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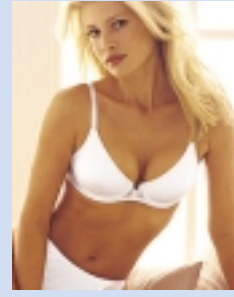
WEDNESDAY MAY 29, 2002

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Military intransigence, LTTE ban thwart talks

THE Sri Lankan military's continuing refusal to implement the terms and conditions of the 3-month old permanent ceasefire and the government's back-peddling on the issue of deproscription of the Liberation Tigers is thwarting the holding of direct talks between the two sides, the LTTE's chief negotiator and political advisor said Monday.

"Both we [LTTE] and the Sri Lankan government accepted in February that conditions of normalcy must be established in the Tamil areas through a process of de-escalation before direct talks are possible," Mr.

Balasingham told Tamil Guardian this week from Switzerland where he had been meeting Swiss government officials and addressing the Tamil expatriate community.

"However, the Sri Lankan military has failed to meet mutually agreed deadlines for its withdrawal from schools, places of worship and public buildings in the Tamil areas. Furthermore, despite [government] assurances to the contrary, the army is continuing to occupy these locations," Mr. Balasingham said.

"The ceasefire and other goodwill measures on both

sides are intended to build trust and confidence in the Norwegian peace initiative. However, the military's renegeing on key aspects of the truce along with its aggressive posture has undermined the peace process," the LTTE's chief negotiator said.

The Norwegian facilitators acknowledged this week that direct talks are unlikely to take place as originally presumed, but played down the widening rift. Mr. Vidar Helgesen, Deputy Foreign Minister of Norway, said that the lack of an agreed agenda had delayed the negotiations.

"Time is clearly impor-

tant but the most important thing is to agree on an agenda for talks," Helgesen told the Maharaja television station. "The aim is to bring the two parties to the table as soon as possible but if you rush it and bring them to the table with no clear agenda, I think that would be detrimental."

However, the issue of Sri Lanka's ban on the LTTE remains, posing a serious obstacle to direct talks. The LTTE says it will not negotiate as an outlawed movement, a stance strongly backed by Tamil political parties and public. Despite its earlier assurances that the

ban will not prove an impediment to talks, the Sri Lankan government was backpedalling on the issue, Mr. Balasingham told the Tamil Guardian.

"We have consistently maintained that the LTTE cannot represent the Tamil people at negotiations whilst being banned. The Norwegian facilitators, with whom we have been working for many years now, have always been aware of this," he said.

"Furthermore, we had been assured that the new [United National Front] government would not let the ban hamper the peace

process. However, the government is now going back on this position" Mr. Balasingham said.

Asked when he thought direct negotiations were likely to take place, Mr. Balasingham said: "It is impossible to draw up firm dates for talks when so many matters remain unresolved, including the unimplemented ceasefire and Sri Lanka's continuing ban on the LTTE."

"The Liberation Tigers are committed to the Norwegian peace process, but we are concerned at Sri Lanka's growing intransigence," he further said.



Mr. Balasingham addressing Tamils in Fribourg on Saturday



Intimidation: In violation of the ceasefire, Sri Lankan troops patrol the balcony of an occupied building in Vavuniya town as an Buffel APC patrols a junction. Photo TamilNet

'Conditions are not conducive for return of refugees'

DESPITE the voluntary return of 71,000 internally displaced people (IDP) to their homes this year, the United Nations' leading refugee agency maintains that "conditions in Sri Lanka are not yet conducive to promote or facilitate large-scale, organised [displaced people's] return or repatriation of refugees," a UN working group said last week. The report said that major concerns remain regarding the risk of landmines and unexploded ordnance in both actual and potential areas of return.

The UN's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) "is monitoring closely the situation of spontaneous returns to ensure that they occur voluntarily, with safety and dignity," the UN's IDP working group said.

More than 71,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), or roughly 14,200 families, have returned to their homes since the start of

the year in Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Vavuniya, Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts, the report said. More than 35,000 returnees in Jaffna District account for nearly half the total.

"Precise week-by-week figures are not available, but indications are that the magnitude of return has clearly increased since the Feb. 23 cease-fire agreement," the report said.

Despite the UNHCR having "reservations about promotion or facilitation of large-scale, organized repatriation at this stage" the agency has agreed to assist in the return of 16 extremely vulnerable refugees from south Indian camps for pressing humanitarian reasons, the report added.

Modalities of repatriation, as well as the level of assistance the government can provide, are two of the topics to be discussed at a

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Troops remain in temples

THE Sri Lanka military this week continued to occupy Tamil schools and places of worship in defiance of its obligations under the permanent ceasefire agreement, press reports said.

Despite assurances by Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Austin Fernando that troops had pulled out of most places of worship, the trustee boards of fourteen Hindu temples in Batticaloa and Amparai alone last Saturday complained to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) that their precincts and environs are still occupied by the security forces. Troops occupying temples in other Tamil areas also remained in place.

The Federation of Hindu Temples in Batticaloa and Amparai said Sunday that the Sri Lanka security forces in the region continue to encompass more than 15 places of worship in the two districts within the defence perimeters of their camps.

"We have been complain-

ing to the authorities about this for a long time. But to this day we have had no indication that the army and Police intend to leave our temples", said Mr. Pakkiaselvam Ariyaneththiran, the spokesman for the Federation.

The ceasefire Agreement between the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan government stipulates that places of worship currently occupied by the forces of either side should be vacated and made accessible to the public thirty days after the truce came into effect on February 23, 2002.

"The Sri Lanka army and Police have occupied most of these temples for almost twelve years. The idols and belonging to many these temples were left behind when the Sri Lankan security forces moved into them", said Mr. Sinnathamby Pushpalingham, the secretary to the Federation of Hindu Temples in Batticaloa and Amparai.

According to a memorandum submitted to the SLMM

by the Federation Saturday, five temples in the two districts are fully occupied by the Sri Lanka army and the Special Task Force.

The SLA is fully occupying Sri Devi Temple, Kommathurai (17km north of Batticaloa) and the Sithth-ivinayagar Temple, Kommathurai.

The STF is fully occupying the Siththivinayagar Temple, Kurumanveli (29km southwest of Batticaloa), Sri Muthumariamman Temple, Kurumanveli, Kittangi Pillaiyar Temple, Senaikudiyiruppu (48 kilometres southwest of Batticaloa).

Nine temples are in the defence perimeters of the Sri Lankan security forces, according to the Federation's memorandum submitted to the SLMM.

They are Maamangam Pillaiyar Temple, Amirthakazhi, Batticaloa, Neelakanda Vinayagar Temple, Araipathai (8 km south of Batticaloa), Muthumariamman Temple, Araipathai, Muha-

maai Manikkapillaiyar Temple, Kaluwanchikudy (24 km south of Batticaloa), Kannaki Amman Temple, Kaluwanchikudy, Mahavishnu Temple, Periya Neelavanai, (32 kilometres south of Batticaloa), Peychchi Amman temple, Periyaneelavanai, Vadapathirakaliyammam Temple, Annamalai, 40 kilometres southwest of Batticaloa) and Manmunai Pillaiyar Temple, Manmunai (10km south of Batticaloa).

"Several temples have not been included in this memorandum. The Pillaiyaradi Temple on the Batticaloa town entrance is in the defence perimeter of the STF camp. The Aanaipanthi Pillaiyar Temple, which is in the heart of the town, and the Navatkudah Sri Murugan Temple on the Old Kalmunai road are in the defence perimeters of the Police.

Their trustee boards are preparing memoranda to the SLMM," Mr. Ariyaneththiran said.

US-Lanka defence pact 'will damage' peace efforts, say Tamil parties

REPORTS that Sri Lanka and the US are to soon sign a defence pact that will set the stage for increased military cooperation between the two countries was criticised by Tamil politicians this week.

The defence pact, known as the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, is likely to be signed within a few weeks and will enable the US and Sri Lanka to access each other's military facilities, the Hindu said.

Defence Ministry officials said that effectively, the treaty would allow the US military the use of Sri Lanka's ports, airports and air space, particularly for refuelling, in return for training assistance and supply of spare parts and repairs.

A US Embassy spokesman in Colombo confirmed that the agreement was ready for signature, but said it was a "routine" treaty that the US

had with more than 50 countries.

Leaders of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) expressed concern that the pact would be detrimental to efforts to peacefully solve the ethnic conflict. They said such a pact coming into force prior to a permanent solution would only complicate matters.

"Just as many conflicts in places where similar pacts have been agreed remain unsolved, this will only damage the prospects for a solution here," said Mr. Sivasinghambaram President of the TULF.

Leader of TELO, N Srikantha, said the move confirms recent suspicion that the United States wants to secure a military foothold in Sri Lanka. "The Sri Lankan government must realise that the deal will have a detrimental effect," he said.

The EPRLF's leader, Suresh Premachandran, also said unnecessary complications could arise with regards to the peace effort in the wake of the US-Sri Lanka defence pact.

The US this week played down the agreement. "Clearly when you sign an agreement that implies a certain level of cooperation and closeness, but this is not a quantum leap," Holgate, the public-affairs officer of the American embassy in Colombo told Reuters.

The Sri Lanka Air Force will take delivery soon of two surveillance aircraft fitted with special radar capability, from the US defence company Raytheon. The Hindu further reported.

The US Government facilitated the purchase, but the spokesman said it was unconnected to the new agreement, and had been in the pipeline since 2000. Sri Lanka already receives assistance from the US under an existing agreement. US Marines have been providing training for Sri Lankan commandos under a programme called Operation Balance Style.

The new agreement will be signed against the background of the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The training, which will encompass joint exercises with United States Armed Forces, will focus on counter terrorism and related activity reported the Sunday Times.

Two US Navy ships, the USS Hopper and USS Sides, recently called in at the Colombo port, one for refuelling and the other on a rest-and recreation stop. These were the first visits by US Naval ships to Sri Lanka in eight years.

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