

Peace mission to the Vanni

After meeting representatives of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in northern Vanni, a southern Sri Lankan delegation of the National Peace Alliance (NPA), urged the Sri Lankan government to begin peace talks to end the suffering of the people in the north-east. The 28-member delegation included Buddhist highpriest Kumburugamuwe Vajira Nayaka Thera and Anglican Bishop Kenneth Fernando.

Although communication with the LTTE is prohibited under Emergency Regulations introduced in January 1998, sources say that the Defence Ministry granted permission for the visit to the Vanni on 8 February, which was sponsored by the National Integration Programme Unit (NIPU) within the Justice Ministry.

The delegation met the LTTE's deputy leader SG Karikalan and head of its political wing, SP Thamichelvan, at Mallavi in Tiger-controlled Mullaitivu District on 10 February. Implying that politicians are not in full control of the situation, Mr Thamichelvan told the mission that it was up to the Army and the government to take the peace process forward. He condemned government attempts in the last four years to deceive the international community with non-existent peace initiatives and an unacceptable devolution package, while continuing the war.

The Thera told the Tiger leaders that peace work was difficult because of the continuing LTTE attacks in southern Sri Lanka. The assault on the holiest Buddhist shrine in Kandy, the *Dalada Maligawa*, in February 1998 has alienated a large section of the Sinhalese community, the prelate noted. Remarking that the Army had destroyed a large number of temples and churches in the north-east, Mr Thamichelvan pointed out that there has been no government response to LTTE leader V Prabhakaran's November call for peace talks.

Convener of NPA and Colombo University Professor Tissa Vitharana

Shipping minister MHM Ashraff says that the clamour for power takes precedence and the present Sri Lankan politicians will never solve the ethnic conflict.

says that it is unfortunate that last year's priority was war and now it is the forthcoming elections. Thousands of people marched in Colombo on 26 February demanding political parties to unite in ending the war. Press reports say that a senior cabinet minister has indicated that there is no change in the government position on peace talks with the LTTE. This means conditions that the Tigers must lay down arms and abandon the struggle for a separate state remain.

The Tamil parties welcomed the NPA's initiative and urged the government to build on the discussions of the Vanni mission with the LTTE. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) MP Neelan Tiruchelvam tabled a motion in Parliament on 24 February to commend the initiative and urge cooperation among political parties.

Only 14 MPs were present in the 225-member Parliament for a debate on the issue. All the important members of the ruling People's Alliance (PA) and the main opposition United National Party (UNP) were absent. Observers are convinced that currently the political parties have little interest in peace. Shipping minister MHM Ashraff says that the clamour for power takes precedence and the present Sri Lankan politicians will never solve the ethnic conflict.

All the important leaders of the Sri Lankan political parties, including opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, came together on 25 February to discuss the forthcoming provincial elections, following an invitation from President Chandrika Kumaratunge. The parties decided to appoint a Monitoring Committee headed by the President.

Following the Supreme Court order in December to hold provincial elections within three months, Elections Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake announced 1 April as the day of elections for five Provincial Councils. After religious leaders protested because important religious days fell during the week, including Good Friday on 2 April, the Commissioner fixed elections for 6 April, after Supreme Court approval.

In her Independence Day message on 4 February, President Chandrika pledged that she will discipline her party members who acted contrary to the PA's pledges to the people. The President is furious over the violence at the North-West Provincial Council elections in January. She told Inspector General of Police Lucky Kodituwakku that police officers must ensure strict compliance with election laws. She also ordered the police in early February to remove all unauthorised weapons from politicians.

But observers believe that without election law reform and strengthening of the office of the Elections Commissioner, violations are likely to continue. The Monitoring Committee proposed by the political parties had not begun work by the end of February. In late February, as Mr Dissanayake sought amendments to election laws granting more powers to the police, violence was reported in the provinces facing elections.

There are grave doubts whether the political parties will cooperate to maintain law and order or in the search for peace. The UNP walked out of the Parliament on three occasions in February, accusing the government of dictatorial attitude and violating democratic principles.

JAFFNA

Resettlement

HEAD of the Northern Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Authority (NPRRA), N Obadage, says that the lack of regular ship service between Trincomalee and Jaffna has forced 60,000 people due for resettlement to remain in refugee camps. Forty seven *Grama Sevaka* (Village Headman) divisions in Jaffna's western Valikamam remain as "security zones" and resettlement is not permitted.

International refugee agency UNHCR granted Rs 77.7 million (\$1.1 million) in February to the NPRRA for resettlement work. UNHCR's representative Janet Lim says that 150 micro-projects were implemented in Jaffna last year. According to Jaffna Government Agent K Shanmuganathan, only 86,000 of the 115,000 displaced people who returned to Jaffna have been paid the resettlement cash of Rs 5,000.

The difficulty in transport is causing delay in reconstruction. Reports say that this may affect long-term foreign assistance to Jaffna. The shortage of food and rise in prices as a result of transport problems continued in February. Part of the 1,657 tonnes of rice supplied to Jaffna in mid-February was unfit for consumption. Mr Obadage has ordered an enquiry.

There is increasing concern over security in Jaffna. The issue was discussed at two meetings between political parties and Army officers in mid-February. Military training and supply of weapons to members of Tamil groups fighting the LTTE on the side of the Army, were also

considered. The groups were given application forms to join the new military unit that the Army intends to create, allegedly to protect local councillors.

On 11 February, the Army scrutinised account books of well-known trading centres in Jaffna, following suspicions that the LTTE plans to collect Rs 10 million (\$150,000) from Jaffna traders. Suspected Tiger gunmen shot dead Tamil group EPDP's Valikamam councillor Pandari Kandasamy on 14 February at Kopai. The military say eight *Pistol Groups* of the LTTE have entered Jaffna for selective assassinations. The Jaffna courts received letters from the LTTE on 24 February ordering closure.

Restrictions on the time of arrival of refugees from the Vanni to Gurunagar in Jaffna town, were imposed on 15 February to prevent Tiger infiltration. Refugees can now arrive in Gurunagar only between 9am and 4pm. But fishing in the Jaffna lagoon has been again allowed between 5am and 5pm, within two kilometres from the shore.

The Navy intercepted a *Sea Tiger* convoy, at dawn on 8 February near Kachchativu Island, 12 miles south-west of Jaffna's Delft Island. A boat was sunk and 18 Tigers were killed. According to the Navy, the boats were carrying medical supplies from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The *Sea Tiger* attack on the Naval base at Kilali on 18 February was repulsed, the Navy say. But the LTTE seized a patrol boat.

Mob rule

Violence erupted at Pannala in Kurunegala on 7 February following a dispute in which a Sinhalese man was killed. Muslim men and women were attacked and houses damaged. Police fired on a mob killing three.

Assault

After an LTTE attack on 8 February, soldiers ran amok in Eralalai, seven miles north of Jaffna town, assaulting civilians. The Jaffna Commander has promised disciplinary action.

Strike

Over 70 government hospitals in Nuwara Eliya District were closed in protest in mid-February, accusing Ceylon Workers Congress General Secretary T Arumugam of assaulting a hospital worker in Hatton.

Denied

Colombo newspaper *Sunday Times* says that the Health Ministry denied permission for foreign medical agency Memisa Medicus Mundi (MMM) to serve in Mannar hospital. MMM made its offer after French agency Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) withdrew from Mannar in December 1998.

Withdrawn

The UNDP's landmine removal programme in Jaffna is again delayed after the Defence Ministry withdrew a map of landmine locations. UNDP Landmines Coordinator David Taylor says the LTTE assured that new mines will not be laid in cleared zones.

Coconut wars

TAMIL groups PLOTE and TELO clashed on several occasions in Vavuniya in early February. PLOTE student wing member Christopher Kishanthan, 17, was shot on 5 February at Vairavapuliyanakulam. He died later in hospital. Three TELO members were killed on 8 February. Five PLOTE cadre are in custody in connection with the murders. The offices of both groups were burned in February.

PLOTE's N Manickathan accused TELO of aiding the LTTE to assassinate PLOTE leaders. TELO has denied the allegation. Local people say that the fighting is over taxes by both groups on consumer goods in Vavuniya. These

groups earn large amounts of money on the illegal taxes, particularly the sale of coconuts.

While PLOTE and TELO quarrelled over coconuts and coconut oil, further north in the Vanni, fighting between the Sri Lankan security forces and the LTTE continued. The two sides exchanged mortar and artillery fire in February.

Reports say that there is an acute shortage of medicines in all hospitals in the Vanni, including at Akkarayankulam, Mallavi and Puthukudyiruppu. Over 22,000 people were treated in Mullaitivu hospitals in January. Mullaitivu District health authorities have warned of a typhoid epidemic. Many people suffer

from malaria following recent rains. Reports say sufficient malathion insecticide has not reached the Vanni and there is a lack of personnel for malaria prevention work.

Following his visit to the north, Buddhist monk Vajira Nayake Thera says families in the Vanni receive only one bottle of kerosene a month for lighting, cooking, studies and other purposes. The plight of school children is pathetic without school books and educational materials. Thousands of families have no soap and it is difficult to obtain even an aspirin. The Thera says that hundreds of people are becoming blind without specialists to carry out cataract operations.

■ *The Navy shell houses in Trincomalee*

Public execution

REPORTS say that the LTTE carried out two executions in Batticaloa on 25 February. Munaikadu *Grama Sevaka* (Village Headman), T Ganeshalingam, 40, and Kokkaddicholai farmer, S Karunakaran, 32, were shot dead in public in LTTE-controlled areas. They were suspected of being Army informants.

The LTTE bombed telecommunication equipment in Batticaloa town on 3 February. Two more devices were blasted at Kattankudy two days later. Following these attacks, security in Batticaloa town was tightened. The Army carried out a house-to-house search in Kallady, south of Batticaloa town, on 13 February.

Since the military captured Vaharai, in

north Batticaloa in June last year, people in the area are facing more problems. A large number of fishermen are affected by a ban on fishing. Civilians going in to Tiger-held areas of Vaharai are not permitted to carry more than 5kg of food. Local people say soldiers have removed window and door frames from 65 houses in the area. Civilians fled after soldiers began breaking in to houses in Kandalady in late February.

According to Batticaloa MP Joseph Pararajasingham, over 30 youths arrested by the Army in the district in January and February have disappeared. Three refugees from the Kalmadu camp who went fishing on 31 January are missing. The Army shot dead civilian S

Vijayakumar at Kiran on 14 February. Mary Benedict of Eravur was killed by unidentified gunmen on 24 February.

Mr Pararajasingham says rice farming in 10,000 acres of land is affected after the Army destroyed two bridges at Sithandy and Vantharumoolai, north of Batticaloa town. Farmers are unable to take their tractors and bullock carts to the fields. The military say that the Tigers were taking hijacked vehicles across the bridges in to areas under their control.

Suspected LTTE cadre shot dead a Home Guard protecting Sinhalese farmers at Aralagangwila in Polonnaruwa District on 17 February. Two others were wounded. The Special Task Force (STF) launched an attack on a Tiger base in Kanjikudichcharu jungle in Amparai District on 2 March. Two Tigers were killed and six others wounded.

In Trincomalee District, the Navy killed A Kamalanathan while fishing near Kadalkaraichenai in Muthur on 6 February. The Navy shelled the shore damaging several houses in the village. Reports say fishermen in Muthur and Serunuwara have stopped going to sea because of fear of Army harassment. Two new military camps have been established in these areas.

Hundreds of people demonstrated before the North-East Governor's office on 8 February demanding transportation to Jaffna. Over 5,000 Jaffna people have registered their names at the government Divisional Secretariat in Trincomalee to travel to Jaffna.

Secret detention

THE decapitated head of Rajaratnam Rajeswaran, 23, was found in Jaffna town on 23 February. Mr Rajeswaran had gone missing two days earlier. After his body was recovered from a toilet in Nelliady on 27 February, angry crowds smashed the office of Tamil group PLOTE in the area. Reports say that the Point Pedro magistrate has ordered the arrest of a PLOTE leader. PLOTE has denied any involvement in the murder. People fear that the death squad *Mandayan group* which operated in Jaffna during the time of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in the 1989-1990 period has resurfaced. There is increasing concern over detention of civilians by Tamil groups fighting the LTTE on the side of the security forces. In mid-February, the Army in Jaffna ordered the Tamil groups not to carry out any arrests. Civilians are regularly detained in the east by PLOTE, TELO and the *Razik Group*. Amnesty

International says four of the seven people taken into custody by PLOTE in Vavuniya between October and December last year are unaccounted for. According to Amnesty, PLOTE cadre abducted S Ashokumar on 24 January and took away A Pakkiri and two other men on 7 February. They are believed to be held at PLOTE's *Lucky House* illegal detention centre in Vavuniya, although the militant group has denied detention. The US State Department says that pro-government militias detain persons at various locations that serve as undeclared detention centres. The Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission has no authority to enforce respect for human rights among militia groups. The State Department also says that the militias operate in secrecy and the government has taken no clear steps to stop their actions.

Draconian law

TAMIL MP Joseph Pararajasingham says that the 1998 amendment to the Immigrants and Emigrants Act is draconian and particularly affects Tamil youths who flee persecution. There is no bail for offences under the Act. The amendment disallows suspension of sentence and removes discretion of the courts. The British Home Office says that the amendment was introduced in July last year in response to pressure from foreign governments who wanted a clamp down on human smuggling.

The amendment has increased the prescribed punishment and provides for mandatory imprisonment of one to five years and fine of Rs 50,000 to Rs 100,000. The MP told Parliament in mid-

February that over 100 young Tamil men and women, arrested at Colombo airport before their journey abroad, have been convicted on charges of attempting to leave the country illegally, imprisoned for a year and in addition ordered to pay a fine of Rs 50,000. Colombo Tamil newspaper *Virakesari* has reported two instances where Tamil asylum-seekers detained on arrival in Sri Lanka after being deported from abroad, have been denied bail.

Meanwhile, in February, 25 Tamil asylum-seekers were abducted in Ukraine following a dispute between two agents involved in human trafficking. The Tamils were later found by Ukraine police.

Tiger commits suicide in Colombo

Arrests in Kalutara

IN the run-up to the 51st Independence Day on 4 February, the police searched 145 houses in Kalutara and arrested 173 Tamils. Sixteen were detained and released after two days. Reports say several of them had been arrested earlier and released. Human rights agencies say that whenever there is a festival, celebration or an international meeting, Tamils are rounded-up.

Police say the LTTE continues to infiltrate Colombo and other southern areas and necessary action must be taken to protect life and property. Most of the people detained are released within 48 hours, but because of the arbitrary nature of the arrests it is difficult to determine how many are further detained.

According to the police, an LTTE cadre committed suicide by taking cyanide when attempts were made to arrest him at a lodge in Colombo's Pettah suburb in early February. The owner of the lodge was taken into custody. Alleged Tiger spy Raman Rajan was

arrested at Passara in the Hill Country in mid-February. His uncle S Sellathurai who gave him refuge was also detained. Another alleged LTTE cadre Prakash Rajah was arrested in a Pettah lodge in mid-February.

Three people were detained after an electricity transformer was blasted at Colombo's Maradana suburb on 4 February. The following day, the police found an explosive on another transformer at Grandpass suburb. Fourteen people were arrested. Since January, six transformers have been bombed in the capital. Three Tamils who went to Anuradhapura on 26 February to see relatives in detention were also arrested.

Torture in custody continues to remain a major problem. Tamil trader M Jeganathan, 46, and M Masilamani, 52, were released by the Badulla High Court in January after evidence of torture was confirmed by the government Judicial Medical Officer. They were arrested in June 1997 in Demodara. The torture

methods included assault with plastic pipes and batons, burning with cigarettes and covering the head with plastic bags dipped in petrol. Confessions were extracted from them under threat of torture. Jaffna resident Somasundaram Sivanesan, 42, says in a fundamental rights application to the Supreme Court that after arrest in October 1997 by the police Counter Subversive Unit (CSU), he was brutally assaulted and nails were inserted into the soles of his feet.

Complaint has been made to the Committee of Inquiry into Undue Arrest and Detention (CIUAD) that shop attendant Shanmugam Mahendrarajan was arrested by the Army at Wellawatte suburb on 11 February. No reasons were given for the arrest. Relatives have also informed CIUAD that asylum-seeker Rajendram Amirtharaj, deported from Germany in October last year and arrested in Colombo, has disappeared. The police claim that Mr Amirtharaj was released after enquiry.

Embilipitiya murderers sentenced

A school principal and ten soldiers were sentenced to ten years imprisonment on 10 February by the Ratnapura High Court in the Embilipitiya abduction and murder case. Embilipitiya Central School principal Dayananda Lokugalapathy and eight soldiers were charged with abduction and murder of 25 students in August 1989, during the revolt of the Sinhalese Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP).

During the JVP insurrection between 1988 and 1990, over 40,000 Sinhalese people disappeared, mostly following arbitrary round-ups by the security forces. On assuming power in 1994, the People's Alliance government pledged to bring the perpetrators to book. Three commissions were appointed and several mass graves excavated. The commissions investigated 19,079 disappearances and a fourth commission is currently probing another 13,000 disappearances.

Welcoming the Embilipitiya judgment, Amnesty International said that impunity for past abuses can be ended when there is a political will and shielding perpetrators undermines the rule of law and human rights protection.

Government delay in probing the Chemmani disappearances in Jaffna has led to doubts whether there is a political will to identify the perpetrators. Over 600 Tamils disappeared after the Army cap-

tured Jaffna in early 1996. Soldier Somaratne Rajapakse, who was convicted in the Krishanthi Kumarasamy murder case, has said that he knows the locations of the mass graves. The UN Human Rights Commissioner and Amnesty have offered to assist in the investigation.

The Foreign Ministry announced on 10 February that Jaffna judge SAE Ekanathan visited Chemmani and after observing that the site was inundated, ordered for excavation on 5 March. As it turned out, the judge neither visited Chemmani nor fixed a date for excavation, but on 8 February allowed a police application to obtain the services of a forensic expert. The judge has accused the government of interference.

There is concern in Jaffna over continuing disappearances. C Basilraj, 24, of Gurunagar disappeared on 28 January and Y Jegathas, 16, of Kodikamam is missing since 5 February. Complaint has been made to the Human Rights Commission that three fishermen went missing on 28 February. Kandasamy Suthakaran was taken away by the Army and has not returned home.

THE SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information 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 Bondway, London SW8 1SJ
Tel: (0171) 820 3100; Fax: (0171) 820 3107
E-mail: brclsproject@gn.apc.org
Internet: <http://www.gn.apc.org/brclsproject>

The Refugee Council:
Tel: (0171) 820 3000; Fax: (0171) 582 9929
E-mail: refugeecounciluk@gn.apc.org
Internet: <http://www.gn.apc.org/refugeecounciluk/>
Charity No. 1014576
Company No. 2727514
ISSN 0955-5943
Funded by voluntary agencies worldwide.
Printed by: Imedia Print, 76-89 Alscot Road
London SE1 3AW