

## A new hope

The entry of Norway, veterans in international peace diplomacy, has heightened hopes for peace in Sri Lanka. In early January, Norwegian Foreign Affairs State Secretary (Deputy Minister) Wegger Strommen confirmed that his government would be involved in shuttle diplomacy between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Although the Sri Lankan government has steadfastly refused to consider foreign mediation, President Chandrika Kumaratunge revealed in January that she had requested the Commonwealth Secretary General and the Norwegian government for assistance. The Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran has been demanding international mediation for the last three years and is said to favour Norway as an intermediary.

Mr Strommen arrived in Sri Lanka on 23 January for spadework before the visit of Foreign Minister Knut Vollebaek in February for talks with the Sri Lankan government. Mr Strommen and other Norwegian diplomats have been working for many months to establish contacts with the parties.

Two other important developments have also raised optimism. The first is the offer of the main opposition United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremasinghe in mid-January to support the government's constitutional reform proposals in Parliament. The other is the announcement of the ruling People's Alliance (PA) government of a four-stage plan for peace negotiations: 1) Talks among the coalition members of the PA; 2) talks with the Tamil and Muslim parties; 3) talks between the PA and the UNP; 4) talks with the LTTE.

Observers say that the UNP's sudden volte-face springs from the government's threat to introduce a law which would enable MPs to cross-over to another party without losing their seat in Parliament. Some UNP MPs have already indicated their support to the PA and cross-overs were likely if the law came into force. After the UNP offered

*The opposition United National Party has agreed to co-operate with the ruling People's Alliance in Parliament to push through constitutional reform proposals.*

to provide the required two-thirds majority in Parliament for constitutional change, the government announced that the new law would not be introduced.

Following Chandrika's victory at the presidential election, many believe that her party, the PA, will win the general elections. In such circumstances, the UNP may wish to provide support to the PA to abolish the executive presidential system of government removing a president with enormous powers.

The PA seems to have other cards up its sleeve. According to new proposals, President Chandrika will continue as the executive President enjoying the same powers for the next six years while the Prime Minister remains powerless. Only after the transitional six-year period, the real Westminster-style parliamentary system will come into operation. The UNP may consider this as a betrayal of government promises. Furthermore, such major changes to the draft constitution, made public in January 1996, may require extensive consultations to ensure acceptance by all parties.

Since the suicide bomb attack on her in December, President Chandrika has launched scathing attacks on the UNP and LTTE leader Prabhakaran. But, Justice minister GL Peiris assures that the peace process remains at the top of her political agenda. The architect of the government's peace proposals, Mr Peiris, is optimistic that the proposed constitutional changes following PA's four-stage

plan are achievable within the next two months. Some observers say the time frame is unrealistic given the complexities of the conflict and that the plan is for short-term political advantage in view of the general elections later this year.

The PA General Secretary and Lands minister DM Jayaratne says that talks with the LTTE on the new constitution will be held within the next three months. The Tigers have not made any statement on Norway's involvement. But, according to diplomats, LTTE's Anton Balasingham, who is currently in Britain, had approached the Norwegian government informally. Other sources indicate that discussions between Norwegian officials and the LTTE are continuing.

Even with Norwegian involvement, Tamil observers believe that the Tigers may not agree to negotiate without acceptance of the principles put forward by the Tamil delegation at the Thimpu peace conference in 1985 - recognition of the Tamil right to self-determination, the homeland and Tamil national identity.

Despite the peace initiative, there are no signs of war efforts diminishing. While the Tiger millennium celebrations focussed on new recruitment, the Army has launched a campaign to enlist 15,000 new soldiers. Reports say that in January the US agreed to sell combat-related equipment, including mortar-locating devices, helicopters and high-calibre ammunition to Sri Lanka. US officers say that the interaction with the Sri Lankan armed forces is founded on shared interests in democracy, peace-keeping, human rights and regional stability.

There is a growing opinion that India's role is vital for a lasting solution to the Sri Lankan problem. The Sri Lankan government, the LTTE and the international community are only too aware of New Delhi's concerns. Analysts say that India, unlike earlier involvements, has a long-term approach to the island's conflict and is part of a group of nations promoting peace in Sri Lanka which would guarantee security and stability in the region.



## DISPLACED MUSLIMS

# The forgotten refugees

MOST of the 75,000 Muslims who were forcibly expelled by the LTTE from the Northern Province in October 1990, continue to suffer in Puttalam, Kurunegala and Anuradhapura districts. Some 65,000 refugees live in over 65 locations in Puttalam District. Researchers say 20% of the refugees are in camps and 46% in new settlements, 13% have been relocated on state-owned land and 21% own a house or live with relatives or friends.

The enthusiasm shown in 1990 by the local Muslim community in welcoming the refugees has dissipated over the years. Although infrastructure development since refugee arrival, such as roads, has also benefited the local people, violence involving the local Sinhalese population has been on the increase. The locals view the refugees as a threat to their livelihood, particularly in the occupation or ownership of land.

The refugees have few employment opportunities. Fishing in the region is possible only for six months a year and the war has made migratory fishing impossible. The land in the coastal region of Puttalam is unsuitable for cultivation or resettlement. New agricultural development using modern technology provides only limited seasonal employment for women. Due to these reasons the refugees continue to depend on government food assistance.

The Muslim refugees yearn to return to their homes in the Northern Province. Peradeniya University's senior lecturer

SH Hasbullah says that the strong relationship between the Muslim and Tamil communities has not eroded even after the expulsion of the entire Muslims community from the north.

In 1995, the government offered land and assistance for resettlement. The Muslim refugees who accepted the offer made clear that their desire was a more dignified life away from the appalling conditions in refugee camps and resettlement would only be an interim arrangement. After five years, many have accepted only the first instalment (Rs 10,000) of the Rs 35,000 (\$485) resettlement allowance.

Security on return to home areas is considered the most important factor. There have been discussions between Muslim refugee community leaders and LTTE representatives. Although parts of the Mannar area and the Jaffna peninsula are controlled by government forces, the Muslim refugees are reluctant to return.

Mr Hasbullah contends that the issue of displacement should be considered as an integral part of the overall conflict and a new atmosphere of peace and stability need to be established for refugees to return home with confidence. The Muslim refugees say that without assurance from the Sri Lankan government, the LTTE and the international community regarding their security and support for the reconstruction of their social, economic environment, any return programme is bound to fail.

## Credit

In January, Britain placed Sri Lanka on a list of 63 countries which are excluded from receiving export credits to buy arms from the United Kingdom. British officers say that hereafter export credits will be limited to projects which are aimed at economic improvement in these countries.

## Invalid

The Supreme Court declared on 3 February that the expulsion of five MPs from the UNP in November was invalid. The UNP sacked the MPs, including Sarath Amunugama, Wijepala Mendis and Nanda Mathew, after they declared support to Chandrika Kumaratunge in the presidential election.

## Sentence

A special court in Tamil Nadu sentenced AIADMK leader J Jayalalitha on 2 February to a year's rigorous imprisonment for criminal misconduct when she was Chief Minister of the southern Indian state. In the violence that followed the sentencing, four girl students were killed when a bus was set alight in Dharmapuri.

## Convention

Sri Lanka was among the six nations that signed the Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism on 10 January. The new Convention, adopted by the UN on 9 December, aims at international co-operation to prevent funding for terrorist activities.

# Food aid to Vanni reduced

THE Defence Ministry ordered a 30% cut in the food supply to Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts from 1 January. Earlier 240 lorry-loads of food were allowed into Tiger-held territory of the Vanni whereas twice the amount was needed in the area.

Mullaitivu's senior state officer Government Agent (GA), S Sundaram says he is unable to provide relief to 5,000 refugees in the district and further cuts will worsen the situation, particularly when rains are hurting refugees who are without proper shelter. The 525 barrels of kerosene (the only fuel allowed) a month to Kilinochchi District has been reduced by 100 barrels.

In a mid-January appeal to the UN, the Vanni Citizens Committee said government and co-operative food stores are depleted and many displaced families have only one meal a day. The shortage of medicines has forced hospitals to issue only prescriptions and most patients have no money to buy medicines outside.

Reports say prices in the Vanni are five to ten times higher than in southern areas of Sri Lanka. Rice is sold between Rs 40 and Rs 50 a kilo, sugar Rs 100 a kilo and kerosene Rs 150 a litre. There is an acute shortage of children's milk food. Shortage of doctors in hospitals continues and 800 more teachers are needed in the LTTE-controlled areas.

Ten people, including five security personnel were killed and over 70 were injured by a bomb in Vavuniya town's post office on 27 January. Policemen and soldiers had gathered at the post office to send money to their families in southern Sri Lanka. The police suspect the LTTE.

A landmine killed six soldiers and wounded nine others on 15 January near Varikuttiyur on Vavuniya-Mannar road. Amnesty International says six armed men, suspected to be members of Tamil group PLOTE which is allied to the armed forces, abducted M Gajamugan, 19, from his home on the night of 30 January. The security forces have denied that Mr Gajamugan has been arrested.



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## 7,000 Tamils rounded-up in southern Sri Lanka

# Two detainees killed

TWO Tamils, A Jesudasan and S Srikumar, were killed in clashes on 6 and 7 January in Kalutara prison, 25 miles south of Colombo. Twelve guards and 30 detainees were wounded. Red Cross officer Sivanathan Kishore, arrested in April 1999, was among the injured.

The clashes began on 6 January during discussions on better welfare facilities. The detainees also demanded that they should not be handcuffed when meeting visitors. According to lawyers, when clashes began, the guards fired at the detainees, wounding several of them. The following day, a group of guards arrived from Welikade prison in Colombo and attacked the detainees.

Lawyers say that the wounded detainees were assaulted while being taken to the hospital and after admission to the Nagoda hospital, were refused proper medical treatment. They were placed two to a bed, handcuffed and manacled to the beds. Colombo human rights agencies accuse the government

for the unsatisfactory response to the numerous incidents of violence against Tamil prisoners over the years. The Committee of Inquiry into Undue Arrest and Harassment (CIUAH) has demanded a report on the Kalutara incident from the Justice Ministry's Secretary.

There are over 700 Tamil detainees in the prison, many of whom are held for several years without trial. The CIUAH has already ordered the police to submit the necessary documents to the Attorney General's (AG) Department before 31 January and the Department to file cases against the detainees before 29 February.

The CIUAH has also ordered the police to submit reports on Tamil women detained in Welikade prison to the AG's Department before 15 March. The 56 Tamil women detainees in the prison were attacked by other inmates on 29 January and three were seriously injured.

A ten-hour curfew was imposed from 4am on 23 January in Kolonnawa, Wattala, Ja-Ela and Negombo, north of

Colombo, and over 3,000 Tamils were rounded-up. The people were photographed and filmed on video. Colombo MP R Yogarajan says he was denied access to those rounded-up and they were not provided food or drink in the morning. Some 400 were detained for further investigation. Around 2,500 Tamils were rounded-up in Colombo on 6 January. Over 650 Tamils were detained in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Reports say that in the Hill Country, over 350 Tamils were arrested in Maskeliya, Bandarawela and Kandy.

The police say they are intent on apprehending *Black Tiger* suicide bombers and have offered a Rs 2 million (\$27,700) reward for information. A number of bombs in the south caused injury to civilians in the run-up to Independence Day on 4 February. A bomb in a bus near Polgahawela on 30 January wounded 21 passengers. Three more people were injured by a bus bomb at Urugodawatte on 3 January.

## Civilians flee attacks in Thenmaratchy

AFTER capturing most areas in the Vanni, LTTE is now aiming to re-take the Jaffna peninsula, observers say. The Tigers continued to lay siege to the Elephant Pass military base and launch shell attacks on southern Thenmaratchy.

In January, the Sri Lankan armed forces bombed and shelled the coastal areas of the peninsula, such as Aruguveli, Kerativu, Thanakilappu and LTTE positions around the Elephant Pass camp. Some 7,000 people, displaced mainly from Thenmaratchy and Vadamaratchy south, have fled to Jaffna town or western Valikamam areas.

Around 4,000 fisher families near Jaffna town are also affected as fishermen are not able to go to sea. Business establishments in Thenmaratchy are unable to function. Jaffna Government Agent K Shanmuganathan says that as the fighting continues, there is increasing reluctance on the part of foreign agencies to begin new development projects.

Four civilians were seriously wounded in Ariyalai and Chavakachcheri on 11 January, by shells fired from Pooneryn area, where the LTTE is said to have

artillery positions. P Parameswary, 17, was injured by a shell at Pashayur six days later. The Army carried out several search operations in Jaffna to identify Tiger infiltrators. Jasintha Tharmarasa

has complained to the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission that soldiers entered her house in Jaffna town on 14 January and attacked her husband. He was taken to Navanthurai Army camp, assaulted and detained for several hours. P Sivakaran who went to the Varani Army camp on 21 January is missing.

Suspected Tiger gunmen shot dead Point Pedro Urban Council Chairman Vadivelu Vijayarathnam on 14 January. Council employee M Baheerathan was also killed. The LTTE had earlier warned officials in the local administration that they would be attacked if they continued in their positions.

Students Priya, 16, Vinoth, 12, and their mother S Valarmathy were arrested on 25 January and taken to Colombo. Students in Jaffna schools stopped attending school on 31 January, demanding their release. The protest ended when they were released. Ms Valarmathy says that in Colombo she was asked to identify her elder son Yasotharan, an LTTE suspect, arrested on 22 January. The three were also asked to provide blood samples for DNA tests.

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

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