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Colombo rejects Tiger talks

AFTER a ten-day truce, the Sri Lankan Army resumed military operations against guerilla forces of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) with a wave of bombing offensives that caused heavy civilian casualties in Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Jaffna Districts.

A Government communique on 11 January, reflected the Tigers' offer of an indefinite ceasefire, citing 34 violations in the ten-day period. Peace talks could be held, said the Government, only if the Tigers first disarmed. The participation of the LTTE's military leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and representatives of all Sri Lanka's political parties were also essential prerequisites.

A LTTE reply three days later called for unconditional talks, saying the Tigers would continue to observe the ceasefire unilaterally. An earlier statement accused the Government of 39 truce violations. This was clearly a ceasefire in name only.

Behind the scenes, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had worked hard to facilitate the ceasefire, suggesting local-level consultations between Tiger leaders and Army commanders. The offer of an ICRC ship to hold talks with senior Tiger leaders was turned down by the Government. The Colombo press, in turn, highlighted the ICRC's "refusal" of a Government request to monitor the ceasefire.

What prompted the Tigers' call for a ceasefire is still a subject of wide speculation in Colombo. Cynics say a New Year truce is almost a convention in such chronic conflicts and with heavy rains lashing the North, filling Tiger bunkers with water and immobilising the Army,

New bombing offensive on the North-East

both sides welcomed the respite. LTTE International Wing leader Kittu, says the suffering of Tamils in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province, faced with floods and starvation, motivated their peace plea. LTTE sources reported in late December that over 200 of the Tamil refugees pushed into jungle areas of Batticaloa and Amparai had died of starvation. Tiger supremo Prabhakaran also reportedly embarked on a series of walkabouts in Jaffna to gauge civilian resilience in the face of six months of bombing and economic blockade.

But a breathing space for the war-weary would also allow the Tigers to regroup and re-arm. Malaysian customs officials intercepted three speedboats containing 33 Tamils and \$700,000 worth of weapons on 6 January off Penang, a favourite arms bazaar for the Tigers.

Rival Tamil group EPDP told Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne that the LTTE was about to transfer 1.5 tonnes of gold, extorted from Tamils in the North, to a Mexican broker on the high seas off Jaffna for a massive arms buy.

But after the killing last month of Lucky Wijeratne, the Army's charismatic Eastern Commander, the military was in no mood for peace talks and operations resumed with a vengeance.

There was heavy bombing at Elephant Pass, closing the causeway link to the Jaffna peninsula, and at Kilinochchi market, where nine people were killed. In the East, a massive Army operation at Thoppigal west of Batticaloa claimed the lives of 17 Tigers and two soldiers.

The Tigers replied in traditional manner, when cadres fleeing the Thoppigal offensive massacred 25 Sinhalese villagers at Bogamuyaya, four miles from the Maha Oya - Polonnaruwa road, on 23 January.

The following day, the LTTE withdrew its unilateral ceasefire as continuing air

strikes pounded areas of Kondavil Kokkuvil and Valvettiturai in Jaffna. Tiger positions west of Nayar lagoon in Mullaitivu District also came under heavy air attack and 16 civilians were killed in bombing raids on Pudukudiyiruppu on 30 January.

This is a low-tech conflict, lacking the laser precision of the Gulf video game war. Bombs are trundled on trolleys through the open doors of ageing Chinese transport planes onto "terrorist-held" buildings below.

After five days of bombing Valvettiturai, hundreds of houses on the coast road are destroyed, while the LTTE camp remains intact with flag flying. It is not just inaccuracy. Sri Lankan aircraft will not venture too close to the Tigers' primitive anti-aircraft artillery and civilian targets are an easy option.

Food stocks in Jaffna are again critical and much of the forthcoming harvest north of Kilinochchi has already been pilfered by farm labourers, close to starvation. There is no tea, milk powder and little sugar. Vegetables are Rs.60 a kilo, kerosene Rs.200 a bottle and petrol Rs500 a bottle - 15 times the Colombo price. District Medical Officer K.Sathiyaseelan says Kilinochchi hospital sees 400 out-patients a day and there is an acute shortage of drugs and dressings.

NGOs say medical supplies are routinely confiscated from relief convoys to the North at Army checkpoints. A two-mile log-jam of lorries carrying vital food supplies waits outside Thandikulam, north of Vavuniya, to cross over into Tiger territory.

LTTE leader Prabhakaran is outraged by civilian deaths in the bombing offensive and has promised to install modern anti-aircraft defence systems in the North. This may mean millions of dollars worth of black market gold has already changed hands in the Palk Strait and the long-discussed Stinger missiles are on their way. The war now seems set to escalate further, forgotten in the shadow of the Gulf.

Indian Foreign Minister V C Shukla on the first high-level visit to Colombo for two years, urged President Premadasa to find a political rather than military solution to the North-East conflict. The background on *Page Two*. Hours after Mr Shukla left Colombo on 30 January, Indian Prime Minister Chandra Shekar imposed direct rule on the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Tamil Chief Minister Karunanidhi is accused of open support for the LTTE whose growing lawlessness in south India has led to "a breakdown of law and order". A full report on *Page Four*.

THE RETURN OF INDIA

Circles of deceit

AFTER three days of talks in Colombo in late January, India's Foreign Minister V C Shukla urged Sri Lanka's President Premadasa to launch a bold new initiative for a political rather than a military solution to the North-East conflict.

In the first high-level visit since Mr Premadasa's election in February 1989, India and Sri Lanka agreed to work together to evolve a new regional security system in the wake of the Gulf War and to respect each other's territorial integrity.

India would never again send troops to Sri Lanka to intervene in the Tamil separatist conflict and steps would be taken to close down Tiger bases in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, said Mr Shukla.

Agreement was also reached for joint oil exploration in the Gulf of Mannar and for the renovation of the Trincomalee oil terminal.

But India still regards the controversial Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of July 1987 as a blueprint for devolution in Sri Lanka's war-torn North-East. It was India's attempt to underwrite a Tamil provincial government and disarm the Tigers that brought 50,000 Indian troops to Sri Lanka three years ago. In 32 months of fighting with the LTTE, 1,140 Indian soldiers and over 10,000 Tamil civilians and guerrillas were killed.

Events and perceptions have come full circle, although, regionally, much has changed. With the waning of Soviet power, India is drawing closer to the USA who is increasingly disillusioned with Pakistan. Sri Lanka in turn is wooing China, who gave Colombo \$10 million of

development aid last month and who has helped them buy arms for the North-East war.

India's regional pre-eminence remains secure but somewhat sullied. Her strategy of destabilising regional secessionist movements from within - in Punjab, Assam and Kashmir - has consistently backfired and now threatens her own long-term integrity.

In Sri Lanka, India's support for Tamil groups PLOTE, TELO, EPRLF and the others as a counterweight to the Tigers brutally polarised the Tamil north with internecine killings. The anti-LTTE groups became a puppet provincial government and the surrogate shock troops in the Indian army's brutal struggle with the Tigers.

Having fled with the Indian army last March, the groups are now back in Colombo working with the Sri Lankan army. But they remain malleable. Lunching with Mr Shukla, they assured him of their support for the Indo Sri Lankan Accord - a document Mr Premadasa has little time for - and urged the Indian Foreign Minister to protest against the indiscriminate bombing of the Tamil areas. If they grow disappointed in the Government's patronage they may yet return to India's orbit.

Everyone at this party is facing both ways, trying to square the circle by keeping their options open. Everyone has conflicting aims and characteristic motives - and has changed sides at least once. India will watch and wait and play both sides. In this sense the circle remains unbroken.

First aid

Japan will provide Sri Lanka with a \$300 million credit package and a debt relief grant of \$500,000 say the terms of two letters of exchange signed in Colombo in early January. Malaysia, who provided 50% of Sri Lanka's 600,000 tonnes of imported crude oil last year, has guaranteed unlimited supply at concessionary rates, in the wake of the Gulf war.

Repatriation

Thousands of Sri Lankan migrant workers flocked to Riyadh airport in Saudi Arabia, on the 15 January Gulf deadline in a vain attempt to return home, said a returning worker on one of the last Saudi flights to Colombo. The International Organisation for Migration has repatriated over 47,000 Sri Lankans from Iraq and Kuwait since August but there are said to be 50,000 still in Kuwait.

Named

Opposition MP Jeyaraj Fernandopulle named ten business concerns in Parliament on 23 January who had loans totalling \$8 million written off by Colombo banks. The ten were first named by former JVP leader, Victor Ivan in the journal Ravaya last month.

Rehabilitation

Over 2,340 of 14,000 youths detained last year after the abortive JVP insurrection have now been released, Army sources say. The Government has set a 25 January deadline for the return of over 4,000 weapons issued to prominent politicians at the height of the JVP crisis.

Peace plans plagued by the past

A COALITION of five Tamil and four Muslim political parties have reached agreement on a devolution package for the North-East to be tabled at the next All Party Conference (APC) on 16 February.

The proposal which endorses the permanent merger of the North and East, creates two separate councils to look after Tamil and Muslim interests subordinate to the Provincial Council.

Presented as a peace initiative, the scheme has yet to win visible support from Sinhalese politicians representing 30% of the East's electorate. Its main backers are the anti-LTTE groups and

the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. Mr Premadasa may yet fashion another Provincial Council from them if only to show, given the Tigers' inevitable and violent opposition, how unworkable Tamil devolution is.

International concern over renewed fighting in the North-East continues. The Norwegian government, after a series of consultations with the LTTE offered to host exploratory peace talks in Oslo but informed sources say India has vetoed any outside involvement in its sphere of influence. Church NGOs have also actively promoted reconciliation but

after the failure of the ICRC to develop its role as a "neutral intermediary", the Sri Lankan government also seems unwilling to empower external mediation.

A peace plan developed by Australia was guaranteed support at a meeting of the Commonwealth's High Level Appraisal Group in London in mid-January, but because of the Gulf war, the meeting has been postponed until June. Sri Lanka as a Commonwealth member would be required to give the proposal close consideration and there is the sense of another opportunity missed.

Putting the squeeze on the North in Vavuniya

Mannar: refugees bullets and rain

REFUGEE WORKERS in Mannar District on Sri Lanka's west coast say the situation continues to deteriorate as fighting intensifies between Government forces and the Tigers.

The Army took control of Nanaddan, south of Thallady in late December but fierce fighting continues elsewhere. After LTTE gunfire hit a Sri Lankan helicopter over Navatkulam in late January, Andalkulam was bombed and a number of civilians were killed. A food convoy organised by international refugee agency UNHCR was fired on in a subsequent incident, on the way to Madhu refugee camp.

The Catholic shrine at Madhu now hosts 18,000 refugees, camped in the

open, sheltering in flimsy enclosures of saris and a few twigs from torrential rains.

India has recently announced a \$785,000 contribution in cash and kind to UNHCR's work in Mannar but there is concern that this may be to ease the return of over 200,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in south India as the crackdown on Tiger bases on Tamil Nadu gathers pace.

Less than 200 refugees from south India have returned voluntarily in recent weeks and since the establishment of an Army camp at Pesalai on Mannar Island in late January, few are likely to follow. India is said to be concerned to "create conditions conducive for Tamil refugees to return" and PLOTE cadres have already earmarked villages in Vavuniya

District for the "rehabilitation" of returnees.

Over 30,000 Muslim refugees who fled Mannar District in the wake of a Tiger ultimatum last October still fear to return, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress MP Abu Bakar told Parliament on 25 January. A Government team led by Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne who visited Mannar Island a few days later said Mannar was now safe for the return of Muslim refugees. Report of interrogations and disappearances linked with the new Army facility at Pesalai will not inspire confidence.

Total refugee figures for the island dropped by 250,000 to around 928,000 in late December but there are many thousands "unofficially" displaced as Army operations continue. Government agents such as Batticaloa's Mr Yoganathan are being reshuffled to contain the refugee crisis and there are rumours that rehabilitation chief Charitha Ratwatte's tenure is increasingly tenuous.

Further west in Vavuniya, a giant bottleneck is growing as hundreds of lorries stack up on each side of the Thandikulam checkpoint that separates the one km cut-off between Government-held territory and the Tigers.

A caravan of trucks waits impatiently in Vavuniya to carry Jaffna onions and other produce out of the North through the gauntlet of Army scrutiny. On the other side lines of lorries crammed with produce and passengers wait to pay the inevitable toll to both armies. This is now a war of attrition and it is the civilian population caught between both sides who must pay the price.

Civilians die in Army operations

BATTICALOA MP P Joseph told Parliament on 23 January that 200 civilians were killed in recent Army operations in the East and over 30,000 people displaced. Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne says however 33 LTTE cadres were killed and 13 drowned trying to escape in a major Army operation around Thoppigal in mid-January.

The body of a woman was found on 21 January at Kottaikallaru in Batticaloa. On the same day Kalikutti Thanthadevi, a teacher, was seen being taken away by men in uniform. She was raped and died later in the Batticaloa hospital.

The LTTE say many people from Pattippalai and Arasaditivu were taken to the Kokkaddicholai Army camp in early January on the pretext of issuing flood relief and detained.

Food relief in the East still faces three major problems - persuading the Government to pay for it, finding drivers to transport it from Colombo, and distributing it west of the lagoon in Tiger territory. Four relief trucks were ambushed and burned at Kumburumoolai in mid-January.

Many of the thousands of refugees who fled west to Paduwankarai have returned to a new reception centre at Chenkalady on the Army-controlled coast road. Between Chenkalady and Batticaloa town there are only the burned out hulks of looted villages. Batticaloa town remains tense and firing can

be heard every night after dark.

Tamil/Muslim tensions continue. Suspected LTTE cadres fired on a private bus at Kandimalai in Kiran on 22 January killing three Muslims and injuring three others. A policeman was killed when a patrol was attacked by LTTE on 26 January at Valaichenai.

In Trincomalee, the police have announced that all new persons coming into the District must register with them. Police visited houses to collect particulars of residents. On 22 January five soldiers were injured by a landmine explosion at Monkey Bridge in Trincomalee. Security sources say that on 28 January four Tigers were killed in Welioya and another in Kinniya in Army operations.

Killing ground in Amparai

SOURCES in Amparai say international relief workers discovered 44 Tamil youths imprisoned in a pit in a Special Task Force camp near Akkaraipatru. Many had been tortured and four were dead. Despite NGO protests the youths were denied medical treatment and quickly moved to another STF camp.

Eight charred heads were found at No 11 Tamil village in Amparai on 11 January close to the Army camp after a number of arrests.

Abductions continue. A father and son travelling between the 35th and 36th colo-

nies were abducted by Home Guards and are believed killed. According to the LTTE, 8 Tamil farmers were taken to the Thirukovil STF camp and murdered. It has also been alleged that at Munaikadu in Amparai 34 Tamil youths were arrested and taken to the Thirukovil camp.

Kalmunai LTTE leader Castro whose feud with Amparai LTTE leader Kannan over millions of rupees held hostage in police stations sparked off the June war, was killed while escaping Army operations in a boat on 19 January.

INDIA MOVES TO BREAK TIGERS' POWER BASE IN THE SOUTH

New Delhi dismisses Tamil Nadu government

Thousands were arrested as New Delhi dismissed the Tamil Nadu government in a bid to break the Tamil Tigers' stranglehold on the southern state and to shut down their vital supply lines to Jaffna. But what will become of 200,000 Lankan refugees that India may now wish to disown.

HOURS after Indian Foreign Minister V C Shukla left Colombo, promising to curb Sri Lankan militants in south India, the Indian government dismissed the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi and imposed direct rule from New Delhi on 31 January.

Indian Prime Minister Chandra Shekar said Mr Karunanidhi's open support for the Tamil Tigers had led to a break down of law and order in the state and accused him of leaking strategic information about India's intentions to the LTTE.

Over 15,000 troops were rushed to Tamil Nadu as days of rioting followed the fall of Mr Karunanidhi's Tamil nationalist DMK party and 17,000 people were arrested. Six people died after setting fire to themselves in protest.

In the last ten years, the Tigers built up a formidable rear base in Tamil Nadu

forging links with organised crime and local smugglers. Mr Karunanidhi's predecessor, M G Ramachandran gifted millions of rupees to the militants who set up over 30 camps in the south with the connivance of New Delhi.

By December last year, it was clear that the fragile minority Chandra Shekar government had changed its mind about the Tigers after a series of robberies and killings in the south. Mr Karunanidhi reluctantly implemented a crackdown and arrested over 1,000 refugee 'militants' very few of them LTTE. Stories continued to surface in the local press of injured Tiger cadres hospitalised in safe houses in Madurai and coastguards apprehending launches filled with diesel fuel for Jaffna. In the last four months, 30,000 litres of diesel was confiscated.

If taming the Tigers is part of New Delhi's "new deal" for Sri Lanka, Mr

Karunanidhi's removal also has distinct advantages for Prime Minister Chandra Shekar's tottering cabinet. Rival Tamil politician AIADMK leader Jayalalitha will now back the Prime Minister with her party's 11 seats in the national Parliament. Mr Karunanidhi's DMK has no seats in the New Delhi assembly.

But observers fear that if India is serious about rooting out the Tigers' rear base they will return over 200,000 refugees to northern Sri Lanka whether there is a peace settlement or not.

The return of the refugees would in itself contribute to stability, Indian and refugee officials said back in 1988, and they may say the same again. But no one ever stopped a war because there were some civilians in the way, and it is no different in the North today.

Inevitably money plays a part in such decisions. Over 125,000 Sri Lankan refugees have arrived in south India since 11 June and have cost the Tamil Nadu government over \$5 million so far. But the human cost may yet be higher.

Premadasa appoints commission on human rights

FOLLOWING several months of pressure from human rights organisations, President Premadasa appointed a three-member Presidential Commission in mid-January to inquire into involuntary disappearances.

The Commission, headed by former Supreme Court judge H.A.G.de Silva, has been mandated to investigate complaints of abductions and subsequent disappearances after 11 January 1991 and take all measures to establish the whereabouts of the disappeared. The Commission, comprising two other members, former Court of Appeal judge P.E.de Silva and Attorney-at-Law A.C.M.Uvais, has also been empowered to investigate the inadequacies in the present laws and recommend legal measures against those responsible for disappearances.

The Organisation of Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared (OPFMD) says that it has no confidence in the appointed Commission, as it will only look into future crimes. The OPFMD, which has received thousands of complaints of disappearances, has been demanding an independent Commission to investigate crimes and denial

of human rights in the recent past, comprising members of the opposition parties, trade unions and human rights organisations in addition to government members.

Member of Parliament for Batticaloa Prince Casinadar has cabled President Premadasa demanding the inclusion of a Tamil in the Commission as thousands have disappeared from the East.

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

The Sri Lanka Project
The British Refugee Council
3/9 Bondway
London SW8 1SJ
Tel: (071) 582 6922.

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The UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances in its report on Sri Lanka, released in mid-January to be presented to the Human Rights Commission in February, says that the Sri Lankan government has responded with regard to 241 disappearances out of the 1,182 cases transmitted. Of these, 16 cases have been clarified by government response and 26 by NGO sources. According to the report, 14 persons died in custody.

The European Parliament in a resolution adopted on 13 December called on the Sri Lankan government to set up an independent Commission of Enquiry into disappearances and extra-judicial killings and to publish a full list of those held in detention camps and police stations.

Police shot dead three men alleged to be JVP members in the Galketawewa jungle in the Matale District in early January. Police say that they arrested a JVP member at Waskaduwa in the Kalutara District in late January. He is alleged to have been involved in nine robberies and 54 murders, including those of 18 security personnel and two Provincial Council members.