

# The Sri Lanka Monitor

No 76

May 1994

Produced by the British Refugee Council

## Tamils struggle for election unity

TAMIL political parties in Colombo, believing that Sri Lanka's four million Tamils hold the balance of power in forthcoming presidential elections in December, are struggling to forge a common platform around a formula to end the island's ten-year civil war.

Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leader S Thondaman, 79, godfather of 1.5 million Plantation Tamils and kingmaker to the ruling United National Party (UNP) launched a new round of consultations in early May. The Thondaman gambit revives the CWC 1991 peace proposal pledging Tamil support to whichever of the major political parties offers maximum endorsement in their election manifesto. The CWC peace package which originally engendered a storm of Sinhalese hostility in the south proposes federal autonomy to the Tamil north with increased revenue and police powers such as control of ports and airports and authority to raise foreign aid directly.

Unity may prove elusive. Few Tamils will vote for current President Wijetunge after his openly chauvinist local election campaigns. But few Tamil politicians believe that Mr Thondaman will desert his 17-year alliance with UNP. His "ransom note" strategy is designed to boost his bargaining power with UNP and claw back his power base in the Plantations under increasing threat from the failure of government privatisation policies and the rise of P Chandrasekaran's Upcountry People's Front (UPF).

"I just cannot abandon the UNP just because it is going to lose the election" the CWC leader pointedly told the press in mid-May which in politics is tantamount to asking for a divorce. Mr Thondaman will keep both friends and enemies guessing until the last moment.

Other Tamil parties like TULF and EPRLF clearly believe that their best bet

lies with the present opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) after Mrs Chandrika Kumaranatunge's unexpected triumph in Southern Provincial Council elections in March.

The growing bandwagon for Sorbonne-educated Chandrika as SLFP presidential candidate was deftly derailed as her dowager mother SLFP leader Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, 78, casually assumed the nomination when the party's National Executive Committee met on 23 May. Mrs Kumaranatunge was appointed deputy leader. Party insiders say mother and daughter will campaign together and after Mrs Bandaranaike has triumphed as Sri Lanka's first woman President she will curb the undemocratic power of the executive Presidency by constitutional amendment, leaving Chandrika in the driving seat as Prime Minister.

Mrs Kumaranatunge has reaffirmed she wants to negotiate a solution to the ten-year civil war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) but both major parties have a long record of broken promises on the Tamil issue.

Another option is a Tamil presidential candidate like All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) leader Kumar Ponnambalam who stood in 1982. AGOTIC a new grouping purportedly representing Colombo's 250,000 Tamils condemned President Wijetunge's racist rhetoric in a statement in early May and is expected to back Mr Ponnambalam. Other Tamil parties like PLOTE and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) are floating a third set of proposals for a north-east regional council with a sub-council for Muslim majority areas.

Meanwhile, President DB Wijetunge has tightened his grip on the faction-ridden UNP in preparation for the December elections. Kandy ally Gamini Dissanayake entered Parliament on 19

May after National List MP MH Amit stood down. More resignations are expected to admit former minister Ronnie de Mel and ex North-West

Governor Gamini Jayawickrema Perera. A major cabinet reshuffle is expected in mid-June.

The arrest of *Sothi Upali* a leading Colombo underworld figure and UNP Working Committee member generated a new press outcry over death squads and gangster politics during the Premadasa era after deposed UNP General Secretary Sirisena Cooray described him as "one of our boys".

Speculation mounted as Dulanjalee Premadasa wrote to Mr Wijetunge saying she did not believe the Tamil Tigers assassinated her father in May 1993 and called for a full Presidential Commission of Enquiry. Mr Wijetunge refused the request saying police enquiries were continuing but in a careful balancing act drafted both Mr Cooray and Mr Premadasa's son, Sajith, into the UNP Working Committee along with Gamini Dissanayake. Premadasa loyalists want a ministerial post for the late President's widow, Hema, in the cabinet reshuffle.

Mr Wijetunge is wooing the electorate while laying claim to Mr Premadasa's populist legacy with a paper trail of tax reductions and price cuts on staple foods that will cost Rs 15 billion (\$375 million) economists say and send inflation spiralling beyond the present 17% level.

New measures announced in early May include a minimum monthly wage of Rs 2,000 for casual state employees, no income tax on earnings below Rs 12,000 a year and food stamps for a further 1.2 million schoolchildren. A new farmers bank and fertiliser subsidy scheme will be introduced following demonstrations in Polonnaruwa last month after 15 farmers committed suicide overwhelmed by bad harvests and rising debt. New development schemes and a fifth round of Mr Premadasa's *Janasaviya* poverty alleviation programme will be launched targeting 120,000 families.

Little of Mr Wijetunge's "manna from heaven", as a sardonic press described it, is likely to filter through the bureaucracy before the December elections. From both Tamil and Sinhalese camps these are but the opening bids in what will be an increasingly deadly poker game.

**Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader, MHM Ashraff, resigned from parliament on 19 May, honouring his pledge to step down if his party failed to win all six councils in Muslim majority areas of Amparai in local elections in March. His resignation was also a protest over police harassment and assaults on SLMC supporters during the election campaign, said Mr Ashraff.**

## THE NORTH

## Under siege

AFTER negotiations with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Jaffna, the Tigers have again refused to open the strategic land route to the peninsula through Elephant Pass, fearing an impending offensive by the military.

Air attacks and indiscriminate shelling from the islands and the Army's foothold around Palaly airbase have continued. A mother of seven was killed and her daughter badly injured in Sulipuram by shelling from Karainagar. A father, daughter and daughter-in-law were killed and ten others injured in aerial bombing on 22 May in Neerveli, after LTTE attacks on front-line positions in Vāsavilan a few miles north. A massive 48-hour artillery barrage of coastal areas in late May sparked new rumours of invasion.

There are frequent attacks on fishermen by Navy craft patrolling the peninsula's coastline. Three fishermen were arrested in mid-sea off Sulipuram and two others are missing after jumping overboard. Defence sources say the Navy destroyed a LTTE boat off Mathagal, killing four Tigers.

Food stocks in Jaffna have stabilised but the medical situation is deteriorating. Over 60 cases of septicaemia were reported in Vadamaratchi south last month and another 700 cases of Malaria. Jaffna hospital short of 25 doctors and 82 nurses saw 27,311 out-patients last month and admitted over 20,000. Infection is spiralling as the hot season approaches and Jaffna's crumbling water and public

health systems collapse.

Over one million people are crammed into the tiny 30 by 15-mile peninsula, prisoners of the four-year military blockade. Every week, 5,000 Jaffna civilians pay Rs 250 each to cross the lagoon through the Tigers' strategic ferry point at Kilali, bringing back foreign remittances from Colombo that keep the northern economy afloat. High winds and heavy rains cut this month's traffic by half.

Tiger leaders remain defiant in the face of the invasion threat. After a massive eight-mile procession on May Day, former EROS chief, V Balakumar, told crowds at Jaffna University that Sri Lankan troops were massing in the peninsula and the LTTE was ready for them. Rumours again surfaced in late May that disgraced LTTE deputy leader, *Mahattaya*, arrested by the Tigers last August, has been executed. Rival Tamil groups claim Richard Ariyalai, *Mahattaya's* closest associate, recently committed suicide under Tiger interrogation. LTTE ideologue, Anton Balasingham opened the first branch of the Tamil Eelam Savings Bank in Jaffna in late May as the Tigers step up state-building. A LTTE police force and law courts already function.

Further south in remote Mullaitivu District, five LTTE cadre and one soldier died in a clash at Wadduvakai on 12 May. Six soldiers died in a Tiger attack on front-line positions at Karuthankulam, north Vavuniya, five days earlier.

### Tragedy

Sinhalese farmer, HL Guna Banda from Divulpelessa, ashamed to see his nine children starving, bought a loaf of bread on credit, cut it into nine slices, then committed suicide by swallowing insecticide. Almost 20 southern farmers have killed themselves in recent months, overwhelmed by bad harvests and rising debt.

### Accused

Attorney General Tilak Marapana has filed a case against Kandiah Lingeswaran alleging he came to Colombo on the instructions of LTTE intelligence chief Pottuamman to assist another Tamil named as Rangunathan to assassinate leading Sri Lankan politician Lalith Athulathmudali in April 1993.

### Freed

Sri Lankan Tamils Prem Sivalingam, 30, and Sam Kulasingham, 37, jailed for life in April 1988 for the murder of three Tamils in a fire-bomb attack in London, had their convictions quashed in the Court of Appeal on 27 May after judges ruled that police suppressed evidence and intimidated witnesses.

### Monsoon deaths

A Muslim family of seven were buried alive in a landslide in Ehaliyagoda, as monsoon rains lashed south-west Sri Lanka in late May. Over 15,000 people are displaced in Kalutara, Galle and Hambantota.

## Targets

TWO policemen were killed in early May and another five injured after the Tigers stormed a police station at Pallimunai on isolated Mannar Island in the north-west, where over 3,500 Tamil refugees were repatriated from India earlier this year.

The island, cut off from LTTE-controlled Mannar mainland, remains a target for the Tigers. Most of the refugees are stuck in UN-run camps, unwilling or unable to go home. Returnee Jeevendran was abducted from Talaimannar station camp at 3am on 21 May by uniformed men. Seven young Tamils were arrested in Talaimannar two days later. Fishing in the area is restricted, decimating the island's fragile economy. Two fishermen

were shot dead by the Navy off Pesalai on 1 May.

On the mainland, the military are digging in at Puvarasankulam, ten miles west of Vavuniya, after capturing the village last month. Fighting continues a few miles north at Sinnathampanai, where four LTTE cadre died in a clash on 28 May. The Army has pushed another mile up the Cheddikulam road, preparing a pincer strike on Periyapandivirichchan, the LTTE command-and-control centre in Mannar District. Three miles away, over 20,000 refugees shelter in a UN camp at Madhu, Sri Lanka's most sacred Catholic shrine.

Further south in Puttalam, unrest has continued after 3,000 Sinhalese fisher-

men fled the district following LTTE attacks. Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) MP Abu Bakr says boats and fishing equipment worth Rs 20 million (\$500,000) were burned when Sinhalese from Serukuli attacked Muslim families in remote Karaitivu on 10 May. A fisherman is missing in Kalpitiya after an armed gang of 25 stole four boats and 22 outboard motors.

Over 40,000 Muslims remain in run-down camps in Puttalam, expelled from the north by LTTE ultimatum in 1990. Post Office worker Mr Hanifa told the BBC in late May that most Muslims will not return to Mannar Island until the government makes a deal with the Tigers that guarantees their safety.

## ■ NGOs question resettlement in the east

# A fast buck in the buffer zone

THOUSANDS of refugees have been resettled without rehabilitation assistance and without access to their fields or fishing boats because of the continuing security threat from the Tamil Tigers admitted Rehabilitation Secretary Christie Silva at a crisis meeting with NGOs in Trincomalee on 9 May.

The military bluntly say resettlement cannot wait until the war is over and if fighting keeps farmers from their fields, then NGOs must create jobs for them. In areas like Thambalakamam, the Army is more concerned with profiteering - farming rich rice lands while local people are corralled in their villages.

Few of those resettled who have access to fields or fishing grounds have received the promised Rs 4,000

Productive Enterprise Grant or Rs 15,000 Housing Allowance to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. The Rehabilitation Ministry has received only Rs 20 million of its Rs 200 million (\$50 million) budget this year and there are persistent allegations of corruption among top government officials in Trincomalee.

Government resettlement policy must be flexible, more sensitive to civilians' security and properly funded. It should not be used to shore up new military fronts or create buffer zones for the Army say the NGOs.

Much of Trincomalee District's interior remains contested territory. Two policemen guarding a bridge near Thoppur were shot dead in early May. A few days later, Tennyson, Tiger leader in

nearby Kattaiparichchan was killed in a police ambush. Two soldiers on patrol were killed on the Habarana-Kantalai road and four off-duty soldiers were ambushed and killed on the flashpoint Pulmoddai-Padaviya road on the district's northern border in late May.

Further south, Tamil MP Pararajasingham Joseph says much of Batticaloa is reduced to rubble with 36,000 of 47,000 houses in the district needing rebuilding or repair through war damage. There is a growing shortage of doctors and medical supplies. While the military nervously patrol the coastal strip, the Tigers sit tight in the interior. Army checkpoints have been strengthened after three bombs were found in Batticaloa town and two policemen shot dead outside Eravur in early May.

West of the lagoon in Mandur on the Amparai border, all males over 12 are screened at 8 am at the Special Task Force camp nearby. The Tigers dominate the surrounding countryside. Three LTTE were shot dead at Kaluwanchikudi a few miles north and three reserve policemen killed in Central Camp in Amparai in early May.

North of the Polonnaruwa road in isolated Vaharai, 60 families burned out of their houses in Panichchankerni in mid-April have received no relief assistance for the last month. Many areas of Vaharai have received no food stamps, whether through bureaucratic bungling or new military pressure to cut the supply lifeline to the Tigers in the green haze of jungle beyond any village.

# Exile and death

THE COLD-BLOODED KILLING of former TELO member Sabaratnam Sabalingam in Paris on 1 May, has sent shock waves through the 500,000-strong Tamil exile community across the world. Many suspect the LTTE of his murder. Over 20 protest and commemorative meetings have been held from Berlin to Toronto. Claims by Colombo news agency *Lankapuvath* that another four Tamils in Paris have been shot dead by the Tigers remain unsubstantiated. Sabalingam was working on a history of the Tamil militant movements that exposed their many "internal killings" and assassinations. In a recent article in Canadian Tamil political weekly *Thayagam*, he accused LTTE leader Prabhakaran of betraying TELO leader Kuttimani and of quietly eliminating other militants who took part in the infamous Neerveli banka robbery with him in 1981.

The message is clear says Colombo insider columnist *Taraki*. History will be written or rewritten by the victors, in the case of Eelam Tamils by the LTTE and Prabhakaran. As surmise and speculation continued, *Thedagam*, a Tamil library in Toronto, where a Sabalingam memorial meeting took place, was burned to the ground on 25 May.

The bullet-riddled body of Subramaniam Suntharapalan, 41, was found slumped in a car near Berne, Switzerland in late May. Police suspect a drugs feud or a dispute over LTTE "taxes" which net the Tigers over \$1 million a month across Europe. There are over 30,000 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers in Switzerland but over 11,000 may be eligible for forcible repatriation under a new government programme to begin in July. Holland has now announced that 15,000 Tamils who claimed asylum after 1990 may be returned to Colombo on a similar programme. Switzerland has granted political asylum to AJ Arulraj who was imprisoned and tortured says Amnesty International during the arrest of thousands of Tamils in Colombo late last year.

# Habeas corpus

ARRESTS of Tamils in Colombo this month dropped to a few hundred, human rights workers estimate but Tamils remain targets as the LTTE threat to the capital continues. Police believe hundreds of LTTE suicide commandos have penetrated the city mingling with 100,000 refugees who have fled the north-east since 1990. MPs say over 1,200 Tamils are in police or Army custody in Colombo, suspected of terrorist involvement. In the eyes of security forces, Tamils without National Identity Cards (NIC), who have not registered at police stations, or who cannot give "a satisfactory explanation for their presence in Colombo" are immediate suspects.

It is what happens after arrest - the risk of torture or disappearance in secret or unofficial detention centres - that still concerns Amnesty International and other

human rights groups. Lawyers filed habeas corpus proceedings in late May, on behalf of Mrs Kanapathy Alagammah, 70, arrested with her husband when she came to Colombo to see her son held in custody. Krishnapillai Ganeshalingam, deported from Switzerland last year was arrested on 16 May and is held at Cinnamon Gardens police station. A relative Mrs A Selvarajah, has filed habeas corpus saying Mr Ganeshalingam should be transferred to New Magazine prison and released. Colombo officials are quietly clearing the few Tamil refugee camps left in the capital. Over 40 families from Sarasvati Hall have been taken to a transit camp at Vavuniya railway station. Another 13 eastern families returned to Karaitivu in Amparai have refused to return home without rehabilitation assistance and proper security.

## Economic and political time-bomb in the Hill Country

# Stagnation in the tea sector

SRI LANKA'S tea sector is in crisis. A clumsy World Bank privatisation programme, falling prices and labour unrest have created an economic and political time-bomb. Only eight of the 22 private Plantation Management Companies (PMC) that took over the tea estates in June 1992 can meet their workers' current wage bills after losses of Rs 1.3 billion last year says the Planters Association of Ceylon.

Tea prices have fallen by 23% to Rs 55 a kilo since January. Sri Lanka produces over 230 million kgs a year about 10% of world production but it has lost lucrative markets in Iraq and Iran and production costs outstrip the selling price in most large estates.

Over 150,000 tea smallholders like Mohamed Sherif of the Private Tea Factory Owners Association now represent 52% of tea production. They say multinationals like Unilever Ceylon Ltd have cornered the market at Colombo's tea auctions and are relentlessly driving down the price. Over 50 tea factories have closed, affecting 5,000 smallholders potentially wasting 200,000 kilos of

plucked tea every day.

Privatisation of the large state-owned plantations has been a disaster. The problem says Forbes and Walker director, Ravi Kumararatne, is that only the management of the estates has been privatised leaving the new bosses unwilling to inject the much-needed capital investment to modernise production.

The estates remain locked in a colonial hangover of sub-standard housing and working conditions where over 400,000 workers, the descendants of south Indian immigrants live in barrack-like "line rooms" with two or three generations of a family, cooking eating and sleeping in one dingy room.

Over 800,000 of 1.5 million Plantation Tamils were disenfranchised without citizenship or vote until their powerful trade union and political party, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and its leader Mr S Thondaman struck a deal with President Premadasa in 1989.

Mr Thondaman's CWC controversially backed privatisation in 1992 hammering out an agreement for 300 working days a year after strikes and agitation.

But management companies say they cannot meet the target and want to strip away the welfare paternalism of the old system.

Mr Thondaman's 1.5 million vote bank gives him powerful leverage over President Wijetunge with the Sinhala vote split in the south. At a meeting on 10 May, the CWC secured representation on the government's Plantation Restructuring Unit giving it a powerful say in future privatisation strategy. Mr Thondaman is also pursuing a Rs 8 per day wage increase with the Treasury frozen since July 1993 and has ambitious plans for workers-owned housing cooperatives funded by Dutch and Norwegian aid.

None of this will ease the impending crisis. Sri Lanka's tea sector will not become financially viable without massive investment, modernisation and stabilised prices in a fair marketplace. Neither the government nor the management companies want to spend the money or challenge the multinationals. The current stalemate can only produce further stagnation.

## India renews ban on LTTE

INDIA renewed its ban outlawing the Tamil Tigers for a further one year period on 14 May, declaring that the LTTE's objective of a separate state threatened its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The LTTE had infiltrated south India's Tamil Nadu state with arms and ammunition and was in league with local secessionist groups said a Home Ministry statement.

Over 1,600 LTTE suspects are held in Tamil Nadu prisons and special camps - 26 of them accused of involvement in the murder of Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991. Since the assassination there is continuing hostility towards 70,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in government-run camps and another 110,000 who live outside on remittances from relatives in Western countries.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha consistently portrays the refugees as terrorists to keep alive the groundswell of outrage that swept her to power after the Gandhi killing. She wants to force them back to Sri Lanka a lot faster than the 40,000 who have supposedly repatriated voluntarily in the last two years on a controversial programme monitored by

United Nations refugee agency UNHCR.

Opposition parties are more sympathetic, some of them openly championing LTTE's vision of a greater *Eelam* or homeland that includes south India's 60 million Tamils. Y Gopalasamy, leader of

**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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**ISSN 0955-5943**

**Funded by voluntary agencies worldwide.  
Technology by RnR DTP  
Printed by Printco, 374 Willesden High Rd,  
London NW10**

the breakaway Marumalarchchi DMK faction says the refugees are not the problem and should not be forced back into the jaws of war. His bitter rival M Karunanidhi, leader of the official DMK, is conspicuously silent on the LTTE threat, preparing already for a return to power at the 1996 state elections. Jayalalitha's ruling AIADMK held two vital by-election seats at Mylapore and Perunthurai on 26 May.

The Tigers remain the ever-present third force in Tamil Nadu politics with Madras and New Delhi routinely accusing each other of covert links with the militants. Deputy Home Minister Rajesh Pilot says Jayalalitha's request for two new coastguard divisions to stall LTTE penetration of south India is under consideration. Pondichery MP Narayanaswamy says the tiny protectorate on the south east coast is the new LTTE pipeline for smuggling fuel to Jaffna. Three Tamil Nadu fishermen are missing after the Sri Lankan Navy attacked a boat in Indian territorial waters off Vedaranyam in Tanjore District.