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Sri Lanka wavers on peace steps amid rising opposition

THE Norwegian peace initiative in Sri Lanka came under increasing pressure this week as the main Sinhala opposition parties stepped up their efforts to challenge the permanent ceasefire signed in February and thwart plans for an interim administration for the Tamil north and east. The Sinhala nationalist campaign against 'concessions' to the Tamils comes as the Sri Lanka armed forces adopted increasingly aggressive posture in the Tamil areas.

Although the Sinhala far-right campaign has failed to mobilise much support amongst the southern public, the United National Front (UNF) government is clearly rattled. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe this week denied having given an assurance that an interim administration would be established for the Tamils.

"We will ask the LTTE to place the topic of an interim administration in its agenda for talks. Other than that, we

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have not given them promises on anything," he said in the southern town of Matara on Sunday.

"This needs parliamentary approval and also needs to be ratified by the people," he said addressing a function to mark the assumption of office of a Buddhist religious leader. Secure in numerical superiority in a vote on ethnic issues, the Sinhala far-right has been arguing for referendums on what it terms as concessions to the Tamils.

The Prime Minister also once again rejected the concept of a Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka, saying he knew only of a single homeland for all communities.

As well as backtracking from the interim administration which is intended to provide a period of deescalation ahead of talks on the conflict's 'core issues,' the government is avoiding the lifting of the ban on the LTTE.

The Tigers have said they cannot negotiate as outlaws, a stance strongly supported by the Tamil community. "The deproscription of the Tamil Tigers and the forma-

tion of an interim administration form the basis of the impending peace process," the Uthayan, the largest circulating daily in Jaffna pointed out in an editorial this week.

The UNF is under pressure from President Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) and the Marxist-cum-nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Perumana (JVP). The PA last week forced the government to call a Parliamentary debate on the ceasefire.

A mass rally the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the main constituent of the PA, is scheduled to be held in Anuradhapura as this edition goes to print. The PA is planning another rally on Thursday.

Sri Lanka's powerful Sinhala Buddhist clergy has been wavering on the UNF's strategy, awaiting any significant move towards sharing power with the Tamils which the prelates are resolutely opposed to. A mass meditation failed to draw more than a thousand junior Buddhist monks last Saturday.

Meanwhile the Sri Lanka armed forces, whose commander in chief is President Chandrika Kumaratunga is adopting an increasingly hostile attitude to the Norwegian peace initiative. The Air Force began low flying surveillance flights over the LTTE-controlled Vanni last week, causing panic among residents. The LTTE lodged a formal protest with the ceasefire monitors after the Air Force refused to scale down its operations.

Meanwhile the Sri Lanka Army began re-establishing security positions in the Jaffna peninsula and increased its harassment of civilians there. The Sri Lanka navy further increased restrictions on fishing in several parts of the north and east - restrictions which are instead due to be completely lifted soon under the terms of the ceasefire - and sailors assaulted Tamil fishermen caught at sea.

The increasing number on incidents is raising tensions across the north and east. Tamil language publications, reporting the events, expressed apprehensions this week. Commenting on the Sinhala protests and the increased military activity this week, the Uthayan said: "President Kumaratunga is scheming not only political but also military means of scuppering the peace effort."



Two starving Tamil children in the Vanni plead for help from passers by. According to a Sri Lankan government survey of children under 5 from the Vanni, 44.4% are wasted due to acute malnutrition and 37% of the children are stunted as a result of chronic malnutrition, 68.5% are underweight compared to Sri Lanka's national figure of 37.6%, state-owned Daily News reported Tuesday. The team of Medical Officers of Health said immediate action must be taken to correct the protein malnutrition through a feeding program and regular monitoring. Photo Kajani/LTTE

Air Force spy planes seen 'negating confidence'

IN the wake of a series of low-level flights over the Vanni by Sri Lanka Air Force surveillance aircraft which have raised fears amongst residents, the Liberation Tigers Monday lodged a formal protest with the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM). The causing of panic amongst civilians by the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) is "a negation of the confidence building exercise undertaken by the government of Sri Lanka," the LTTE said in a letter to the SLMM.

Writing to General Trond Furuhoed, head of the SLMM, Mr. S. P. Tamilchelvan, Head of the LTTE's Political Section said: "You are aware that the LTTE has already brought to the attention of the SLMM the flight of Unmanned Reconnaissance Aircraft over civilian areas in Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi districts."

The aircraft are cruising over towns and villages at low altitudes causing anxiety and panic among civilians and school children, the letter, a copy of which was seen by TamilNet, said.

"During war times these flights were not only confined to surveillance on land but always preceded aerial bombardment. As such the Tamil civilian population is deeply worried over the intention behind this unwarranted action," the LTTE's letter said.

"This aerial surveillance constitutes a violation of the spirit of the truce agreement," the LTTE said. "Furthermore, such action is tantamount to a negation of the



confidence building exercise undertaken by the government of Sri Lanka."

"We, therefore urge you to use your good offices and prevail upon the government to desist from this provocative action to stabilise the conditions of peace and normalcy in Tamil areas," M. Thamichelvan's letter to the SLMM chief said.

The SLAF used up to half a dozen Israeli built drones extensively during major military offensives in the Vanni region in the late nineties. Almost all were lost either through LTTE ground fire or accidents, Sri Lankan press reports said at the time. Built by Israeli Aircraft Industries (IAI), the planes were said to cost half a million dollars each.

Drones - also called Remotely Piloted Vehicles (RPV) - are controlled from the ground from a command room with television sets. The aircraft carry onboard computers and cameras and transmit high resolution pictures back to the command room to enable air or artillery strikes.

TRO opens office in Trincomalee

THE Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) has commenced its activities in the Trincomalee district with the opening of its office in the east port town Friday, reported TamilNet. Dr. Dedo Geinitz, Team Leader of the German Technical Co-operation (GTZ) in Trincomalee declared open the TRO office.

"We expect all local non-governmental organisations in the district to become partner organisations in our activities of rehabilitating the families affected and displaced by the conflict," said Mr. Lynkaran, administrative head of the LTTE's political section in the district, speaking at the function that followed the opening of the TRO office (pictured right).

"Credit goes to TRO for saving women, children and elders in the Vanni region from famine, disease and other various difficulties in the past because of the economic embargo of the previ-

ous government. It is the TRO which served the displaced and affected people in Jaffna during military operations," said Mr. Lynkaran.

He appealed to all local non-governmental organisations in the district to be self-sustainable and not to depend on the international volunteer organisations, which would one day leave the country.

Mr. T. Thavasilangam, President of the Trincomalee District NGOs Consortium, said that the TRO is having permanent root in several countries including the north-east in the island. It serves dislocated and displaced Tamil people in several areas.

Ms Ranji Balasingham, President of the Trincomalee Women Welfare Organisation, former Divisional Secretary Mr. V. Velumylyam and Mr. K. Thuraiyasingham of Tamil National Alliance also spoke.



Defiant Arafat vows Palestinian statehood

YASSER Arafat toured West Bank cities for the first time in five months Monday and reassured Palestinians they would win their own state, brushing aside a vow from Ariel Sharon's Likud party never to allow it.

"To Jerusalem we are headed. Jerusalem is the capital of our independent state of Palestine, never mind who agrees or does not," a defiant Arafat told a crowd in Nablus in the northern West Bank. The trip began shortly after the central committee of the right-wing Likud party voted never to accept a Palestinian state, drawing Arab condemnation and world concern.

The Likud vote at a heated convention in Tel Aviv Sunday marked a victory for former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the incumbent Sharon

in a looming battle for the party leadership.

Palestinian official Saeb Erekat said the Likud vote showed Israel's true intentions and would increase Palestinians' frustration in their 19-month-old uprising against Israeli occupation.

An Arafat aide said Likud's rejection of a Palestinian state undermined the peace process and the 1993 Oslo accords.

European officials also said it would harm the search for peace and the United States, Israel's strongest ally, reiterated that it supported an eventual Palestinian state. "Everybody has recognized that the only way to peace is through a (Palestinian) state. It is a pity that internal politics can make this process more difficult," EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said.

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