Refugee Rehabilitation Organisation (TRRO) after the kidnapping of TRRO's founder Mr K Kanthasamy in Jaffna on 19 June. TRRO, who play a prominent role in rehabilitation work in the North and East, announced shortly afterwards that it would be forced to abandon its refugee resettlement programme.

All Catholic social work activities in the Eastern Province - which are largely refugee oriented - were suspended earlier this month by Batticaloa's Bishop Kingsley Swamipillai following the killing of Fr Chandra Fernando in June. Catholic priests have also resigned from all positions held on Citizen's Committees.

Human rights groups oppose Indemnity Act

AT a joint meeting of human rights organisations active in the south of Sri Lanka held on June 25, a campaign was launched to draw attention to the Government's proposed Indemnity Act which will offer security personnel immunity for unlawful actions carried out between 1983 and 1987 under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The meeting which was chaired by Mahinda Rajapakse head of the Human Rights and Legal Aid organisation based in Tangalle, also resolved to draw public attention to the growing number of "disappearances" in the South. A few days after the meeting Mr Rajapakse's house and car were badly damaged by fire.

Checkmate to stalemate

THE stalemate in the negotiations between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Indian intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) continued in July, with the IPKF intensifying operation 'Checkmate' and the LTTE going on the offensive in the propaganda front by issuing several statements against Indian moves. The primary objective of the IPKF military manoeuvres seems to be to pressurise the top leadership of the LTTE into accepting a memorandum on the understanding between RAW and the LTTE negotiator Kittu which has been published, but not yet agreed upon. Meanwhile attempts made by RAW to contact LTTE leader Prabakaran directly appear not to have been encouraged by the LTTE. This is probably due to caution as a result of the fate of previous negotiators and couriers.

On 9th July LTTE issued a statement condemning India of attempting to eliminate the Tigers and describing the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord as a 'charter of servility for the Tamils'. This statement effectively ended the negotiations. The main problem seems to be that a climate of trust has not been created because the wrong people are involved in the negotiations. Government Minister S. Thondaman declared earlier this month that the talks should be between the leaders of the LTTE and the leaders of India and not between third parties. If peace is the aim of the parties, this would be the way forward.

In the IPKF operations in Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Jaffna, Mullaitivu and Batticaloa civilians have often become targets. Following a grenade attack on the IPKF in Sulipuram in the Jaffna peninsula, in which two soldiers died, male and female members of the public were attacked by the IPKF. In Vavuniya, the body of Nadarasa Nithiyananthan who had been arrested by the IPKF on 30th June was handed over to relatives at the Vavuniya camp. The mutilated body of Suppiah Nadarasa, who was arrested on the same day, was found by relatives on 9th July in Cheddikulam. A number of similar incidents have been reported and the pattern of attacks on civilians seems to continue.

Press reports from about 21st July said that in the confrontations with LTTE at least forty IPKF soldiers had died from the beginning of the month. In the Mannar area, following the death of six soldiers in a landmine explosion, the IPKF imposed a curfew, carried out a large scale hunt and arrested a number of people. The reports said that helicopter gunships were used in this operation by the IPKF.

UNP majorities reduced in by-election

THE ruling United National Party (UNP) won three of the four seats in the by-elections held on 14th July. The Kekirawa, Katugampola, Welimada and Ratnapura by-elections were regarded as a test of the popularity of the government. Although UNP won three seats the majorities in these electorates was reduced, particularly in Kekirawa where the majority was only 361. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won the Ratnapura seat by a comfortable majority. The Leader of the SLFP, Srimavo Bandaranaike, alleged that the government resorted to thuggery and intimidation in all four electorates. She claimed that the pattern of voting showed a 'tremendous swing' for the SLFP. Press reports said that 53 impersonators were arrested and a large number of complaints regarding election offences had been recorded. In the 1977 general elections the UNP won all these seats by large majorities. The elections were called as the sitting members had recently resigned in order to contest the Provincial Council elections.

Concern over arrests and detentions

IT was revealed before the Colombo High Court earlier this month that a man who the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) said they had released in 1986 was still in custody. A fisherman named Selliah Ravindran of Trincomalee was arrested by the Sri Lankan army on 28 December 1985. He was charged with failing to give information to the police. When the case was heard in 1987 the Court was informed by the CID that he had been released on 22 September 1986. Relatives of Ravindran filed a habeas corpus application and the Attorney-at-Law of the applicants produced a letter dated 28 June 1988 written by Ravindran from the Boossa camp in Galle. In the letter Ravindran had pointed out that all other persons arrested with him had been released either after having been granted pardon or pending trial. The High Court has issued notice on the chief of the CID and the officer in charge of the Boossa camp.

In another habeas corpus application Brigadier Manjit Singh of the IPKF has been named respondent. The petition alleges that Parameswaran Ganga, a voluntary worker in a rehabilitation organisation, was arrested on 5th April by the IPKF and is being held unlawfully. It further states that Ganga was not involved in any unlawful activity and that he had not committed any offence under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. He was neither informed of the reasons for his arrest at that time nor was he produced before a court as required by the law of the land.

Observers believe that there are number of similar cases and that a thorough investigation should be conducted into the procedures of arrest and detention in all parts of the island. Questions are also being raised as to the legality of the large number of arrests made by the IPKF in the North and the East. Meanwhile towards the end of the month the police arrested nearly 100 persons, the majority of them Tamils, in Colombo. Press reports said that these persons were taken into custody because they could not explain their presence in Colombo.

Dr. Athula Sumathipala, an executive member of the Sri Lanka Medical Association, went missing on 19th July and relatives believed that he had been killed or abducted. However, three days later the Sri Lankan police said that they had arrested him over allegations that he had treated Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Rohana Wijeweera and other members of the JVP. The Colombo newspaper 'The Island' described the mode of arrest of Dr. Sumathipala as 'high-handed' and called upon the Ministry of Defence to 'take action to see that the police are not permitted to act in brazen violation of the law which they are committed to uphold'.

Indo-Sri Lanka Accord - one year old

THE first anniversary of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord fell on 29th July. Although the agreement was opposed from various quarters, including sections of the Sinhala and Tamil communities, both Governments have indicated their firm commitment to implement the agreement. During the past year the agreement has failed to achieve its aims and has brought about more death and destruction. However, some people have expressed optimism. A. Amirthalingam, Secretary General of the Tamil United Liberation Front declared at a meeting in Madras that if there was a ceasefire there was still hope for the accord. But in a statement issued in Sri Lanka, the LTTE said that the position of the Tamils had deteriorated since the Accord and went on to call for a general strike in the North and the East. Meanwhile a Government Minister said that the Accord has been a disappointment and suggested that it should be reviewed by both Governments.