

TAMIL GUARDIAN

P.O. BOX. 16226, LONDON SE1 4FE, UNITED KINGDOM

E-mail: editor@tamilguardian.com Website: www.tamilguardian.com
Tel / Fax: +44 20 7357 8731

WEDNESDAY JANUARY 09, 2002 EDITION 143

Host Country

India is best placed to provide a venue for talks

The Norwegian initiative is decidedly moving forward. Following a successful meeting on Friday with the Liberation Tigers' chief negotiator and political advisor, Mr Anton Balasingham, a Norwegian delegation is expected to visit Sri Lanka this week. The signs - accurate or otherwise - of hectic diplomatic activity with regards to Oslo's peace initiative continue to raise hopes amongst Sri Lanka's peoples. Mistrust and caution - quite rightly - remain palpable, however. As we pointed out last week in the wake of the threats of renewed war unwisely articulated by Sri Lanka's new Defence Minister, every comment by any of the parties concerned has an impact, often significantly. Tilak Marapana's ill-timed belligerence and the hysterical protests of the Sinhala far right aside, a cumulative sense of slowly easing tensions is emerging in Sri Lanka. Little wonder then that speculation has already begun over the timing and venues of future peace talks. Norway, as the official facilitator, will no doubt be actively considering these matters already. Whilst it is far too early to plan the timing of talks - there are many bridges that need to be passed first, not least the matter of de-proscription of the LTTE, an essential pre-requisite for meaningful negotiations - it is not unreasonable to think about suitable venue. Arranging this will - in itself - be a prerequisite for setting a timetable for talks.

The Norwegian delegation, this paper learns, will be putting to the Sri Lankan government a suggestion from the Liberation Tigers that India could provide a such a venue. Whilst clearly Colombo needs to share the LTTE's sentiments on the matter - and India must also be comfortable with the notion (the former also being a precondition for the latter) - the reasons for holding negotiations at a location in south India are compelling. To begin with, Colombo is out of the question. With Sri Lanka's Prime Minister himself at risk from rogue elements with the Sri Lankan military - as events last week proved - and President Chandrika Kumaratunga, a committed opponent of negotiations with the LTTE, in charge of the armed forces, southern Sri Lanka is absolutely unsuitable. Other locations which could offer both negotiating teams rapid and easy physical access to their respective leaderships in Colombo and the Vanni are decidedly few. Another key factor is the availability of suitable facilities to

cater for the health and safety of the negotiators. Mr. Balasingham, the LTTE's chief negotiator, is known to have a renal condition, requiring frequent medical checks and access to specialist equipment for treatment.

The United National Front (UNF) government of Ranil Wickremesinghe has welcomed - indeed aggressively sought - greater involvement by India in the island's peace efforts. Whilst Delhi diplomatically declined to infringe on Oslo's prerogative, reinforcing its support for Norway's long-standing and continuing efforts, the notion of holding talks in Indian territory should not prove problematic to Colombo. Of course, the Sinhala far-right, led by the Marxist and vehemently anti-Indian Janatha Vimukthi Permana (JVP) will shriek in protest. But they are, in any case, not supportive of the notion of peace with the Tamils and need to be resolutely marginalized. From Norway's perspective, Oslo has always been cognisant of regional realities, keeping Delhi informed every step of the way - with the support of both the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan government. Clearly Norway would like to play a prominent role in opening any negotiations but would appreciate India's assistance with their longer term conduct.

From India's perspective, the hosting of such talks should be a relatively uncomplicated matter. As the regional power, India justifiably has vested interests in both securing a speedy negotiated outcome to Sri Lanka's conflict and in the nature of the settlement itself. Whilst India's involvement in the island's matters in the past proved controversial and ended unhappily for all concerned, the provision of a venue for talks in the context of the Norwegian peace initiative would be significant contribution to the latter's success - something Delhi has consistently stressed its support for. A point of opposition that could be raised domestically is of course India's proscription of the LTTE. But that is based on as yet unresolved matters not related to the Sri Lankan conflict. The island's war, by the same token has considerable impact on India's regional economic, geopolitical and - hence - security concerns. Hence, while it remains to be seen as to when and where negotiations between the two sides will commence and continue, regional authority, geographical proximity and vested interests provide compelling reasons for the necessity of India's assistance in this regard.

First Step

The easing of the blockade is a welcome start

Amid the continuing unilateral ceasefires being separately observed by the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan armed forces, the necessity for a permanent ceasefire remains obvious. Already there have been incidents that had the potential to escalate into violence. As such, the Norwegian delegation expected to visit Sri Lanka this week will, this paper learns, be taking with them specific proposals by the LTTE to lock down the present tranquillity prevailing in the war zones and establish mechanisms for associated matters like movement of unarmed personnel, resolution of breaches, etc. Combatants on the respective frontlines need to have a mutual understanding and acceptance of what is and is not permitted under the terms of the ceasefire. As an aside, it should be borne in mind that a permanent ceasefire does not mean a total cessation of military-related activities - the massive recruitment drive being undertaken by all services of the Sri Lankan security forces this month is a case in point. The de-escalation process has begun, but is arguably yet to get into its stride. As we have pointed out before, continuing cordon and search operations by the Sri Lanka Army not only have the potential to trigger serious confrontations with the LTTE, they are weakening confidence in Tamil areas in Colombo's commitment to the peace initiative, as do arbitrary arrests in Colombo.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government's strict economic embargo in the north and east still holds. Hospitals are still without desperately needed drugs, food is in short supply, ordinary life remains a struggle. Last week, the new United National Front (UNF) government declared its intent to ease the embargo and allow the flow of essential items from the middle of January. This is a welcome step, a significant departure from the uncompromisingly hostile position of the People's Alliance (PA) regime that has for several

years inflicted enormous suffering on our people. However, contrary to the perception delivered by the public relations blitz that accompanied the announcement in Colombo last Wednesday, the matter is certainly not concluded.

Firstly, as those familiar with the abortive peace process of 1995 will recall, it is not the promises in Colombo that will ensure the desired alleviation of suffering in the Vanni, but the physical delivery of essential supplies to the people there. The Sri Lanka Army proved then a law unto itself, blocking supplies at Vavuniya and thwarting the alleviation of the difficulties of civilians in the menacingly titled 'uncleared' areas. That potential for disruption remains. Secondly, several vital items remain blocked or subject to strict rationing (however commonsense dictates that military items will of course remain barred). The process by which these matters will be resolved so that residents of the Vanni achieve the same level of day-to-day ease as that enjoyed by the Sinhala people in the south, will regrettably take considerable time.

The Tamil homelands have been devastated by the heavy weaponry deployed by the Sri Lankan military. Roads have been shattered, houses, schools and hospitals reduced to rubble. Vehicles have been destroyed or immobilised by attack and blockade on spare parts. Together, these factors will hamper the distribution of essential supplies. The authorisation by the UNF of the reparations of the road infrastructure is therefore another welcome step. The overarching concern with regards to the embargo, is the ensuring that the ethnic discrimination inherent in Sri Lanka's blockade must end in a practical, real sense. Comments last weekend by Dr. Jayalath Jayawardene, Sri Lanka's Minister for Rehabilitation and Resettlement that "Tamils in the so-called uncleared areas are Sri Lankans too," hopefully reflects his government's recognition of the dynamics of this issue.



The politics of Sinhala unity in government

The publicly exhibited goodwill between Sri Lanka's President and Prime Minister conceals a bitter political contest, writes Ravi Thurairajah.

AFTER a tumultuous year of accusations, counter accusations and bitter inter party duels, President Chandrika Kumaratunga, leader of the opposition People's Alliance (PA), started 2002 with a sudden reversal of her previously hostile stance, and extended a hand of friendship to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the now ruling United National Front (UNF) party.

It was probably no coincidence that the President's surprisingly amiable offer to cooperate with Wickremesinghe's efforts to create a national government of reconciliation come amidst proactive, if subtle, efforts by the current government to pave the way to impeach the President. To understand Kumaratunga's unusually magnanimous stance one has to have a fuller appreciation of the predicament she faces.

Although the UNF controls parliament and is technically the party in power, the nature of Sri Lanka's executive presidency bestows considerable power on Kumaratunga. Amongst them, the ability to dismiss the current UNF government after just year of their election. With the clock ticking, Wickremesinghe's only practical course of action to avert such an outcome is to neutralise Kumaratunga - and impeaching appears to be the most obvious route. Although fully aware of Wickremesinghe's intentions, the President's actions to counter are limited and she has no recourse but to attempt to muster enough political support to prevent Wickremesinghe from achieving his objectives. As an aside, the

government's move to impeach Kumaratunga was being spearheaded by the late Gamini Atukorale, whose untimely demise is sure to be a blow to the PM's efforts.

The UNF's move to impeach the President is being preceded by allegations of supporting and protecting those involved in serious criminal activities. One persistent charge is that of ordering the assassination of prominent human rights lawyer and Tamil politician, Kumar Ponnambalam, allegedly killed by a member of Kumaratunga's Presidential Security Division. The pro-UNF Sunday Leader newspaper running a campaign supporting impeachment and undermining Kumaratunga's image, has recently seized on Ponnambalam's case.

In a bid to stave off what stands to be a humiliating end to her political career, Kumaratunga suggested she would be more cooperative with the new UNF government. Her cooperation takes the form of complying with Wickremesinghe's attempt to form a national government of reconciliation. The only point of contention is the nature of such a government. Kumaratunga has clarified that her perception of government is one encompassing the party that controls the presidency as well as that which controls parliament, as opposed to Wickremesinghe who would prefer it to be a mere extension of his current UNF government which controls parliament.

Although Wickremesinghe's government doesn't stand to gain from openly allying with President Kumaratunga at this juncture and

has everything to lose as the President will retain the option to dismiss the government in December, he will have considerable pressure to accept Kumaratunga's overtures from the Sinhala nationalist lobby. Exactly the form of political protection Kumaratunga is manoeuvring for. The formation of a national government of reconciliation has been the key political demand of the extreme Sinhala nationalist lobby for a considerable period. The creation of such a government would effectively mute the political voice of the Tamil people, ensuring absolutely no political input to the direction the government chooses.

In their recent public letter to the President the chauvinistic and politically powerful Buddhist clergy recently lamented her reluctance to form a national government of reconciliation with the UNF. In her reply she wooed their support by informing them that she was very open to the concept. Kumaratunga established herself as the political darling of the extreme right after she ran her most recent hawkish election campaign based around the pursuit of a military solution to the war giving no quarter to the LTTE or the Tamil populous. By extending support to Wickremesinghe's efforts to form what in effect would be a Sinhala hegemony in government, Kumaratunga will enjoy the not inconsiderable political support of the Sinhala right.

Wickremesinghe has already attempted to appease the Buddhist clergy with promises to heed their advice, an undertaking they will no doubt put to the test shortly, but has a lot of ground to make up on the incumbent President. The recent scandal over exposing an elite army commando team who stand

accused of attempting to assassinate him and the peaceful overtures to the LTTE will also have antagonised the right wing elements of both the political and military spectrum. The Buddhist clergy have also exhibited a pathological suspicion of India and Wickremesinghe's open moves to move closer to New Delhi are already being greeted with contempt by the Sinhala nationalists - most visibly this week by the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Perumana (JVP).

With the Liberation Tigers being constructively engaged in ironing out basis for a potential peace process via the Norwegian government - which doesn't enjoy the trust of the Sinhala nationalist lobby - and potentially under the auspices of the Indian government, the ingredients are in place of the complete alienation of the Sinhala right wing - an outcome that is potentially destabilising for the current government from both a military and political perspective.

Fortunately for the Prime Minister, he does have one more political card up his sleeve. Former PA minister AHM Fawzi has suggested that over twenty MPs within Kumaratunga's party are open to crossing over to the UNF, thus consolidating the number of MPs needed to form a government of reconciliation (and a strong force for impeachment). The only obstacle remains Kumaratunga's power to dismiss any defectors under the current constitution. To circumvent such an eventuality, the Prime Minister is considering implementing the controversial Cross Over Bill. The bill would allow parliamentarians to switch party allegiances without being sacked.

Should Wickremesinghe succeed, he would be able to appease the far right by

implementing their demand for a national government of reconciliation and proceed to implement the impeachment of President Kumaratunga, ensuring the longer term stability of his government. To date, Wickremesinghe has avoided doing anything unnecessarily provocative, such as a radical reshuffling of key military posts, which are typical when a new government comes to power. Kumaratunga is still the head of state and commander of the armed forces and overly antagonistic moves could allow her to justifiably take extreme measures. Instead the Prime Minister has chosen to subtly consolidate his position of strength.

The pieces are in place for a riveting end game. Should Kumaratunga's calculation prove correct, the Sinhala right will seize this opportunity to form a Sinhala national government and ensure that Kumaratunga gets the support she needs to form such an institution. Within a year, Kumaratunga correctly expects little tangible improvement in economic conditions, and the Sinhala right wing will probably be suitably infuriated by Wickremesinghe's apparently dovish moves involving foreign governments whom they have little faith in and Kumaratunga can dismiss parliament and stand a reasonable chance of returning to power in the subsequent general elections. Wickremesinghe is expected to play his closing gambit by attempting to bring the Cross Over bill and form a national government, having dismissed Kumaratunga and thereby save the long term viability of his government. In either outcome the Tamil people's Parliamentary fortunes can be expected to be placed at the mercy of a Sinhala nationalist government.

For God and country: the new world war?

A refusal to examine each conflict in its own specific context will lead to global polarization on religious lines argues Siva Ratnam.

OF ALL the conflicts that are currently taking place around the globe, three in particular have been the focus of the Western media's attention recently. The US led campaign in Afghanistan may be winding down, with any prolonged continuation likely to take the form of covert operations rather than full-scale military strikes, but the next phase of the 'war on international terrorism' remains unclear. Although there have been numerous calls for Iraq and Saddam Hussein to be subjected to the military might of the world's superpower, the US itself has not given any clear indication as to where it may turn its attention next.

The Palestinian conflict has certainly made front page news on numerous occasions in the past year culminating with three suicide bombers causing scores of Israeli casualties in the beginning of December. In response Israeli helicopters blasted three of the Palestinian leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat's helicopters and shortly afterwards, Israeli troops occupied several Palestinian towns - in breach of previous peace deals.

And most recently, the conflict in Kashmir has come to the fore following a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament that left 14 people dead. Had it not been foiled, it may well have quickly led to war between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan. As it is, there is a long way to go before war is averted.

Although all three conflicts are essentially unique in their origin and complexity, there are certainly some similarities worth elaborating upon. Firstly, all three are conflicts between an elected democratically governed power against a non-democratic - as the West sees it - body. The Taliban came to power in Afghanistan through a series of victorious battles, General Pervez Musharraf took control of Pakistan following a military coup and even though the PA can rightly claim to represent the aspirations of the people of Palestine they are not an elected body in the Western sense.

Secondly, all three conflicts are struggles between a Western or pro-western power against an Islamic government. Although this

reality is interesting in its own right, the stance taken by the US on the other two conflicts where it is not directly involved is also worth considering. Suffice to say a pro-Israeli line on the war in the Middle East and rather more subtle support for the Indian government have accentuated the dividing line between these Islamic countries and the rest.

Thirdly, all three Islamic governments involved in the conflicts either have or have been alleged to have 'terrorist' connections. The harboring of the al-Qaeda network of terrorists essentially led to the downfall of the Taliban in Afghanistan; General Musharraf has been blamed for not clamping down sooner on Kashmiri groups in Pakistan such as Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taliba; and Mr. Arafat has been repeatedly accused of collaborating with militant Palestinian organizations such as Hamas.

The overriding theme that seems to emerge when considering some of the most important modern conflicts is the struggle between Western or pro-Western cultures and the aspirations of the Islamic world. Although differences in beliefs and practices are quite apparent across the various Muslim

countries, with Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia providing differing examples, the existence of a cohesive force that unites many Muslim countries involved in hitherto separate conflicts is undeniable. The similarities in the form of government, the resort to violence to rectify perceived injustices and a common religion that has a profound effect on the culture and way of life of Muslims have all played their part in establishing this unifying force.

In a manner not too dissimilar from the way in which the US readily aligns itself with nations modeling themselves on Western beliefs and ideals, the Muslim countries therefore have the potential to coalesce on a religious and cultural foundation and confront the West on a more united footing. As Samuel Huntington points out in his book, "The clash of civilizations", violence between states and groups from different civilizations carries with it the potential for escalation as other states and groups from these civilizations rally to the support of their "kin countries". As a case in point, in the Yugoslav conflicts, Russia provided diplomatic support to the Serbs and Saudi Arabia,

Turkey, Iran, and Libya provided funds and arms to the Bosnians, not for reasons of ideology or power politics or economic interests but because of cultural kinship.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that future conflicts are likely, though not exclusively, to be started due to cultural factors rather than economics or ideology. Five of the seven states listed by the US State Department as sponsoring terrorism are Muslim, as are a majority of foreign organizations accused by America as engaged in terrorism. The three conflicts above are therefore only a subset of a wider war between the US with its supporters in the West and elsewhere and the Islamic world. The potential for its escalation may well be the biggest concern for the global community since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the refusal by the global community to examine each conflict in its specific historic, cultural and geographical contexts - and not just its religious one - will inevitably contribute to further polarization of the world's peoples on religious (if not Islamic and non-Islamic) lines. The repercussions of this and accompanying hostility will undoubtedly be devastating.