

Tigers urge de-escalation

Political Advisor to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Anton Balasingham, urged the Sri Lankan government in late February to create a congenial climate for mutual trust which will lead to peace talks to end the 17 year ethnic war in the island.

Reports say that Mr Balasingham conveyed the Tiger position to Norwegian Foreign Minister Knut Vollebaek, who met him London after his discussions with Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunge and Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe on 16 February.

Mr Balasingham also called for cessation of hostilities, withdrawal of government troops and removal of economic and other restrictions on the north-east regions held by the LTTE. He accused the government of amassing weapons promoting a military solution and stressed that there cannot be peace talks in such a background.

Mr Balasingham demands de-escalation, but there seems no let-up in the LTTE's military programme. The Tigers have declared 2000 as the 'year of war' and have redoubled their worldwide fund-raising efforts. Press reports say that President Chandrika has assured the Sri Lankan armed force commanders that there will be no military concessions in the promotion of peace.

In her Independence Day message on 4 February, President Chandrika said that she firmly believed that the country was finally on track towards a durable solution to the ethnic problem. While underscoring the need for consensus politics and governance, the President declared that the LTTE has a vital role to play in 'concluding the extended sadness for the Tamil people'. She urged the Tigers to recognise that assassinating leaders and innocent civilians can never resolve the problems of the minorities.

President Chandrika and Mr Wickremasinghe continued to engage in a war of words in February accusing each other of blocking the path to peace. The President held discussions with the Tamil political parties on 9 and 11 February on

The future that the Tamil people dream of, and that we desire for all Sri Lankans, can be achieved by collective efforts, within a process of dialogue.

President Chandrika Kumaratunge

the amendments proposed by the ruling People's Alliance (PA) to the draft constitution tabled in Parliament in October 1997. The Tamil parties reiterate their demand for the permanent merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces as one unit of devolution and oppose a referendum in the east. The two provinces were temporarily united under the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement of 1987 which also provides for a referendum in the east for permanent merger.

The Tamil parties are concerned over several of PA's new proposals, particularly the change of the draft provision "Sri Lanka shall be a union of regions" to "Sri Lanka is one, sovereign independent republic comprised of regions within a united state". The current constitutional provision "Sri Lanka is a unitary state" was changed in the 1997 draft constitution, with the aim of devolving power to the regions as a solution to the island's conflict. The Tamil political parties are worried that the new proposal will curtail effective devolution.

Some observers have expressed dismay that the government is holding discussions on a peace package that the LTTE has already rejected. They also point out that the government has allocated Rs 41.4 billion (\$575 million) for defence for the year 2000 and Public Administration deputy minister, Monty Gopallawa urged, at a meeting on 7 February, state officers such as Government Agents and *Grama Sevakas*

(Village Headmen) to become involved in recruitment for the armed forces.

A group of intellectuals, including UN human rights prize winner Sunila Abeysekera and UN special representative on women Radika Kumarasamy, has expressed concern over serious deficiencies in the proposed constitution and disappointment over the removal of article 168 in the 1997 draft constitution which allowed limited judicial review of laws that transgress constitutional provisions on fundamental rights. The group has called for transparency and openness in the constitution making process.

Press reports say that the discussions between the Mr Vollebaek and the President Chandrika centred only around initiating peace talks avoiding controversial issues. The new Foreign Secretary, Lionel Fernando, who earlier served as GA in Jaffna is expected to visit Norway in late April for further talks.

Many organisations have welcomed the new peace initiative, but there is also strong opposition. Over 15 Sinhalese organisations led by the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT) and Sinhala Weeravidhana have demanded Norway not to interfere in Sri Lanka's internal affairs.

The police denied these organisations permission to demonstrate in front of the Norwegian embassy in Colombo on 18 February. Norway, they say, is harbouring 'LTTE terrorists' and therefore has no moral right to intervene as a mediator. These organisations have repeatedly claimed that Sri Lanka faces only a terrorist problem and have opposed devolution of power to the regions.

The influential *Mahanayake Theras* or highpriests of the four main Buddhist sects, meeting on 4 March, decided to launch a campaign against Norwegian involvement and constitutional reforms. The British High Commissioner in Colombo, Linda Duffield, says devolution strengthens nationhood and enables governments to reflect the different traditions, cultures and aspirations of the people who make up the nation.

VAVUNIYA REFUGEES

Confined to the camp

TAMIL refugees in camps in Army-controlled Vavuniya, who fled the fighting in the Vanni are suffering without sufficient food and adequate facilities. There are currently 22,450 refugees in six camps, including 9,170 in Poonthottam and 7,780 in Sithamparapuram. Many among the refugees have spent over four years in the camps.

The government provides Rs 35 for an adult per day and Rs 20 for a child. Although the money is given every 15 days, there was no payment in February and the refugees can afford only one frugal meal a day. Some families are accommodated in shelters outside the main camp. Refugees say the camps are cramped and the roofs leak during rains. The situation is becoming worse as more refugees arrive in Vavuniya from the LTTE-held Vanni.

The refugees complained to press reporters from Colombo in late February that the camps are managed more like prisons. Although the security forces claim that 12-hour passes are issued, camp residents say that they are allowed only four hours outside camps. Students were earlier given weekly permits to attend school, but now they are expected to obtain permits every day.

According to the US State Department Tamil militant groups such as PLOTE gain access to the camps by bribery and threats and complaints about their activities within camps continue. Poonthottam camp residents K Pushpanathan and S

Ramakrishnan were wounded when they were attacked by police on 28 January.

Sanitary conditions are extremely poor in the camps which are referred to as 'welfare centres'. Refugees say that in some camps cleaning of latrines are irregular and may be causing disease. When complaints are made about camp conditions they are being threatened with transfer to other areas. The refugees are expected to sign a document on arrival stating that they are entering camps at their free will.

The security forces have refused permission to many refugees to go to southern Sri Lanka or to settle in areas of their choice in Vavuniya. The district Army commander Tissa Jayawardena says that only Vavuniya residents are permitted to resettle in the district. Others, he says, can make applications. UNP MP Segu Isadeen told Parliament in late February that Tamils wishing to leave the north and travel to southern Sri Lanka must complete a 14-page application form answering over 200 questions.

The other people in Vavuniya District are expected to hold resident permits. The current permits are being withdrawn and new permits, which must be renewed every three months, are issued. Police say the new measure follows the discovery of forged permits and recent bomb attacks in Vavuniya and Colombo. Seven people were arrested in late February in connection with the bomb attack on the Vavuniya post office in January.

Human rights

Answering a parliamentary question, British Foreign Office minister Peter Hain said on 1 March: "Although the Sri Lankan government have taken some steps to improve their human rights record, we remain concerned about continuing violations and failures to prosecute violators. We are also concerned about human rights abuses committed by the LTTE and reports that they are still using child soldiers".

Probe freeze

The Committee of Inquiry into Undue Arrest and Harassment (CIUAH) ordered the police in late February to submit a report within two weeks, on the rape and murder of S Sarathambal, allegedly committed by Navy personnel on Jaffna's Punkudutivu Island in December. The order follows allegations by MPs that investigations have come to a standstill.

Film ban

Reports say that Prasanna Vithanage's Sinhala film *Purahanda Kaluwara* (Darkness of the Full Moon), which depicts the impact of the Sri Lankan war on civilian life was acclaimed at international film festivals, but has been banned in the island.

Shot dead

The Sri Lankan Navy killed an Indian fisherman in late February in the Palk Strait. Another eight were arrested accused of entering Sri Lankan territorial waters and harassing local fishermen near Mannar Island.

LTTE prisoners protest

IN late February the LTTE allowed a visit to the Vanni by relatives of 15 soldiers held for the last six years, after they staged a 15-day hunger strike demanding release. Following a plea by the relatives, four captives were released on 28 February. Tiger leader Thamilselvan says that the government must negotiate if others are to be released. Two years ago, the LTTE demanded the release of three Tigers detained in the south.

In early February, over 2,000 people from LTTE-controlled Vanni were waiting beyond the crossing point at Pramanalankulam, 15 miles west of Vavuniya town on Mannar-Vavuniya road, after they were denied permission

to enter Army-held areas. The road between Pramanalankulam and Periyathambanai, five miles north-west, is a civilian security zone. After three weeks, the Army allowed the people on 8 February. Meanwhile, the Tigers warned civilians not to enter recently captured areas saying that they are heavily mined.

Malaria is continuing to cause concern in the Vanni, because of the difficulties in carrying out preventive measures. During 1997 and 1998, 53% of the 430,240 malaria patients in Sri Lanka were in Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and Jaffna districts. But 80% of the 177 deaths due to malaria were in these districts. Government Anti-Malaria

Campaign Director Dr Punsiri Fernando says many deaths in the Vanni were caused because of lack of facilities for proper medical treatment.

Hospitals in the Vanni have suffered for many years without adequate medicines due to government restrictions. In 1999, the Mallavi hospital in Mullaitivu District treated 158,300 people, including for malaria, septicaemia and diarrhoea. Hospital authorities say 142 people died in the hospital. Of the 299 children born in the hospital in 1999, 166 were underweight. Press reports quoting Norwegian agency Redd Barna say undernutrition among children in Sri Lanka was 37% but in the Vanni it was as high as 67%.

■ Navy burn houses and shops in Trincomalee

Peace march

WHILE the Army and the LTTE clashed for territorial control in the east, over 1,500 people marched for peace in Batticaloa town on 28 February. The demonstrators submitted a petition to President Chandrika and opposition leader Ranil demanding talks with the LTTE using Norway as an intermediary.

Reports say that in the year 2000 the NORAD-assisted Development of Batticaloa (DERBA) project will not be implemented in Tiger-held areas. Although the programme covered all areas of Batticaloa in 1998, the government decided last year to develop only the Army-controlled parts. NORAD has allocated Rs 520 million (\$7.2 million) for the period 1998-2003.

Thirteen police were killed and 15 others were wounded in an LTTE attack on a military convoy on 15 February near Miyankulam on Polonnaruwa-Batticaloa road. Military convoys use this important supply route through LTTE-controlled jungle areas several times a week, carrying equipment and personnel. Many military camps have been established along this road. The Tigers shelled Punanai Army camp on 25 February injuring seven soldiers. Local residents have complained to Batticaloa MPs that many houses have been damaged in shelling from Kalkudah military camp which followed Tiger attacks.

After suspected Tiger cadre fired on an Army patrol near Sithandy on

Batticaloa-Valaichenai road on 19 February, soldiers shot and wounded three members of a family, including seven year-old R Ranitha. On 29 February, two soldiers were wounded in a Tiger assault on Kayankerni Army camp on Valaichenai-Vaharai road. In Army shelling that followed, four civilians, including four year-old Y Sutharsan, were injured.

In Trincomalee District, a suicide bomber targeted the district Army commander Piyal Abeysekera on 2 March. The commander sustained minor injuries but the driver of his vehicle was killed. Security in Trincomalee has been tightened following several LTTE attacks.

Three policemen were killed when the Tigers assaulted a police post in Muthur Central College on 22 February. Three days later, a naval officer was killed and three injured in an LTTE ambush at Salli near Sambaltivu. Navy personnel ran amok and burned 11 houses two shops and over 40 vehicles in Salli. The next day, over 4,000 people staged a protest against the attack. Two more sailors died in an attack at Nilaveli, seven miles north of Trincomalee town on 28 February.

Amnesty International has expressed concern for the safety of fisherman Vyramuthu Jeyakili who has been missing since his arrest by the Navy at Sambaltivu on 25 February. Amnesty says Mr Jeyakili may be in need of medical treatment as he was reportedly hit on the head at the time of his arrest and was seen bleeding.

Human rights abuse

THE US State Department says in its 1999 report on human rights practices that the ongoing war in Sri Lanka continued to be accompanied by human rights abuses by security forces, who committed numerous extra-judicial killings and almost certainly killed prisoners captured on the battlefield. Arbitrary arrests, including short-term mass arrests and detentions, continued. Torture and impunity for those responsible for human rights abuses remained serious problems. In most cases of extra-judicial killing or disappearance, there was no investigation or prosecution at all. The report further says that there is some discrimination and occasional violence against religious minorities and widespread ethnic discrimination against Tamils. Government restrictions on medical supplies and a significant reduction in food rations contributed to poor health conditions for civilians in the Vanni area. The pro-government Tamil militant groups, such as PLOTE and TELO, who are armed and at times directed by security forces, committed extra-judicial killings and were responsible for disappearances, torture, detentions, extortion and forced conscription in Vavuniya and the east. The LTTE regularly committed extra-judicial killings, including prisoners taken in battlefields, and was also responsible for disappearances, torture, arbitrary arrest, detentions and extortion. The Tigers killed close to 100 civilians in the north and at least 14 persons found guilty of offences by the LTTE's self-described courts were publicly executed. The LTTE continued to control large sections of the north-east through authoritarian military rule. It denied those under its authority the right to change their government, infringed on their privacy rights, forcibly recruited children and severely discriminated against religious minorities.

A sum of Rs 41.4 billion (\$575 million) was allocated for defence in the budget for the year 2000, tabled in Parliament by President Chandrika, in her capacity as the Minister of Finance, on 14 February. Rs 47 billion was allocated for 1999, 5% of GDP, but by the end of the year it had risen to Rs 56 billion (\$777 million).

The economic strategy for the new millennium is titled 'Vision 21' and is said to be aimed at building a modern and prosperous economy based on humanitarian values and ushered by a people-friendly and caring government.

Observers are concerned that while the LTTE has declared the year 2000 as the 'year of war', the government's budget appears to be a 'war budget' inspiring

Vision 21

little confidence in the peace process. The National Security Levy (NSL), which is a contribution for the war, was extended to all services, excluding some, such as water, electricity, health, transport and construction.

The NSL was introduced in 1996 and rose last year to 5.5%. Observers say that Sri Lanka is the only country in the world where serving foreign institutions are required to contribute to the war. Professionals who are liable to contribute to the Save the Nation fund are exempt from paying the NSL. A separate industrial zone will be established this year to attract investors for the manufacture of belts, boots, uniforms etc. for the use of the armed forces and for export.

Bus bomber arrested in the Hill Country

Police failure

THE Attorney General (AG) KC Kamalabasayan said in early February that the delay in filing cases resulting in prolonged detention, is due to the failure on the part of the police to submit the necessary reports to his department.

The US State Department says the total number detained during 1999 under Emergency regulations (ER) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) was consistently close to 2,000 and hundreds of Tamils arrested under the PTA were held without bail, some upto five years. According to the AG, almost 1,000 PTA and ER cases are before the High Court.

Arrests of Tamils continued in February. Nine Tamils were taken into custody during a search operation in the Colombo suburb of Dematagoda on 11 February. Ten Tamils, including two Moratuwa University students, were arrested on 20 February in the same area. A week later, 74 Tamils were rounded-up in Colombo, Negombo and Kandy and 31 were detained. Twenty young Tamil

men and women were arrested in lodges in Pettah on 1 March. In a massive search operation in the Kandy area on the same day, 24 people were detained.

Police say that a number of LTTE units have penetrated the heavy security in southern Sri Lanka. In eight separate bomb attacks on buses, between 30 January and 8 February, three civilians died and over 150 were wounded. The Information Department says that the Cabinet appointed a committee on 9 February to probe the bus attacks.

Batticaloa resident C Pushparajah was taken into custody in Negombo in early February with explosives. The police also arrested M Sivalingam at a Colombo hospital. He had been injured by his own bomb in a bus at Pettah on 8 February. On his information, the alleged mastermind behind the bus bombings, Nageswaran, was arrested on Poonagala Estate in Bandarawela. Colombo MP R Yogarajan says Nageswaran is a member of the People's Liberation Front (JVP).

The police allege that guns and grenades were found in the Muthumari Amman Hindu temple on Bloemendhal Lane in Colombo's Kotahena suburb in early February. The temple was closed and a priest was arrested. Four other Hindu priests in temples at Grandpass and Navagampura were also arrested and released after enquiry.

Amnesty International has expressed concern for the safety of Chitravel Manivannan arrested by police in Vavuniya on 10 January. He had just been released after serving a five year sentence. Student T Thavaruban, arrested under the PTA and detained for 26 months, was released after the AG's Department withdrew the case in early February. According to the Judicial Medical Officer (JMO), he had suffered severe torture. Another Batticaloa resident K Selvachandran, arrested on 5 May 1998, had also suffered extreme torture in security force custody, according to the evidence of the JMO.

Whoever controls Elephant Pass...

THE LTTE launched an assault on Elephant Pass military base defence lines, four miles north of Paranthan, on 16 February. The camp lies at the entrance to Jaffna from the mainland. Army positions in Iyakachchi, two miles further north, were also attacked in an effort to take control of Paranthan-Chavakachcheri road and cut-off northern supply lines to Elephant Pass. According to the military, 27 combatants died and the attack was repulsed.

Elephant Pass is strategically important. Army Commander Srilal Weerasooriya says 'whoever controls Elephant Pass controls Jaffna'. The Tigers hold Paranthan and a narrow strip of land north-east of Elephant Pass. The LTTE also launched assaults in Kerativu, south of Chavakachcheri.

Two soldiers were killed by a Tiger grenade in Chunnakam on 17 February. On the same day, a helicopter ferrying wounded soldiers from Elephant Pass was shot down near Kodikamam killing two crew members. EPDP member and former local councillor K Ketheeswaran was shot dead by suspected LTTE cadre

at Navatkuli on 26 February. Jaffna Municipal councillor V A Sivalingam, 65, was killed on 1 March at home.

In late February, the Jaffna magistrate ordered the arrest of seven officers,

including Army Captain Lalith Hewage in connection with disappearances. After the Army capture of Jaffna in 1996, over 400 civilians disappeared. On 21 February, K Kulasingham identified his daughter Sumathy's clothes removed from a grave in Chemmani. The Army arrested Sumathy in August 1996.

Over 6,000 people participated in a demonstration on 6 February in Jaffna town demanding the removal of the ban on fishing imposed on 11 December. They say there is an effort to undermine the two main economic activities of the Jaffna people - agriculture and fishing. A large part of the agricultural land lies within the military's security zone and allegations are being made that there is little effort to improve access to southern markets for Jaffna produce.

Following instructions from President Chandrika and the Defence Ministry, Army's Gamini Jayasundara announced on 27 February that fishing will be allowed in the lagoon off Pashayur and Gurunagar areas near Jaffna town from 1 March, between 5am and 4pm, upto two kilometres from the shore.

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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Charity No. 1014576
Company No. 2727514

ISSN 0955-5943
Printed by: Imedia Print, 76-89 Alscot Road
London SE1 3AW