

Buddhist clergy slams power-sharing with Tamils

SRI LANKA'S hardline Buddhist Sinhala clergy last week unanimously adopted resolutions at a key meeting, denying any form of devolution of power to other ethnic communities on the island, demanding that "Constitutional supremacy should lie with the parliament" and that the concept of a Tamil homeland be "totally rejected".

At a conference at the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress Hall in Colombo, the Buddhist clergy defined these - among a number of resolutions - that were 'inviolable fundamentals' which should be included in any revised constitution.

The Sinhalese priests were keen to include the denial of areas populated by Tamils

and other ethnic groups as their respective homelands within any revised constitution. "No area in the country should be treated as homeland of any linguistic section," the clergy said referring to Tamil assertions that the North and East of the island was their traditional homeland. "Accordingly, the concept that Northern and Eastern Provinces as homeland of Tamils should be totally rejected," the statement concluded.

On a similar note the Buddhists also demanded that "demarcation of Regions or provinces should not be done at the behest of either political parties or minorities for political or economic reasons."

"Sri Lanka should continue to be a unitary state. The Constitutional supremacy should lie with the parliament while preserving the independence of the judiciary," the Sinhala clergymen proposed.

On the subject of Buddhism and the current national flag and anthem the powerful religious order demanded that they continue to maintain their current status. "Provisions available in the present constitution should be enacted without change," said the resolution referring to the protection the Buddhist religion receives under the current constitution. The Sri Lankan national flag is dominated by a Lion with a sword, the Sinhala

national symbol. The clergy also looked to undo existing minor concessions to other ethnic groups on the island brought about by the Indo-Lanka accord.

"As the 13th Amendment to the present constitution was imposed on Sri Lanka by India by force and deceit, it should be annulled immediately. Accordingly, all laws and regulations enacted under that constitution should be treated as null and void. The system of Provincial Councils should be revoked and unification of North and Eastern region should also be revoked," the clergy said with reference to the changes under the 1987 Indo-Lanka agreement.

"Decentralisation should

not be used as a means of solving the imaginary ethnic problem," the Buddhists announced referring to solutions to the decades old conflict in the Tamil areas of the island.

The statements of the Buddhists were echoed last week by Sinhala Jathika Sangamaya Chairman, S. L. Gunasekera, who warned that any confederation state given to the LTTE could turn out to be another "Israel" which would ultimately lead to the Sinhala people becoming refugees in their own country, similar to what happened to the Palestinians.

"The parties which initiated the Balfour Treaty in 1948, silently wiped off their hands resulting in one of the worst crises of the past century, and I'm afraid the same scenario would be repeated here on our own soil" Mr. Gunasekera said.

Quoting speakers at the conference, the staunchly nationalist Sinhala language paper the Divaina, in an editorial called on the Sinhala people to unite.

"There is a massive conspiracy under way against the Sinhala majority in this country. So as a nation the Sinhala must unite now to tackle all the challenges that has risen against the country and the nation. Mere talking is not going to save the disunited Sinhala," the paper warned quoting Mahanayake therero of the Amarapura chapter Ven. Madhe Pagnaseeha therero.

The religious leader's

statement was made at a meeting organized by the National Sangha Council, Sinhala Jathika Sangamaya, Movement to protect motherland and National Unity Committee, which was held in order to point out the dangers of peace talks, the paper reported.

Ven. Sobitha therero, a leader of another Buddhist chapter, cast suspicion upon the Norwegian delegate intermeddling between the government and the LTTE. Speaking at the same meeting, he said Erik Solheim, who demonstrated some time ago in Norway demanding that Eelam should be given to Tigers, is now the peace negotiator and though the govt does not know where

Prabhakaran is, Solheim knows very well, the Divaina commented.

The Island, the English language sister paper of the Divaina, also called for unity before peace talks, in its editorial saying "we say for the umpteenth time that such bipartisan consensus between the two main parties is a fundamental requirement for any negotiating process to get going."

"Peace between the PA and the UNP is essential before peace with the terrorists," it went on to comment. Divaina reflected this sentiment and urged their unity. "Today this [unity] has to be done at all costs to save the Sinhala nation," the Sinhala language paper said.

Norway's role seen "suspect"

SENIOR Sri Lankan ministers said last week that the Norway's peace efforts in Sri Lanka are "suspect" among the Sinhala community, press reports said.

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister even hinted Norwegian

special envoy Erik Solheim should admit his failure to broker unconditional talks with Tamil Tigers and quit, AFP reported.

"Norway's role is suspect for most Sinhalese because of the pro-LTTE (Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam) statements it had made in the past," Fisheries and Aquatic resources Minister Mahinda Rajapakse said in an interview to Indo-Asian News Service.

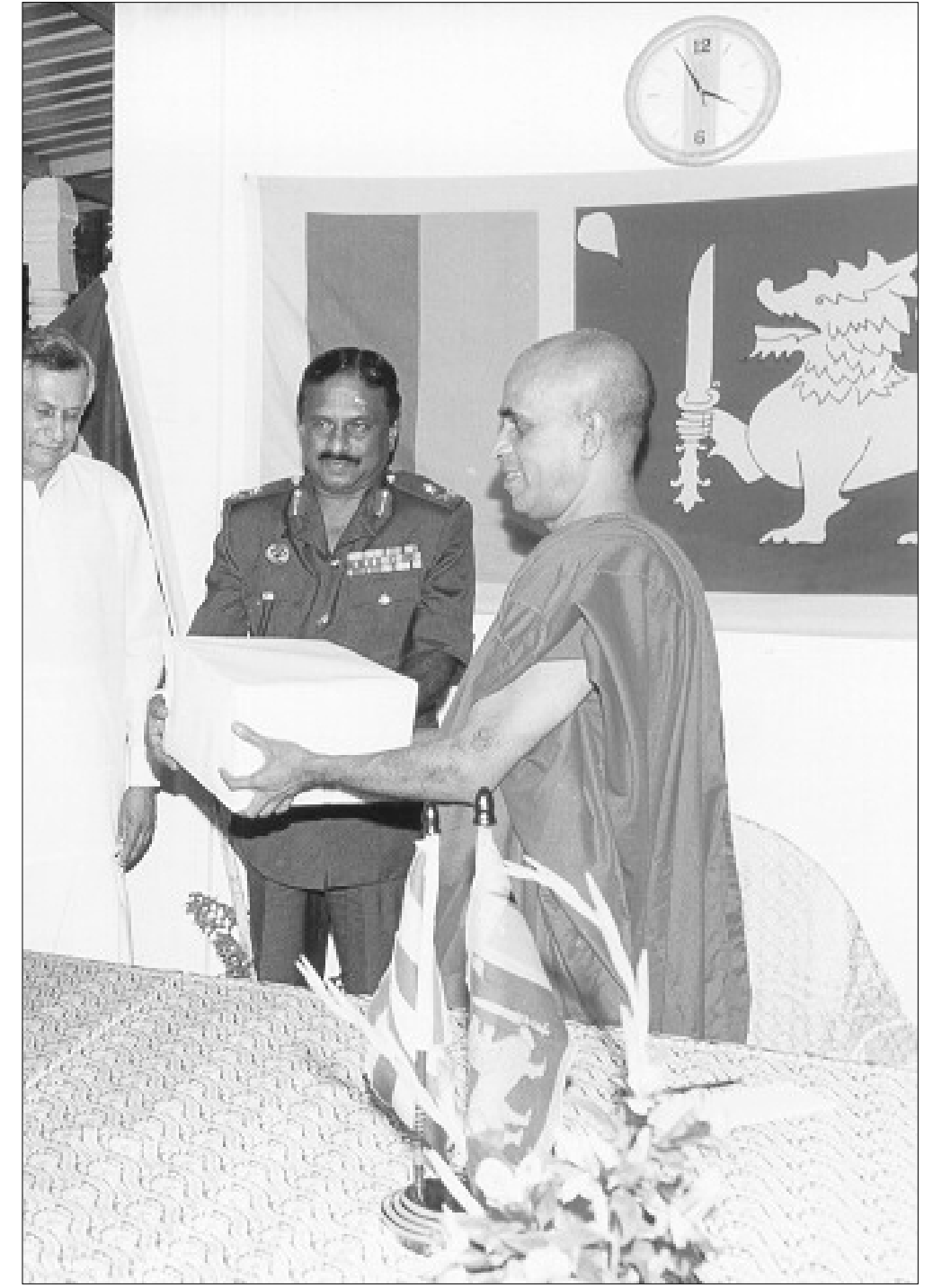
The minister said the isl-

and's political parties should work out a political package and offer it to the Tigers on a "take it or leave it basis."

He noted that the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) had recently said in a statement that Oslo's efforts were aimed at giving international recognition to the LTTE, which had been designated a "terrorist" outfit by the U.S. and proscribed by Sri Lanka, India and Britain.

that has claimed more than 60,000 lives in two decades.

Rajapakse had opposed President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Constitution reforms proposals when it was presented to Parliament as the draft Constitution bill days before the general election in October. The government was forced to withdraw the bill in the face of strong protests not only by Sinhala hardline groups and the main opposition United National Party (UNP) but also from within its own ranks.



Allied forces: The Buddhist clergy is strongly supportive of the war. Photo SLA



Pessimism: How the Tamil language Thinakurral saw the Norwegian peace initiative, with "majoritarian hatred," "racial politics," "religious supremacy," and Sri Lanka's "desire for war" taking the wind out of the peace process.

Premier Ratnasiri Wickrematunge on Saturday mysteriously asked reporters to carry a quote from an unidentified third person criticizing Solheim for raising the stakes in the Sri Lankan conflict by meeting with US authorities.

While Wickrematunge did not identify the source of the criticism, it is believed he was hinting at his personal opinions.

"What the Norwegian envoy must now do is realise that he cannot solve this problem and leave without further internationalising the issue," the prime minister quoted the person as saying, according to the Sinhalese-language Lankadeepa daily.

He made the request to the reporters after giving a speech in his home constituency of Horana. The speech was also critical of the Oslo peace bid.

Norway has been playing the role of the "facilitator" to bring the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to the negotiation table to end the island's ethnic bloodletting

The prime minister, who advocates a hard line against the LTTE and often echoes the views of ultra-nationalistic elements of the Buddhist clergy and Sinhalese, said the government was committed to resolving the conflict through talks.

As the peace process has become bogged down, Sinhalese nationalists have escalated their campaign against Norway's efforts, and especially Solheim. The United Sinhala Maha Saba, or Sinhalese Council, said Saturday they wanted Norway's ambassador here, Jon Westborg, expelled and Solheim declared persona non grata.

In previous protests against Norway's involvement in Sri Lanka's "internal affairs" crowds rioted outside Oslo's embassy in Colombo. The Norwegian flag was torched by Buddhist monks as both right and left wing Sinhala parties united in opposition.

Amnesty slams impunity in Lanka

AMNESTY International, the human rights watchdog, voiced its concern last week over the continuing erosion of human rights in Sri Lanka. Particular points of concern for Amnesty was the impunity with which perpetrators carried out human rights violations, the rise of torture in custody and the extension of emergency powers to the Sri Lankan security forces allowing these actions to continue unabated.

"Impunity for the perpetrators of human rights abuses remained a major concern. Victims who sought justice through the courts received death threats," the organisation commented.

"Torture remained common, both in the context of the armed conflict and during routine policing operations. Reports of torture increased following the introduction of ERs [Emergency Regulations] in May," the report went on to say. The organization also voiced concern over the number of deaths in Sri Lankan custody. "Several incidents of violence in prison and other detention facilities were reported."

The report specifically mentioned the Bindunuwewa massacre where "young

Tamil men and boys aged between 14 and 23 detained for 'rehabilitation' were killed during an attack by a mob of Sinhalese villagers on a rehabilitation camp."

"There was evidence of collusion by members of the local police and deliberate failure to protect the detainees," said Amnesty.

The Amnesty report was also concerned the plight of political prisoners. "Thousands of Tamil people were arrested on suspicion of involvement with the LTTE. At least 1,500 were held without charge or trial at the end of the year; some had been detained for more than four years," the report stated.

"Tamil armed groups working alongside the security forces, and members of the security forces acting outside the normal command and control structures, were allegedly responsible for human rights violations, including against journalists," said Amnesty International.

The report also stated concerns over the LTTE's alleged use of child soldiers and civilian deaths caused during attacks attributed to the movement. The LTTE has denied reports that it uses children as combatants.



Gun law: The leader of the paramilitary Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) strides through a security zone in Jaffna with his phalanx of gunmen in attendance. The EPDP is part of President Kumaratunge's coalition government and the unpopular Devananda has proved a dangerous enemy: at least one journalist was shot dead by his men and several have been threatened following adverse reporting.

NPC calls for lifting of self censorship

THE NATIONAL Peace Council (NPC), expressed doubts whether Sri Lanka's lifting of censorship on the reporting of military news from the North and East of Sri Lanka would have any effect on the quality of news coverage from the region, reported the LankaAcademic on Thursday.

"Now once the government censorship has been officially lifted, are the journalists going to tell the real story of war?" asked Jehan Perera, the NPC's media director, while welcoming the government's decision to lift censorship on war-related reporting. Mr. Perera maintained the view that even before the government imposed a censorship, many journalists did not genuinely cover both sides.

The ban was lifted without any explanation, said Jehan Perera, because the government wanted to indicate to the international powers that it intends to pursue a negotiated settlement to the ethnic problem. He pointed out that the government had to resort to this measure after the Norway brokered peace process reached a stalemate. Sri Lanka has refused to lift the ban on the LTTE, which is proving to be a stumbling block to the Norwegian peace initiative.

The NPC official said that the authorities should now prove their genuineness by putting BBC's Sinhala and Tamil programmes, back on the SLBC broadcasts. These programmes were banned after the Sri Lankan Army was defeated by the LTTE in Elephant Pass, last year. In an interview with BBC's Sandeshaya, he said that it is only one of several possible goodwill and confidence-building measures for

Norwegian brokered peace process.

Welcoming the move, the Free Media Movement (FMM) said that it hoped the censorship will not be re-imposed once the military situation escalates again.

Meanwhile, left-wing "Haraya" Editor Gnanasiri

Kottigoda talking to "The Lanka Academic" questioned whether mainstream journalists in the South who write to help the government win the war, will now stop writing from Colombo and go to the war-torn area to give their readers the real story.

MP calls for probe on 1983 pogrom

A Sri Lankan Minister has demanded the appointment of an inquiry body on the lines of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa to probe the July 1983 pogrom, which killed thousands of Tamils in Colombo and other parts of the country, reported the PTI last Tuesday.

Deputy Minister for Ethnic Affairs K S Ganesamoorthy has written to President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Parliament

Speaker Anura Bandaranaike asking for a commission to "establish the truth behind the organised pogrom of July 1983 against Tamils. We have a right to know the truth and are not seeking revenge," he said.

Over three thousand Tamil people were estimated to have been killed, in July 1983 with widespread reports that government forces and officials played an instrumental role in orchestrating the riots.

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