

Safe passage from Jaffna

DIPLOMATIC SOURCES say the Sri Lankan government, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and international refugee agency UNHCR will sign a tripartite agreement at the end of April to open a relief corridor to the beleaguered Jaffna peninsula, through the Pooneryn-Sangupiddy ferry crossing.

The new route closed since Sri Lankan troops occupied the islands west of Jaffna in October 1991, lies six miles south-west of Kilali. Over 150 people have died since December after Sri Lankan Navy attack near Kilali on boats packed with civilians fleeing Jaffna. Six UN and twelve local staff will guarantee a phased opening of the Pooneryn crossing involving, firstly, transit of vital medical and food aid for Jaffna's one million population under siege for three years and if the lifeline is successful, a civilian crossing point in the second phase.

The negotiations which began in mid-December have been stalled for the last three months by LTTE demands that the Army be withdrawn from Pooneryn village, the first major settlement on the southern side of the crossing and Army stipulation that the Tigers leave the Kalmunai promontory, a narrow neck of land north-west of Pooneryn. A LTTE landmine attack near Pooneryn which killed two soldiers on 25 March stalled negotiations. High-level negotiators from UNHCR's Geneva office are expected to travel to Jaffna in mid-April to finalise the agreement.

Observers in Colombo say both sides are already using the potential agreement as a cover for further military offensives. Reports say that Army camps in the Jaffna peninsula are being strengthened and the arrival of a large contingent of

President Ranasinghe Premadasa said in a BBC radio phone-in programme on 7 March that LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran should submit any proposal for resolving the Sri Lankan conflict to the Parliamentary Select Committee. He emphasized that the government was committed to a just and durable political solution and the armed forces were engaged in protecting innocent civilians in the North-East. The BBC Colombo correspondent and a Danish cameraman were refused permission by the Army to enter the north in late March.

UN to broker humanitarian corridor

new troops indicates that a major military offensive is imminent. Five civilians were killed on 11 March when the Sri Lankan Airforce bombed Pommaiveli south-east of the Jaffna town, which observers say is a likely place for an amphibious landing. In mid-March civilian areas in the north-west of the peninsula were shelled by naval vessels and north-east was attacked by bombers destroying houses. Fifteen civilians were injured and many houses damaged in further bombing at Udayarkaddu on 24 March. Other sources say the high rift between Army Commander Lt Gen Cecil Waidyaratne and the bureaucrats of the Joint Operations Command (JOC) who technically direct Army operations has reached a new intensity.

According to Colombo newspapers Tigers are also preparing for widespread attacks and over 500 cadre from the east have arrived in the north on the orders of LTTE leader V Prabhakaran.

Analysts say the LTTE want to target Nagathevanthurai naval base, the source of the Kilali killings, only three miles east of Pooneryn. Jaffna medical student Wilson Nicolas was killed on 24 March when a navy gunboat again fired on passengers waiting at Kilali to cross the lagoon. Two other students on their way to receive government Mahapola scholarships in Vavuniya were seriously injured.

Diplomatic sources in Colombo are puzzled by UNHCR playing such a role rather than the ICRC, currently protecting the Jaffna hospital, whose mandate more clearly includes such work. Some sources believe both combatants are out to exploit UNHCR's relative inexperience in the Jaffna theatre of war for their own ends.

The Tigers seek an instrument to pull the UN into the conflict to allow escalation of the international Tamil lobby.

The government wants to show the international community its humanitarian regard for the people of Jaffna.

Some analysts say a formal agreement affording some kind of recognition to the LTTE is impossible, particularly when the country is facing Provincial Council elections in May. Such difficulty could lead to two separate agreements, one between the Sri Lankan government and the UNHCR and the other involving LTTE and UNHCR.

Despite a government announcement that 6,200 metric tonnes of food aid was sent prices of essential food items in the Jaffna peninsula remain high. But the price of fuel fell after each family was provided a litre of kerosene through the Government Agent's office. Presidential International Advisor Bradman Weerakoon says LTTE has plundered Rs 3 million worth food aid in 1992. Reports say large quantities of harvested tobacco and onions destined for the south were stockpiling because of lack of transport.

The interim report of the Parliamentary Select Committee appointed to find a solution to the ethnic problem submitted on 11 March after a year-long discussions was rejected by Tamil political parties which denied that there was Tamil-Sinhala consensus. As expected the interim report recommended demerger of the North-East province which the Tamil parties bitterly oppose, and devolution as provided for states in the Indian Union. Despite President Premadasa's pledge that the government would implement a final solution after considering all proposals, the disappointed Tamil parties called for international mediation.

The North-East province will be left out of the Provincial Council elections in late May. President Premadasa's gamble would be to test the mood of the people in the light of continuing ethnic strife and deteriorating economic conditions. Some observers say if he can pull this one off, the stage would be set for a real prospect in solving the island's problem.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Task Force tied

IN a surprise about-turn Sri Lanka's Attorney-General Tilak Marapana made wide-ranging commitments to improve human rights at the UN Human Rights Commission sessions in early March.

Mr Marapana's statement undertakes to ascertain the whereabouts of the disappeared, prosecute those responsible for human rights violations and review current Emergency legislation. The World Council of Churches, however, says Sri Lanka's attempts to address criticisms of human rights performance are cosmetic.

Blatant violations of civil rights have continued according to human rights NGOs in Sri Lanka which have again called for transparency and accountability. Despite amendments to Emergency regulations, inquests into deaths in custody may still be bypassed and major problems of undisclosed places of detention and unlimited extension of detention orders remain unaltered. NGOs say the Human Rights Task Force (HRTF) is unable or unwilling to compile a complete list of either the detainees or places of detention and the Presidential Commission of Enquiry into disappearances appointed in 1991 has concluded hearings only in four cases.

Under Emergency regulations upto 5,000 detainees of the abortive JVP uprising are held incommunicado for over three years. Some 700 prisoners launched a fast unto death in late March and petitioned President Premadasa for speedy disposal of inquiries into charges against them.

The Attorney-General now says he has been forced to withdraw cases against many of those detained for over three years. According to reports 3,070 indictments have been served against JVP suspects and 2,011 persons were released for lack of evidence. The Sri

Lanka Bar Association says 2,975 cases alleging illegal detention and torture were filed in 1992 and persons ordered to be released by the Supreme Court remain in custody.

In late February the Supreme Court directed the HRTF to use its wide-ranging powers into illegal detention. HRTF Chairman JFA Soza claimed after consulting President Premadasa that HRTF had powers only to investigate conditions of detainees. In early April the Supreme Court, however, ruled that the law permitted HRTF to investigate detention and monitor the observance of fundamental rights. These events have led to suspicions that there has been political dealing around the HRTF.

The UN Working Group on Disappearances says that in the North-East persons most at risk are young Tamil men in informal refugee camps. The Batticaloa Peace Committee reports over 5,000 disappearances in the east in the past three years and according to Fr Harry Miller, an American Jesuit priest living in Batticaloa, disappearances continue.

Foreign missions in Colombo claim that Sri Lanka's human rights record has improved since the demise of the JVP revolt. But the situation in the war-torn North-East has if anything worsened. Vavuniya as a kind of frontier and the nearest urban centre to the Army's forward defence line in the north-west has become a command post for Army-directed Sinhalese colonisation and a new spate of disappearances.

Sri Lankan NGOs say assurances of the Sri Lankan government should be keenly scrutinised by the international community since none of the constitutional and legislative changes promised have been carried out.

Children killed

Four Sri Lankan children were killed and 12 others wounded on 27 March when a live grenade they found in the Murunkan Catholic churchyard in north-west Mannar District exploded as they played with it.

Leader replaced

Major Sheker cohort of deputy leader Mahattaya died in an accidental bomb blast says a LTTE statement on 16 March. Persistent rumours speak of a struggle within the LTTE and Mahattaya conspicuous by his absence in public ceremonies has been replaced by Soosai and Ruban.

Dwindling forests

Sri Lanka's forest cover has dropped to 20% of the island's area from 23% in 1983 says Deputy Conservator of Forests WRMS Wickramasinghe. According to him the reason for the high rate of decline was the clearing of jungles under the Mahaweli Development Programme.

Ransom demand

The Supreme Court granted leave for the hearing of the fundamental rights application by T Selvakumar alleging that the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) leader Douglas Devananda abducted him and demanded a ransom of Rs 1 million (\$21,000). The EPDP currently supports the government in the war against the LTTE.

Cancer deaths

According to the Jaffna Regional Health Office 585 people died of cancer in 1991, whereas 11,000 died in 1992. Jaffna University researchers attribute the high incidence of cancer to toxic fumes released by bombs.

Jayalalitha jabs Rao

TAMIL NADU Chief Minister Jayalalitha is under siege and her AIADMK government is expected to fall after she snubbed Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao by breaking the 20 month-old uneasy alliance between her party and the Congress (I) on 9 March.

Janata Party leader Subramaniam Swamy has sought to remove Jayalalitha from office in a petition to Tamil Nadu Governor BN Singh accusing her of securing government contracts. The petition has now been referred to the Elections Commissioner following a

directive by the Supreme Court. Mr Swamy also says Jayalalitha is now under the influence of the LTTE.

In late February Tamil Nadu police seized a LTTE submarine prototype near Mahapalipuram and arrested master-builder Shanmugavelu. Earlier in the month, Sea Tiger Kiran was arrested at Rameswaram and a LTTE boat was found near Karaikal. Naval patrols were increased and Tiger member Saran was arrested at Nagapatanam with weapons.

The accusation of Tamil Nadu Transport Minister KA Sengottaiyan that

local Congress (I) leaders were involved in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has caused an uproar and is likely to further delay the murder trial. The case is now at a standstill as Madras lawyers are unwilling to defend 16 of the 26 accused persons.

No new date has been set for resuming UNHCR-monitored repatriation of Tamil refugees to Sri Lanka. In early April UNHCR representative Sunil Thapa was again refused entry to a refugee camp outside Madras despite having New Delhi's permission.

■ *People harassed in Amparai* ■ *Committee threatened in Trincomalee*

Supremacy in the east

BATTICALOA Defence Coordinator Brigadier Rohan Gunawardena says ten of the twelve Assistant Government Agent divisions in the District are now under Army control. According to him LTTE controls only Vakarai, north of the Polonnaruwa road and the Vellaveli area 15 miles south of Batticaloa remains contested.

In early March the Army launched *Operation Sumana* (Fragrant Flower) in Thoppigala, north-west of Batticaloa to prevent the LTTE attacking from jungle bases. Mines prevented troops penetrating the jungle and the Airforce heavily bombed the area in an effort to flush out the Tigers. Army sources say 22 Tigers were killed and two military camps had been set up to cut off rebel movement.

Observers say the Army intends to capture as much territory as possible before the Presidential Mobile Secretariat in Batticaloa in early July.

Ministry secretariats are currently visiting Batticaloa to prepare for the Presidential Secretariat. Over 6,000 people who came to Batticaloa town on 8 March with death and injury compensation claims returned disappointed after Rehabilitation Ministry officials failed to make any payment. According to Batticaloa MP P Joseph over 75% of the 105,000 people affected by violence have not received compensation. Although 32,000 houses are damaged only 8,000 people have been compensated.

Despite Army claims of control LTTE made its presence felt throughout the dis-

trict. Eighteen Muslim fishermen abducted by the Tigers at Valaichenai on 20 March were released on the same day. The bodies of two abducted TELO members were found in Vantharumoolai on 26 March. A day later four Tigers were shot dead in Kurunthanmadu.

Two civilians walking near the Urukamam Army camp were shot dead on 9 March. A 13 year-old boy was killed by the police on 22 March near the Mamankam railway station. In late March EPRLF leader Suresh Premachandran accused three policemen of raping a young woman in Urani, in a letter to the Defence Secretary.

In Amparai District people complained that Home Guards were harassing them and a gang posing as the Tigers had robbed a number of Tamil villages. According to the Social Services Director 1,420 families have been resettled in the district. Over 4,200 families remain in refugee camps and 2,000 families live with friends or relatives.

The committee to inquire into the occupation of temple lands by Sinhalese colonists in Trincomalee has been threatened, according to reports. S Rajaratnam was shot dead in Trincomalee on 17 March by unknown persons. Defence sources say several Tiger cadre were killed when surprised by an Airforce patrol near Morawewa in mid-March. Further north three soldiers were killed in a LTTE attack at Monerawewa in the Weli Oya area on 27 March.

Moderates at the crossroads

FOLLOWING the rejection of the interim report of the Parliamentary Select Committee in mid-March by seven Tamil political parties, the moderate Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) says in a 24-page memorandum to Chairman Mangala Munasinghe the merger of the north and east is vital to the future of the Tamil community.

The TULF argues that permanent merger will strengthen the historical kinship of the people while guaranteeing safety and contribute to the pooling of the human resources of the north and the natural resources of the east. Separate councils for the two areas, Tamils fear, would lead to the appointment of a Sinhalese chief minister in the east where Tamils are a minority and marginalisation of Tamils by intensified Sinhalese colonisation. The TULF says the Indian model of devolution recommended by the Select Committee is inappropriate because of the unitary character of the Sri Lankan Constitution which contains discriminatory provisions.

Observers say if the UNP is successful at the provincial elections in May, President Premadasa will declare demerger of the North-East and hold elections in the east. Others say he will allow merger to continue or strike a deal with Tamils to bring in the votes.

At a secret meeting between Tamil parties and Presidential Advisor Bradman Weerakoon on 18 March, human rights lawyer Desmond Fernando was adamant that merger was anathema to the Sinhalese. Mr Weerakoon conceded that some element of merger was essential for any realistic settlement and called for a redrawing of provincial boundaries.

The Tamil parties are in a quandary. The Tamil Congress leader Kumar Ponnambalam declared that it was now time for Tamils to rethink their position and urge foreign intervention.

Army advance in Vanni

IN an uncertain security situation the Sri Lankan Army enforced a new curfew in uncleared areas across Mannar District and the north-west on 8 March after a spate of clashes with the LTTE.

During the 50-hour curfew the Army pushed to the Cheddikulam railway station in Vavuniya in *Operation Sedapahara* (Torrent) with little resistance from the LTTE. Brigadier Angamana says that in four major military operations the Army has captured 250 sq kms of territory in the Vanni.

Tigers attacked Army's forward defence line at Cheddikulam on 30 March killing three soldiers and injuring five others. In another attack further south at Kokkuveli a soldier was injured. Three PLOTE cadre and a civilian were killed by the LTTE at Nochchimodai four miles north of Vavuniya. The Airforce continued to target LTTE posi-

tions in Poovarasankulam and destroyed a Tiger base at Pandisurichchan on the Vavuniya-Mannar road.

Fear gripped Army-controlled Vavuniya town by abductions carried out by persons in black uniforms in white vans. In late March Vanni MP Raja Kuganeswaran said that eleven persons had disappeared in Vavuniya town.

The LTTE shot dead three policemen at Pesalai on 15 March on Mannar Island. There are 3,000 refugees in the UN-run refugee camp at Pesalai and another 30,000 refugees in a massive settlement at Madhu. Army search operations began after curfew was imposed on Mannar Island on 29 March following reports of LTTE infiltration. Earlier in the month a LTTE base at Parappukadanthan, nine miles east of Mannar Island, was wiped out by the Airforce, security sources say.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SAYS RETURNING REFUGEES ARE AT RISK

Security alert in Colombo

SRI LANKAN security forces claim increasing levels of infiltration by LTTE cadre into Colombo in the run-up to the New Year period in mid-April in preparation for attack on high profile targets in the capital.

Security was strengthened in early March following reports that a LTTE hit-squad had slipped into Colombo to assassinate Tamil and Muslim MPs. Police appealed to the public for information alleging that the Tigers were residing in lodgings in the city. A large number of Tamil youths who have fled the North-East live in cheap hotels and boarding houses in Colombo and the suburbs.

According to the police three members of a Tiger unit working in factories were arrested in Negambo and Ja-Ela and eight LTTE deserters hunting for employment in Ja-Ela were also detained for interrogation. Ramalingam Ragavan allegedly a close associate of LTTE deputy leader *Mahattaya* was taken into custody on 22 March. Police say that a large number of LTTE women cadre are in the capital and five of them have already been arrested.

Round-ups of Tamil youths continued in March. Seventy five Tamils were arrested on 20 March and fifteen including two women were detained. Another 120 were rounded up in a security sweep in late March according to military spokesman Brigadier Nalin Angammana. In early April Colombo newspapers quoting intelligence reports said LTTE explosives expert *Neelan*, a confidant of Batticaloa Tiger leader Karuna had entered Colombo to begin a bombing campaign.

Many European nations are moving forward to deport Sri Lankan Tamils refused asylum in their countries. Swiss Refugee Minister Peter Arbenz told Swiss Radio in late February that a new repatriation programme for Sri Lankans would target over 1,000 Tamils who have arrived in Switzerland since September 1992. Sri Lankan Tamils would be sent to Colombo and the south only said Mr Arbenz after a UNHCR evaluation undertaken in June 1992 claimed the south was safe for prospective returnees.

A Norwegian immigration spokesperson says that the Norwegian government

has decided after a series of consultations with UNHCR, to deport 50 Tamils refused asylum. The decision is said to have been taken after a Norwegian official who visited Sri Lanka claimed that Tamils were safe in Colombo. Reports say that according to the Head of the Immigration Department, the deportations will be coordinated by UN officials who will ensure a safe passage from the airport to their destinations in Colombo.

Amnesty International in a press release on 5 March rejected Mr Arbenz's claim and said that the majority of the Tamils could not live in any part of the country in safety and dignity. A Tamil youth who arrived in Colombo on holiday after ten years in Canada was arrested by the Fort police on 24 March on suspicion that he was linked to the LTTE. Sri Lankan human rights NGOs say repeated incidents of widespread cordon and search operations in and around Colombo, leading to mass arrest and detention of Tamil youths and the conflict-ridden situation in the North-East prevent effective resettlement of even persons displaced within the country.

Politicians armed for provincial elections

SEVEN Provincial Councils elected in 1988 to decentralise powers in the wake of Tamil separatism were dissolved on 16 March to make way for fresh elections in mid-May.

Most of the 32 political parties are expected to contest for the 364 seats in the councils and 10.9 million people are eligible to vote. There will be no election, however, in the North-East where the EPRLF-controlled Provincial Council was dissolved in 1990.

President Premadasa's United National Party (UNP) has to contend with a new force, the breakaway Democratic United National Front (DUNF) led by former ministers Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake, who have inside knowledge of UNP's campaign tactics. The emergence of the five-party People's Alliance, led by the main opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) must also concern the UNP.

After the UNP agreed to a series of demands on wages and welfare of plantation workers, Hill Country trade union the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), led by Minister S Thondaman decided to

support the UNP at the elections. The CWC has suffered a set back in the recent months by a breakway group which has joined the DUNF.

Tamil observers believe the dissolution of the provincial councils within a

week of the Parliamentary Select Committee deciding to separate the northern and eastern provinces is significant and say the decision to hold the provincial elections is President Premadasa's way of indicating to the Tamils that no other solution will be considered. Tamil Congress leader Kumar Ponnambalam called on Tamils outside the North-East to register their protest by voting against the UNP.

Council members still retain weapons issued by the government four years ago and observers fear widespread violence in the run-up to the elections. The killing in March of eleven Colombo gang members has led to fears that criminal elements may become involved.

Reports say 50,000 security personnel will be deployed and the opposition will appoint its own election monitoring committee drawn from local and international NGOs. SAARC members have been invited by the government to monitor the elections. Elections Commissioner Chandrananda de Silva's call on the police to meet force by force to ensure free and fair elections means Sri Lanka faces a bloody May.

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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