

Peace talks in peril

SRI LANKA'S fragile peace process hangs in the balance as the war of words continues between Chandrika Kumaranatunge's People's Alliance (PA) government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In a letter dated 25 February, Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran accused President Kumaranatunge of "a paralysis of will" to convert the seven-week truce into a permanent ceasefire. He called for LTTE participation in government plans to spend \$800 million rebuilding the war-torn North East rejecting a Presidential Task Force led by Home Affairs minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake.

The Tigers refuse to talk on substantive political issues until the rehabilitation package is agreed and essential services restored to Jaffna. The international community appears willing to underwrite the massive aid programme but the present lull in the fighting may not last until 27 April when most of the money will be pledged at the next World Bank meeting on Sri Lanka in Paris.

Six ceasefire monitoring committees headed by international observers have yet to start work and both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military have launched a new round of recruitment and re-provisioning as tension visibly grows. Four of the international observers flew to Jaffna for a surprise meeting with the reclusive LTTE leader in early February.

Political manoeuvring has continued unabated. The Prabhakaran letter blames the unresponsiveness of government delegation leader presidential secretary K Balapatabendi for the breakdown in the peace process and denounces the government's unilateral declaration "opening" two land routes to the Jaffna peninsula at Pooneryn and Elephant Pass as "military subterfuge".

On 17 February LTTE political adviser Anton Balasingham told a People's Peace Delegation from the south led by NSSP MP Vasudeva Nanayakkara that for the first time the

Tigers were making an unequivocal commitment to a federal constitution providing sufficient powers were devolved. In more ominous mood Mr Balasingham denied LTTE involvement in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and Gamini Dissanayake but warned accompanying journalists that if President Chandrika Kumaranatunge's hands become stained with blood she would be made to pay.

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The threat to Chandrika's life is not new. In early February the President again claimed that the Tigers were plotting to kill her while talking peace after a Tamil was arrested photographing her house at Horagolla 25 miles north of Colombo.

But there are other enemies closer to home. Corrupt Army officials were a greater threat to her life than the Tigers concluded the President at a public rally at Attanagalla on 12 February. Some senior soldiers say it is lunacy to trust the Tigers while others made millions profiteering on the four-year blockade of the north and want the war to continue.

Chandrika has vowed to clean up the defence sector and in a surprise move fired Defence Secretary Hamilton Wanasinghe in early February. The Colombo press says another former Army commander General Waidyaratne is under investigation for violating tender procedures in procuring military supplies.

General Waidyaratne is also implicated in a mysterious coup attempt says the *Island* newspaper on the eve of last August's general election when it was increasingly clear that the United National Party (UNP) would lose its 17-year grip on power. Three brigadiers are currently

being questioned.

Increasingly impatient the Tigers released another exchange of letters in late February in which LTTE leader Prabhakaran rejected a retired French diplomat as Chandrika's personal intermediary but did not oppose foreign mediation. The government was dragging its feet on negotiations said LTTE political leader Thamilchelvan and its rehabilitation plans were an illusion.

Rejecting the Tigers' tirade, President Chandrika Kumaranatunge said there had been 33 exchanges of letters since negotiations opened last October and that rehabilitation plans were well advanced. The LTTE was commandeering extra food aid to the north said the President. Over 3,000 tons of food and two 300KV generators to provide electricity for Jaffna left Colombo by ship on 23 February as the government rehabilitation programme got underway.

What the Tigers want is a joint government/LTTE Reconstruction and Development Committee to plan rehabilitation priorities and programmes. Then a Development Bank must be established says Thamilchelvan that will ensure that foreign funding to rebuild the North East is correctly channelled. The government and some of the international community equally fear that LTTE will hijack the process.

The standoff is symptomatic pundits say of the emerging pattern of the Chandrika era where inept ministers juggle four or five portfolios while senior bureaucrats sympathetic to the previous United National Party (UNP) government sit on files and lock the administration into inertia.

Chandrika's cabinet has set itself an impossible mid-July target to table a solution to the ten-year civil war through a revamped federalist Constitution, endorsed by referendum if necessary. The section on devolution in the draft Constitution remains blank. The President continues to think aloud on an August snap election to bolster her fragile parliamentary majority. But drift and distrust across the lagoon may blow the state of ship off course long before then.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Promises

SRI LANKA'S new administration will promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, Foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar told the 51st session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva in early February. But the government is not going far enough or fast enough say human rights agencies.

In their own submissions to the UN Commission NGOs said Emergency regulations continued in Colombo and some southern areas, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) allowed arbitrary arrest and detention and submission of confessions as substantive evidence in court. International scrutiny will strengthen the government's commitment to investigate past human rights abuses and prevent future violations.

The PA government has established three regional Commissions to probe disappearances during the previous regime's reign of terror but their mandate extends only to 1988. This excludes many Tamil disappearances in the early 1980s say NGOs and the Commissions' remit should be pushed back to 1979 when the PTA was introduced.

The Commission for southern and western regions has received over 9,000 submissions since December. Public hearings will begin on 10 March. Over 40,000 people died or disappeared in the south between 1988 and 1990 in the Sri Lankan military's brutal contest with the Sinhalese Marxist insurgent People's Liberation Front (JVP).

Colombo's cocktail circuit says expediency will prevent the PA government honouring its election pledge to bring the pre-

vious regime's death squads to justice. The PA leadership needs the police and the Army for its own political and perhaps personal survival.

There will be a few high profile prosecutions as in the Embilipitiya murders of 35 schoolboys where there is compelling evidence or public outrage. The rest will be quietly forgotten. Instead police and Army officers implicated in past atrocities "will not be promoted".

The government-run Human Rights Task Force (HRTF) has been wound up and damning evidence gathered on the disappearance of 185 Tamils from a Batticaloa refugee camp at Vantharumoolai in 1990, ignored. A report by HRTF Chairman Justice JFA Soza recommending the immediate release of 181 of 1,000 detainees in Army camps and police stations, has been sidelined. The PA's anti-Torture Bill passed by parliament in November is deficient and ambiguous say human rights activists.

Impunity among security forces remains a brutal reality. Sri Lanka's Bar Association says a lawyer Mr Premadasa was assaulted by local police in early February while visiting a client said to have been tortured in a Kurunegala police station.

Batticaloa's magistrate ordered an identity parade in early February of 179 Special Task Force (STF) commandos implicated in the murder of 14 farmers last year. Two young Tamils, Thatchanamurthy and Narayanamurthy who surrendered at the STF camp in Mandur last July are still missing.

Boycott

The moderate Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) is boycotting meetings of the newly-formed "Tamil Forum" of political parties convened by Plantation Tamil leader S Thondaman to discuss constitutional reform. A new Tamil front could jeopardize peace talks said TULF MP Joseph Pararajasingham.

Acquitted

Vincent William Mariyadas sentenced to seven years in prison for the murder of TULF leader Appapillai Amirthalingam in 1990 was acquitted by Colombo's Appeal Court on 8 February.

Development

American conglomerate Freeport McMoran will open a \$400 million fertiliser factory in Trincomalee to process 25 million tons of phosphate deposits discovered at Eppawela in the 1970s.

Forensic

Colombo police have identified the suicide killer of UNP presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake as 30 year-old Pushpamalar from Ariyalai, Jaffna. Her use of a cyanide capsule implicates the LTTE says Inspector General of Police Frank Silva.

Armed

Over 4,800 of 6,000 weapons issued by the previous UNP government, mostly to its own MPs during the insurrection by the southern Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP) between 1989 and 1990, have still to be recovered, say police.

Tigers want peace says Vasu

THE Tigers want peace, will accept a federal solution but there will be some hard bargaining concludes veteran leftist NSSP MP Vasudeva Nanayakkara who led a 17-strong delegation from the Campaign for Peace with Democracy (CPD) in a three-day visit to Jaffna in mid-February.

Thousands attended meetings in Jaffna and Kilinochchi as the CPD delegation distributed a Peace Memorandum addressed to LTTE leader Prabhakaran and President Kumaranatunge. The CPD campaign was launched after a series of rallies in Colombo and the south promoted by NGOs and community groups urging genuine popular participation in the

peace process. In talks with the CPD group, five senior LTTE representatives said meaningful talks would resume when the economic embargo is lifted, fishing rights are restored and the Pooneryn causeway is reopened.

Muslim CPD delegate Nilar Cassim secured an undertaking that 50,000 Muslims evicted from the north by LTTE ultimatum in 1990 could return to their homes when rehabilitation took hold. HD Perera from the flashpoint Weli Oya area north-west of Trincomalee told the Tigers that the eviction of thousands of Tamils from the area in the 1950s did not justify LTTE attacks on unsuspecting Sinhalese settlers. CPD also called for

the release of four political prisoners held by the Tigers including Tamil poetess Selvi awarded the Dutch "Poetry International" prize last year. Tamil human rights groups like University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) say the LTTE holds as many as 3,000 civilian or political prisoners. Sinhalese journalists who visited Jaffna last September were told that Selvi, held since August 1991, was dead.

Vasudeva says LTTE sees the first three rounds of talks as inadequate. Government representatives have been minor bureaucrats with no political clout who fly in and out of Jaffna the same day with no time for real negotiations.

■ Army camps and checkpoints strengthened

LTTE conscription drive in the east

LOCAL people say increasing numbers of Tamil youths have been abducted by the Tigers in Amparai District to strengthen fighting units.

Three young men were seized at gunpoint on 4 February in the Central Camp area. Seven others went missing on the same day in Malayadivaram. Three days later the LTTE tried to abduct youths from Etram.

Villagers in Sangamankandy say LTTE cadre took away five people on 8 February. The parents of a shepherd complain that their son was abducted on 11 February. The Tigers have also conscripted youths in Pottuvil and Thambiluvil. Defence Ministry officials say the Amparai LTTE leader has been informed.

Continuing rain has ravaged crops in Amparai and farmers are unable to pay back bank loans. An appeal has been made to the Rehabilitation and Land ministers for compensation.

Amparai farmers say wild elephants are destroying crops in villages adjoining jungles. Recently three persons were killed by elephants and 11 houses damaged. People in Thandiyady and Sangamankandy in Thirukovil have moved to other areas.

Over sixty people were arrested by police at Malkampitiya in Sammanthurai area on 25 February after local people attacked harvest labourers from Batticaloa. Two people were admitted to hospital and the Kalmunai magistrate has ordered 22 of the assailants to be

remanded. Local opinion says Batticaloa labourers accept low wages and reduce job opportunities for local farmers.

The Army now allows Batticaloa farmers to take 50 litres of fuel every three days to the fields for harvest. Farmers say the decision by Brigadier ACS Fonseka will ease their problems.

Reports say Army checkpoints in Batticaloa are being strengthened. In early February TULF MP P Joseph demanded an explanation from the government for renewed fortification of military camps during a ceasefire. EPDP MP Thangavel says civilians are harassed at checkpoints while Tigers pass through by showing their cyanide capsules.

LTTE's Batticaloa political leader Babu has accused the Army of ceasefire violations. He says the Army is engaged in military exercises in Vellaveli and continues to prevent food reaching Paduvankarai. The Army in turn blames the LTTE. Deputy Defence minister Anuruddha Ratwatte defending the Tigers in late February said the militant group was not building new bunkers as reported in newspapers.

In Trincomalee a dispute between TULF stalwarts Secretary General A Thangathurai and former MP R Sampanthan is overshadowing other problems. TULF members are demanding the resignation of MP Thangathurai as part of a "gentleman's agreement" in August last year that parliamentary tenure would be shared between the two. The dispute has been referred to TULF leader M Sivasithamparam.

Spending power

IN what the Colombo press described as "a budget of boring brilliance" former academic GL Peiris tabled the PA government's first blueprint for "capitalism with a human face". Deputy Finance minister Peiris introduced major privatisation programmes, new luxury taxes and a two-year wage freeze for public servants. Denying his budget was trapped in a World Bank/IMF straitjacket Mr Peiris pointed to continuing government subsidies on staple foods like bread, fish and milk powder that will cost up to Rs 3.6 billion. Fertiliser subsidies for marginal farmers will cost a further Rs 1.5 million. Over Rs 50 billion of domestic borrowing and the rest in foreign loans and aid will bridge Sri Lanka's largest-ever budget deficit of Rs 85 billion (\$1.9 billion). Some 60% of current tax revenue goes for debt servicing. The success or failure of current peace talks will potentially free up much of the Rs 26 billion allocated for military spending next year. Mr Peiris also plans to raise Rs 13 billion by privatising the Ceylon Electricity Board, Air Lanka and restructuring ten other public utilities. Management companies will be given 50-year leases for state-owned plantations which currently lose Rs 500 million a year.

Critics say the budget's "half-way-house" version of privatisation is unworkable and reflects the polarisation of the right and left elements in the cabinet. Colombo's stock market stuttered badly as a 15% reduction in textile import taxes threatened the already beleaguered local garment industry.

The apparent commitment to free market policies aroused predictable howls of outrage from the opposition UNP who accused the traditionally socialist PA of "stealing its clothes". The new regime's drive for export-led growth is commendable but export-led growth has to create public wealth as well as private capital.

Wild asses

MEDIA freedom is under threat in Sri Lanka say Colombo journalists from attacks, arrests and growing government censorship. Journalists wore black armbands in protest at the cabinet press briefing following an attack by four thugs on *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge and his wife Raine in early February.

Sunday Times editor Sinha Ratnatunge was threatened with criminal defamation in four hours of questioning on the notorious fourth floor of police intelligence headquarters after a *Times* gossip column charted President Kumaranatunge's penchant for partying in Colombo's five-star hotels.

Two weeks earlier President Chandrika announced a committee to for-

mulate a code of ethics for journalists saying "We don't see why the press in this country should have a wild ass's freedom and we shall bring it in line with other democratic countries".

Colombo's Free Media Movement (FMM) says censorship and intimidation are growing as the new government's honeymoon period peters out. Tilak Jayaratne, producer of Sri Lanka radio's Education Service was mysteriously fired in early February after the programme was taken off the air.

Yukthiya editor Sunanda Deshapriya says there is a growing tension as the country opens up to satellite and cable networks while the government jealously curbs state-owned newspapers, radio and television as instruments of propaganda.

In the uneasy truce only a few refugees are going home *back to a future?*

INDIA'S controversial repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees resumed on 27 February with the arrival of 500 Tamils on Mannar Island in the isolated north-west. Over 3,500 are expected to return by ship to Talaimannar with another 4,000 due to arrive at the eastern part of Trincomalee.

Conditions on Mannar remain marginal say NGOs with the island still under LTTE blockade. Many local youths have vanished in the last two weeks as the Tigers step up their conscription campaign. Over 1,000 returnees are from the mainland and the LTTE has still not agreed to let them go home.

United Nations refugee agency UNHCR which will spend \$13 million on returnee programmes in Sri Lanka this year is helping the government to provide Rs 7,000 a family for temporary housing and home gardens but the shortage of building materials on the island remains critical.

In Trincomalee, December floods have left refugee camps at Muthur, Clappenberg and Pachchanur in bad condition. In the uneasy truce between the Tigers and the military, only a few refugees are going home. Over 500,000 people are still internally displaced in camps or with friends and relatives across Sri Lanka.

Another 60,000 Sri Lankan refugees remain in 126 government-run camps in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu. India says the repatriation is voluntary but local NGOs say poor housing and harassment by local officials often help returnees to make up their mind. UN refugee agency UNHCR monitoring the voluntary aspect of repatriation has no access to the camps and is allowed only cursory interview facilities on departure.

Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister Jayalalitha catapulted to power in 1991 by the Rajiv Gandhi assassination has consistently scapegoated Sri Lankan refugees in her struggle to contain LTTE penetration of the state and its 60,000 million Tamil population. Every LTTE action puts new pressure on the refugee population.

The same day repatriation resumed, nine hard-core LTTE suspects escaped from Madras jail. Three were recaptured and another, Shanmugasadas, found dead outside the prison supposedly after consuming a cyanide suicide capsule - a

Subramaniam, 24, told Colombo's Sunday Times he was attacked by six Swiss police in a cell and forced on a plane gagged with sticking plaster.

Tiger trademark. Local papers blamed warders who launched a vicious attack on inmates after the jail break. Jayalalitha in her running battle with central government in New Delhi accused RAW, India's CIA of involvement.

Only weeks earlier, India's Human Rights Commission had secured the phased release of most of 1,600 Sri Lankan refugees held in special camps or subjails without charge often on spurious pretext. Local NGOs are fighting to prevent those released being forced to join the repatriation process.

There are those who clearly want to return home but the fragile truce in Sri Lanka has sapped confidence and caused many to change their minds. NGOs also

fear that local Tamil Nadu officials have promised Nw Delhi to clear most of the 60,000 from the camps in the coming year and that a new round of covert coercion will begin.

The ceasefire has also triggered new moves towards repatriation from Europe where there are over 200,000 Sri Lankan refugees. Swiss Refugee minister Scheiddeger led a delegation to Colombo in mid-February seeking a treaty for the mass return of 35,000 Tamil refugees from Switzerland but the Sri Lankan government was distinctly lukewarm.

The Swiss currently have an agreement to forcibly return up to 600 Sri Lankans in the next two years. Subramaniam, 24, told Colombo's *Sunday Times* he was attacked by six Swiss police in a cell and forced on a plane gagged with sticking plaster. Many Tamils targeted for repatriation try to illegally cross the border to Germany where there are another 45,000 Tamil refugees. Two Tamils handed over to Swiss police in early February, stabbed themselves as they were about to be deported and were taken to the hospital. Navanesan who fled Trincomalee after his father disappeared was caught at the German border and forcibly returned to Colombo despite a seven-day hunger strike.

Norway plans to return up to 300 Tamils refused asylum. LTTE political advisor Anton Balasingham told two Norwegian Home Ministry officials who visited Jaffna in mid-February that asylum-seekers should not be returned before a lasting solution in Sri Lanka. NGOs and Tamil organisations told a session of the Norwegian parliament in Oslo on 22 February that repatriation plans were premature. Like the Swiss, Norway is likely to push ahead with a limited programme. The Norwegian Refugee Council has plans to open an office in Colombo to assist those returned and will take part in a joint fact-finding mission with the Danish Refugee Council in March to assess the ground situation.

If 500,000 people internally displaced by the continuing uncertainty cannot go home where is the logic in returning asylum-seekers from other countries who may still risk reprisals say local refugee workers.

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