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Premadasa talks to the Tigers

IN A SWIFT REVERSAL of policy which surprised many, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighting for a separate state in the North and East of Sri Lanka, agreed to hold talks with President Premadasa in Colombo, beginning in late April.

The move came after a succession of Government peace feelers had been spurned over the last few weeks, both by the Tigers and the Sinhalese insurgent People's Liberation Front (JVP). In a key speech at a youth rally in eastern Sri Lanka on 1 April, President Premadasa offered to dissolve Parliament and hold fresh elections within three months if the LTTE and JVP entered the democratic mainstream. Up to 200 Reception Centres would be set up across the country guaranteeing protection and assistance to rebels who surrendered, the President said.

The JVP response was a call for a week-long *hartal* (general strike) beginning on 5 April, to commemorate the JVP insurrection of 1971 which cost close on 10,000 lives. Colombo and the South were at a standstill and North-Central Province completely cut off. Around 45 people were killed in the South in the following 48 hours including 11 Sri Lankan police in landmine ambushes at Lunugamwehera and Hungama. In Mullaitivu in the North, at least 20 Tamil civilians were killed after Indian soldiers launched a massive operation on 6 April in Mankulam and Oddusudan, following a LTTE ambush which killed 28 soldiers of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF).

The Government reiterated its peace plea on 12 April, calling a week-long unilateral ceasefire to coincide with Sinhalese and Tamil New Year celebrations, offering militants unconditional amnesty.

In a series of press releases issued in London, the LTTE described the

offer as "an exercise in futility", rejecting any ceasefire without complete IPKF withdrawal and pointing to continuing state-aided Sinhalese colonisation of the North-East under the auspices of the Mahaweli Development Scheme.

The point was chillingly emphasised a few days later, when Tamil militants killed 21 Sri Lankan Army personnel on 15 April in the disputed Weli Oya area of the North-East where the Government has settled over 3,000 Sinhalese families.

Then a day later, in a sudden tactical shift, the Government announced that the LTTE had responded favourably to Mr Premadasa's open offer of talks, nominating LTTE London representative Dr Anton Balasingam as their intermediary. As preliminary discussions got underway in late April, it was expected that Dr Balasingam would be joined in Colombo by LTTE second-in-command *Mahatiya* and Political Wing leader *Yogi*, who would be the LTTE's chief negotiators.

In Colombo, a wealth of speculation on the talks has zig-zagged unsteadily between opposing degrees of dogmatism.

Some say both Premadasa and the Tigers are in their weakest-ever position. Both of them need a settlement urgently - the Tigers because they lack the resources to continue a

military struggle, Premadasa, because he needs peace to implement the economic package his political survival depends on, both at home and abroad.

The Tigers will give up their demand for a separate state, *Eelam*, some say, in return for the dissolution of the Provincial Councils (PC), a move designed to unseat their rivals the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF). Both India and EPRLF have welcomed the talks but say they must not trespass on the provisions of the Indo-Lankan Accord which support devolution through the PCs.

Others say both the Tigers and Premadasa are strong. The Tigers will play for time, reprovision and return the compliment of the carrot-and-stick policy pursued against them in the North, as they did at Weli Oya. Premadasa, having cut the North-East administration's purse strings needs an ally to prevent a permanent IPKF/EPRLF hegemony in the North and East, and there at least it can be said that Premadasa and the Tigers share certain goals.

There are other permutations with one strong and one weak partner at the negotiating table and a spectrum of supposed inevitabilities. What both sides may yet lack, is a feel for the middle ground as well as India's assurances as to the limits of its peace keeping ambitions.

SRI LANKA was a notable absentee at a series of World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) meetings held in Washington in early April to discuss aid, trade and international monetary cooperation. Sri Lanka, a key member of the *Group of 24* appointed by third world nations to look after their interests, failed to appear at the meeting, financial observers say. The World Bank is also said to have recalled its resident representative

in Colombo recently.

Sri Lanka earlier failed to meet IMF requirements to draw the second instalment of a Rs 6 billion (\$200 million) loan due in March. A delegation consisting of Central Bank Governor, Dr Neville Karunatilake and Finance Ministry Secretary, Mr R Paskaralingam left for Washington in late April to renegotiate the IMF payment in the light of Sri Lanka's recent budget.

COMMENT

The Plantations: poverty prejudice and black flags

THE UPCOUNTRY AREAS of the south and central highlands represent the last stronghold of Sri Lanka's colonial plantation economy, rich in tea and rubber. But like their counterparts in the southern states of the USA they have thrived only on slave-like labour and conditions.

For over forty years 'Plantation' Tamils, the descendants of South Indian indentured labourers, have struggled for citizenship and a living wage on Sri Lanka's estates.

A new Act of Parliament introduced on 25 April will give the majority of Sri Lanka's 800,000 Plantation Tamils voting rights on application for the first time. It has been a long and difficult struggle to supersede a maze of previous and partial legislation. But in Districts such as Kandy, Nuwara Eliya and Ratnapura, already racked by the Sinhalese insurgent Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), estate workers' support may only be enlisted by fear or favour.

In Uva black flags adorn business premises as an enforced JVP protest. Estate workers are forbidden work during the now regular *hartals* (general strikes) and expected to contribute the lost day's wages to JVP coffers. Planters commute in and out of the area, rarely staying on their own estates. Following a series of killings, an increased security programme for estate superintendents organised by Home Guard Units will cost close to 250 million rupees (\$8 million) across Sri Lanka's 600,000 acres of tea, rubber and coconut. Though the money will be provided by the government the expense will be borne by the estates.

The plantation economy has consistently deteriorated since nationalisation in 1975. Bureaucracy has passed overheads back to individual estates, making it difficult for them to show a profit, while estate superintendents have lost their local autonomy over vital production decisions. In the southern Districts of Sabaragamuwa, tea production is down by 70 per cent and a recent

Asian Development Bank report suggests that Sri Lanka's costs per kilo are now the highest of tea-producing countries throughout the world.

With the two main State corporations showing a combined 1.7 billion rupees (\$60 million) overdraft this year, Plantations Minister Gamini Dissanayake has plans to diversify into multi-cropping - tea under rubber, cocoa under rubber - and to promote a system of smallholdings following the Kenyan model.

Much further down the agenda are moves to reform the archaic living and working conditions on the Plantations. Three to four generations of families still live in barrack-like 'line rooms' on tea estates little changed in 100 years. Plantation Tamils work as day-wage labourers often denied a full working week, sickness benefit and leave entitlements that other State corporation employees enjoy. They earn less than half the national average and health and education provisions are sub-standard.

Their political representation has long been the preserve of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), closely aligned to the ruling United National Party under CWC leader, Rural Industrial Development Minister Mr S Thondaman. But in a notable upset, CWC candidates lost heavily to Sinhalese UNP candidates in February's General Election, Mr Thondaman returning to Parliament as a UNP nominee on the National List.

The Plantation Tamil vote has been split by the rise of the new Up-country People's Front led by former CWC and PLOTE member Mr S Chandrasekaran, who has built up grass roots support campaigning for improved social and working conditions. His success has prompted a purge of CWC officials at the District level. Observers say the onus will remain on the CWC hierarchy to bring in the newly enfranchised Plantation voter in return for UNP patronage. There should now be some incentive for the Government to provide the plantation worker with at least a living wage.

Refugee killings

Filipino national Victor Castigador appeared in a London court on 7 April charged with the murder of two Sri Lankan Tamil refugees A Anapayan (21) and K Vinayagamoorthy (28) who worked as security guards in a Soho amusement arcade. The victims were doused with petrol and set alight.

North-East aid

The United States presented Sri Lanka with a cheque for US\$2.45 million on 17 April as first instalment in the USAID-financed Rehabilitation Assistance Project for victims of the ethnic conflict in the North-East. On completion almost 150,000 families are expected to receive financial assistance.

Disappearances

An unprecedented 85 habeas corpus applications were filed in Colombo's Court of Appeal on 19 April on behalf of those missing and disappeared. Opposition MP Mr Dinesh Gunawardene launching the "Parliamentarians for Human Rights" Movement said 40 cases of disappearances involving university students had been brought to his notice on 10 April alone.

Relief appeal

Mullaitivu Citizens Committee lodged an official complaint with the Government Agent in mid-April drawing attention to the large numbers of refugees from Kokkuthoduwai and Kokkilai stranded in the Alampil area, who had received no assistance for the last three months.

Escape

While LTTE cadres attacked an IPKF installation nearby, some 40 Tamil militants from PLOTE and LTTE escaped from Indian Army detention in Vavuniya in late April, overpowering their guards and seizing their weapons. Four Indian soldiers, two LTTE militants and two PLOTE members were killed in the break-out.

THE NORTH AND EAST

Muslims flee militants as communal clashes return to Kalmunai

OVER 10,000 Muslims fled the Kalmunai area south of Batticaloa in Amparai District in late April, following a series of clashes between Muslims and Tamil militants.

Tension had escalated in the last weeks between the two communities, following the killing of ten Muslims at Kinniyai further north on 10 April. Thousands of Muslims surrounded the local police station demanding protection.

The trouble in Kalmunai grew out of a series of reciprocal kidnappings carried out by Muslim and ENDLF and TELO cadres as Tamil groups tried to enforce 'taxes' in the Muslim areas. Following the looting and

burning of a number of shops in Kalmunai on 21 April Muslim villages surrounding the Tamil hamlet of Karaitivu, a centre of ethnic unrest since communal clashes in 1986, were evacuated as Muslim refugees sought sanctuary in mosques and schools in Kalmunaikudy.

Curfew was quickly clamped down on the area as IPKF reinforcements arrived. Following a string of ransom demands for leading Muslim businessmen abducted in the disturbances, IPKF Amparai District Commander, Brigadier R Loganathan, said that any civilians found carrying weapons in the area would be arrested. Foreign Affairs Min-

ister Ranjan Wijeratne and Muslim MPs held a series of consultations in Kalmunai with EPRLF, ENDLF and TELO groups on 23 April in an attempt to defuse the crisis.

A succession of Muslim organisations rallied to Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) MP Mr Haleem Ishak, when he called for a contingent of Pakistani troops to be stationed in the Eastern Province before the 5 July Referendum on the permanent merger of the North and East.

Opposition to the proposed Referendum is mounting on all sides. Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader Mr M H M Ashraff, in a letter to President Premadasa, called for its cancellation pending a re-negotiation of the Indo-Lankan Peace Accord, and the disarming of former militant groups in the Eastern Province.

In late April, the IPKF announced that they would confine all EPRLF and ENDLF cadres to IPKF camps until they were inducted into the Civilian Volunteer Force. All TELO camps in the North and East would be closed.

Jaffna G. A. shot dead in bank terror campaign

FOLLOWING a month-long battle of wills to re-open banks and Government offices in Jaffna, Government Agent Mr M Panchalingam - who survived five difficult years as head of Jaffna's civil administration - was shot dead by three gunmen in late April.

After a two week closure ordered by the LTTE to protest against India's *Operation Baaz* in the North, banks re-opened on a three-day week basis on 4 April. The IPKF at first refused to provide security, resulting in no cash transactions for the first three days. Mr K Ramanathan, Jaffna's Additional Government Agent was shot dead at his home in Tellipallai on 7 April.

The LTTE claimed responsibility, saying Mr Ramanathan was cooperating with the EPRLF-led Provincial Council in their attempts to restore five-day week facilities at Government offices and banks.

A number of other community leaders have been killed this month as the struggle for control between the EPRLF and LTTE has intensified. They include Mr K Selathurai, Principal of Vigneswara College, Chavakachcheri, and Mr I Balasingham, a Justice of the Peace at Point Pedro.

The IPKF mounted intensive operations this month in both the Chavakachcheri and Point Pedro areas following the killing of two Indian soldiers. A series of arrests were made and a number of civilians admitted to Jaffna General Hospital with injuries sustained during the search operations.

Trincomalee bomb blast kills 51

ON THE EVE of New Year celebrations in the North-East's new provincial capital, a car bomb devastated the bazaar area of Trincomalee killing 51 people, mostly Sinhalese, and injuring another 50.

The Sri Lankan Army sealed off Sinhalese settlements to prevent revenge attacks on the Tamil community but at least five Tamils were killed in mob attacks and a number of others are missing.

All India Radio attributed the explosion to the LTTE who subsequently denied involvement.

Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne, who flew to the scene of the accident with Sri Lankan Army Commander Lt Gen Hamilton Wanisinghe, said that local residents were convinced EPRLF was behind

the bomb attack following the disarming of one of their cadres by the IPKF at a Trincomalee checkpoint that same day.

EPRLF, who also denied involvement, pledged immediate assistance and compensation to the families of blast victims.

■ **Buddhist leader Gamini Jayasuriya**, who visited the Eastern Province earlier this month, said provision must be made from incoming foreign aid for large numbers of Sinhalese refugees in Trincomalee District. Mr Jayasuriya said that Government relief supplies sent to the area were being sold in transit and that Tamil colonisation of evacuated Sinhalese villages was already underway.

EUROPE

Tamil hunger strikers fight deportation

SEVENTEEN Sri Lankan Tamil asylum-seekers held for a number of weeks in detention facilities at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport launched a hunger strike on 19 April. The protest began when they learned that three of their number were to be deported to Sri Lanka without an opportunity to appeal against the Dutch government's refusal to grant them asylum.

The three asylum-seekers were returned to Sri Lanka on 21 April accompanied by two Dutch police

officers. A spokesman in Colombo said the three were assaulted on arrival by Sri Lankan customs officers in full view of the Dutch police and only escaped being taken to the notorious *Fourth Floor* of Colombo CID where torture and intimidation are said to regularly occur, by bribing their Sri Lankan police escort. They are now said to be in hiding in Colombo.

Another member of the Schiphol group was due to be deported to Sri Lanka on 5 May, and the Dutch courts will decide the fate of the remaining 13 on 11 May. The hunger protest had to be abandoned after 12 days due to the increasingly weak condition of a number of the strikers.

A spokesman for the Stichting Tamil Co-Ordinating Committee in The Hague said the Committee supported by human rights organisations would mount a series of vigils at the airport and elsewhere on behalf of the remaining asylum-seekers in the run-up to the court decision.

The prospects for Sri Lankan Tamils seeking asylum in European countries are increasingly uncertain, representatives of European refugee agencies were told at a meeting of the European Consultation on Refugees and Exiles in Zeist, Holland in early April.

Many countries have experienced major increases in refugee applications - Germany 79 per cent, Denmark 77 per cent, Switzerland 53 per cent, France 24 per cent - the meeting was told. Holland was almost alone in reporting a 50 per cent decrease.

Holland already effectively deports 12 per cent of all asylum-seekers and introduced a new aliens bill in February, restricting the appeals procedure and the role of international refugee agency UNHCR in the determination process.

It is expected other countries will follow the Dutch example in seeking effective deterrents by procedural changes that will make the denial of asylum compulsory in certain cases.

The SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas.

If you have any information you wish to share, or any enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact:

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PTA amendment protest

SRI LANKA plans to amend its controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), Government sources revealed in Colombo on 9 April, granting police powers to military personnel and allowing suspects to be held for up to 18 months.

The amendments will also allow police and military to declare *Security Areas* whereby villages may be cordoned off and the local population removed. New offences under Section Two of the Act include printing, possessing, distributing or publishing any material inciting anti-Government sentiment. The death penalty, currently permitted for the kidnapping of prominent persons or Government officials can now be demanded in any case of abduction.

The Government says these amendments are preferable to a restoration of the State of Emergency, but the proposed changes have been widely condemned by Opposition parties and human rights organisations.

The Inter-University Student Federation said the new PTA would give military personnel virtual impunity in security operations. The University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) said the amendments would legalise the most repressive measures formerly permitted only under the declaration of States of Emergency which required monthly review and renewal.

Drought moves south

SRI LANKA'S south-western Districts have been badly hit by drought conditions of increasingly serious dimensions which observers say will badly affect the secondary *Yala* rice crop usually sown in April.

Around Elpitiya in Galle, tanks and wells have completely dried up, compelling thousands of people to trek to remote areas of the District in search of drinking water. Thousands of acres of paddy land are said to remain uncultivated and there is a growing shortage of cattle fodder.

The Mahiyaganaya area of Badulla District has also been badly affected and local farmers have appealed to the authorities for assistance. Further north in the Gokarella area of Kurenegala District, *Yala* paddy cultivation has been abandoned. Almost 25,000 acres in the area were due to be cultivated.

■ Southern fishermen from coastal villages in Galle and Matara, who for generations have seasonally migrated to fishing grounds off Kalmunai and Akkaraipattu on the east coast after the Sinhalese New Year, have been prevented from fishing the area this year by the continuing ethnic disturbances. They have appealed to the authorities for urgent relief assistance.