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P.O. BOX. 16226, LONDON SE1 4FE, UNITED KINGDOM
E-mail: editor@tamilguardian.com Website: www.tamilguardian.com
Tel / Fax: +44 20 7357 8731

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Back to Basics

Sri Lanka takes a show-stopping hard line

Although Norwegian diplomats continued their shuttle diplomacy this week with their customary indefatigability, it is clear that serious issues have arisen that need resolution before their peace initiative in Sri Lanka can advance further. Firstly, the direct talks that were speculated to begin next month are clearly not going to take place, as even Mr. Vidar Helgesen, Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister, was forced to concede this week. Secondly, the reasons for this - namely, the Sri Lankan armed forces' failure to implement their obligations under the permanent ceasefire and Sri Lanka's continuing ban on the Liberation Tigers - remain the responsibility of the government to resolve.

The military's continuing occupation of Tamil schools and places of worship and the ongoing restrictions on fishing have made a mockery of the permanent ceasefire agreement which came into effect on February 23. From a Tamil perspective, it is not enough that there are no violent engagements. The military oppression continues: the Sinhala forces continue to occupy schools, places of worship and other public buildings. People are being harassed and openly threatened with death by troops - who are in the meantime extending their positions rather than demilitarising Tamil areas. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is either unable - or unwilling - to rein in the military. And the duplicitous response of his government to increasing Tamil discontent has further eroded confidence in the north and east. Whilst the Defence Secretary declared that troops had withdrawn from places of worship, nothing of the sort has happened, as frustrated Hindu organisations pointed out this week. Meanwhile the government's backpedalling on ending the ban on the LTTE has also shaken Tamil confidence that the peace initiative is going to lead anywhere fast. Whilst the government has repeatedly declared that the ban will not be allowed to impede Oslo's initiative, it has done precisely that. As ever, Colombo's insistence on maintaining the ban underlines the contempt with which Tamil grievances are held by the Sinhala establishment.

The United National Front's victory at the Parliamentary polls last December - on a mandate of seeking peace with the LTTE - resulted in the prompt revival of the Norwegian peace initiative. As we have pointed out before, the euphoria triggered by the lifting of the economic embargo on the Tamil areas and the signing of the permanent ceasefire was based on growing Tamil confidence that the UNF would break from Sinhala-supremacist tradition and genuinely pursue peace. If the Sri Lankan military's brazen refusal to honour the ceasefire weakened that confidence, the rhetoric in Colombo this week dealt it a body blow.

Hitherto, the UNF's positions on matters related to the peace initiative have been starkly distinct from those of the ultra-hawkish People's Alliance (PA) of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. But the apparent adoption by the UNF now of some of the very positions which the PA maintains and which earlier thwarted the

Norwegian peace initiative has justifiably heightened concern. When the Norwegian peace initiative got into its stride this year, both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE agreed that conditions of normalcy must prevail before direct talks are considered and that phased de-escalation was necessary to build mutual confidence. It was also agreed - by both sides - that Sri Lanka's ethnic question, which has defied resolution for several decades could not be answered in the short term and that the conditions of war should be removed and normalcy restored for an interim period before these complex issues are discussed.

Yet suddenly, the dynamics of the Norwegian peace initiative seem to have turned about. President Kumaratunga has instructed Wickremesinghe to ditch the idea of an interim administration and pursue 'core issues' instead. She also insists that de-proscription cannot take place unless concessions are first extracted from the LTTE. These were her positions during the bloody phases of the island's conflict. As seasoned observers of the ethnic question are aware, Kumaratunga's advancing of these stances at this juncture is certainly not intended to promote the Norwegian peace process but the exact opposite. With the Liberation Tigers insisting they cannot negotiate as outlaws, by making the lifting of the ban conditional on the LTTE making concessions on important matters that should be discussed at the negotiating table, Kumaratunga hopes to - and, if she gets her way, almost certainly will - stall the peace initiative.

With the UNF government apparently buckling to Kumaratunga's pressure, the Norwegian facilitators will no doubt struggle to find a way forward now. The temptation to pressure the LTTE to also accept Kumaratunga's dictat must inevitably be strong and Tamil suspicions are growing accordingly. The timing of Sri Lanka's announcement last week that the massive oil facility in Trincomalee would be handed over to India - in keeping with Delhi's "strategic interests," along with the unveiling of a significant defence agreement with the United States is being questioned in this light. The apprehensions reflected in the Tamil press and expressed by Tamil political parties will undoubtedly colour local perspectives on the internationally-backed peace effort.

Meanwhile, the LTTE is justifiably demanding that the permanent ceasefire - the first concrete agreement reached between the two sides - be fully implemented if there is to be any trust in the viability of the Norwegian peace process. Whilst some may feel that simply kick-starting direct talks and waiting for a 'peace momentum' to build is as good a conflict resolution strategy as any, the abject failures of earlier negotiations in Sri Lanka suggest this would be the worst approach possible. Meanwhile the government's stoic insistence that direct negotiations will go ahead soon is no doubt intended to convince reluctant international donors to loosen their purse strings. But simply defining a date for beginning talks - like the D+30, D+60 and D+90 dates of the ceasefire agreement is of little relevance to advancing the Oslo's initiative.

Cosmetic Exercise

UN agencies continue to shirk their responsibilities

The assertion by the United Nations' leading refugee agency that "conditions in Sri Lanka are not yet conducive to promote or facilitate large-scale, organised [displaced people's] return or repatriation of refugees," reflects as much on its own failures as on the conditions faced by the hundreds of thousands of Tamils who have been forced to flee their homes. Whilst the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) might piously suggest that much needs to be done before internally displaced people [IDPs] can return safely to their homes, the agency has done little to either support the displaced amidst their wretched living conditions or to facilitate their return.

As the Tamil community is well aware, many people fleeing persecution were deported from Western countries on the strength of letters from the UNHCR assuring the governments in question that the asylum seekers were not at risk of persecution in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the agency - like many of international NGOs - collaborated in the deliberate starving of half a million Tamils by refusing to condemn or publicise the economic embargo imposed by the Sri Lankan government - which was lifted with much fanfare by the new administration in January this year.

The UN's IDP working group said last week that it "is monitoring closely the situation of spontaneous returns to ensure that they occur voluntarily, with safety and dignity." Watching impassively has, after all, been the UN agencies usual response to difficulties faced by people in the Tamil areas. Although we have pointed out the considerable danger posed by over 1.4 million landmines and explosive devices, none of the UN agencies have made any genuine effort to help clear these or to support the poorly equipped, but courageous Tamil volunteers attempting the mammoth task on their own. UNICEF has meanwhile declared itself the 'lead' UN agency on 'mine-risk education.'

We note also that the UN agencies seem in no hurry to take advantage of the permanent ceasefire to accelerate the return of displaced people and refugees to their homes by alleviating the conditions which hamper this. In fact, amidst the considerable difficulties that hundreds of thousands of Tamil people continue to undergo either in refugee camps and whilst living rough, the UNHCR's latest undertaking might have appeared the height of idiocy: six arts workshops for three hundred children. Their paintings are to be displayed at the National Art Gallery "in celebration" of World Refugee Day.

Cracks emerge but the colours are flying

Sri Lanka's government is pretending all is well with the deteriorating peace process, to avoid rattling international aid donors, writes Ravi Thurairajah

EVIDENCE of President Chandrika Kumaratunga's increasing influence over the Norwegian peace initiative emerged this week following her meeting with the head of Oslo's facilitatory delegation, Mr. Vidar Helgesen, at which she emphatically ruled on the issues to be discussed at future peace talks in Thailand.

The President, who earlier this year seemed to have been successfully sidelined by Sri Lanka's Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, stamped her conditions on potential negotiations with little resistance from either the leader of the United National Front (UNF) government or the Norwegian delegation.

"The President during the discussion had stressed that all the core issues relating to the future of the Northeast province should be included in the agenda for Thailand peace talks," said a press release from the Presidential Secretariat referring to the meeting with Mr Helgesen on Monday. Mrs Kumaratunga also objected to the de-proscription of the LTTE prior to the commencement of peace talks, something else Mr Wickremesinghe's administration is leaning towards.

The fresh interference by the President has important ramifications which are apparent in the context of Sri Lanka's recent past. Mrs Kumaratunga's formerly ruling People's Alliance (PA) government had pursued hawkish policies on the ethnic conflict, making little movement towards a peaceful resolution. Propagating the rhetoric of a 'war for peace', the PA government employed a strategy intended to militarily destroy the Liberation Tigers instead.

Although the PA failed to gain the necessary success on the battlefield it however refrained from engaging in a ceasefire or de-proscribing

the Liberation Tigers before talks. Kumaratunga's stance on the agenda for discussion was largely academic at the time, as talks without a ceasefire (as she demanded) were a non-starter. From a Tamil perspective the de-proscription of the Liberation Tigers was an essential pre-requisite to negotiations.

The UNF made substantial initial progress on the peace front compared to the PA. Wickremesinghe reciprocated the Liberation Tigers' truce and subsequently consolidated it with a permanent ceasefire agreement. The Prime Minister had won a strong mandate from the Sri Lankan public to end the war and appeared to be taking steps unthinkable from his hawkish political opponent - his bold strokes were endorsed by the electorate in the two subsequent local polls.

It is known that private agreements between the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan government, facilitated by the Norwegian government, had outlined guidelines and steps for the peace process. The UNF government accepted that the Tigers could not engage in talks unless normalcy first returned to Tamil areas. It further accepted the difficulties the Tigers faced if expected to negotiate while proscribed. The UNF government also shared the opinion that to attempt to address core issues at the outset would be detrimental to talks as neither side was ready at the early stages of a peace process to make the concessions necessary to ensure a successful conclusion to such an exercise. Instead, both parties agreed to establishing a sustained environment of peace and stability within which the protagonists could later redress their concerns and diffuse tensions.

Wickremesinghe's gov-

ernment therefore agreed privately to an interim administration for the Tamil north and east for a period of two or more years after which both sides could discuss a permanent solution to the island's ethnic problem. The talks in Bangkok this year were planned to address the formation of the interim administration.

Meanwhile, Kumaratunga vehemently opposed the ceasefire agreement with Liberation Tigers, but came under criticism domestically and internationally for her hawkish stance. The President subsequently made dovish overtures, supportive of Norway's peace initiatives, however maintained her criticism over the direction of future talks. She insisted that the LTTE not be de-proscribed (an impasse-triggering policy which Wickremesinghe had initially rejected but recently appears to be curiously warming to) suggesting this week that, as a 'minimum,' a date for talks be set before de-proscription is considered. However, the establishment of a date for talks subsequently places the onus on the LTTE to adhere to the set date regardless of the failure by the Sri Lankan military to implement the ceasefire agreement, an escalating point of tension in the Tamil areas.

The President has also now insisted that the talks in Thailand should address a final solution to the ethnic conflict. But any agenda attempting to frame a final solution to the island's problems are bound to end in gridlock as neither side is prepared to make the necessary compromise at this juncture, particularly amid the still fresh enmity developed by decades of bloody war.

The failure by the UNF government to challenge the President over her disruptive moves and its conceding to some of her demands (such as that over de-proscription) suggests that the balance of power between the President and the Prime Minister has shifted decisively towards

the former. Upon assuming power, realising the threat Kumaratunga posed to his government and to a potential peace process - the viability of both being inextricably linked - Wickremesinghe embarked upon a twin strategy to curtail the President's powers. Both strategies progressed this week with the UNF saying it would present legislation to constitutionally curb Kumaratunga's powers while presenting further evidence to Parliament which could support potential impeachment proceedings in future.

Having laid in place elaborate measures to sideline the President, Wickremesinghe's failure to act decisively at this crucial juncture does not bode well. It is plausible that the statements in the press were merely a bluff and that the UNF does not have either the Parliamentary support or the legal case to curb the President's powers. Alternatively, Wickremesinghe may still harbour aspirations of forming a government of (Sinhala) national reconciliation - a move which would receive the strong endorsement of the ultra-nationalist Sinhala-Buddhist establishment.

The Buddhist leadership has been notably silent on the peace process to date - despite vehemently opposing far less conciliatory gestures to the Tamils in the past. This could be because one of Wickremesinghe's first steps on assuming power was to inform this notoriously hard line institution of his intentions and to assure them that he would not act against their interests. It should also be noted that the Buddhist clergy has eagerly advocated a government of national (i.e. Sinhala) reconciliation with Kumaratunga's PA; arguing, quite rightly, that this would eliminate the dependence of Sinhala-dominated governments on minority (Tamil or Muslim) parties. As recently as last week the Prime Minister briefed the leaders of the main chapters of the Buddhist clergy on the

progress of the Norwegian initiative, underlining the influence the prelates maintain over his actions.

To observers of the conflict, it should be increasingly clear that the Norwegian peace initiative is in an increasingly precarious state. The UNF government, which started off with a pragmatic approach to resolving the ethnic problem, is steadily adopting the hard line policies of its opposition (despite the drubbing the latter received in the last three polls). Wickremesinghe has chosen to either accept that he does not have the necessary clout to proceed with the peace initiatives whilst disregarding Kumaratunga; or has decided to enter a period of cohabitation with the President on her terms.

Key aspects of the ceasefire agreement and promises of de-proscription are being renege on, jeopardising the entire process. Yet all the non-Tamil actors seem deliberately oblivious to this. This week the Norwegian government sent questionnaires to both parties on modalities for talks clearly assuming - or pretending - that negotiations will go ahead despite the major differences that are beginning to emerge.

Wickremesinghe also continues to profess that nothing is amiss, assuring the international community that he has contained Kumaratunga's bitter opposition to peace with the Tigers. However, it is clear that the peace process is foundering as Kumaratunga makes her political resurgence. The Prime Minister's pretence that everything is proceeding according to plan is most likely a charade for the benefit of the Sri Lanka Development Forum whom he will soon be courting in the hope of securing more desperately-needed aid. But is patently clear that all is not well in the island of Sri Lanka and any generous handouts made on the basis of assisting the peace talks are far from justified.

Is the Prime Minister's will weakening?

In its editorial of May 14, the Uthayan newspaper questions Ranil Wickremesinghe's motives.

HAS Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe heeded the chauvinist cries in the south against the peace efforts? Has he been persuaded by the racist forces?

The speech he gave a few days ago in Matara has raised this suspicion. "We will never accept parts of this country as traditional homelands. Sri Lanka is the homeland for all. We will not talk to the Tigers about another homeland," the Prime Minister said.

He displayed considerable resilience in pursuing a solution to the ethnic conflict during the last two general elections and after cap-

turing power at the end of last year. Even after that he has stuck to the same line during the signing of the ceasefire accord with the Tigers, saying his only motive was to see an end to the ethnic strife.

But recently, the Prime Minister who played down the chauvinist chorus in the south against the peace effort has backed down to the extent to be appearing to trample underfoot the matter of something as basic as the Eelam Tamils' national identity.

Is this a ploy to move the peace effort forward? Or is it actually a result of him bow-

ing to chauvinist demands? These are the questions now. Right or wrong, it is necessary that his government remains in power to advance the peace process and reach a final settlement. But a sword will continue to dangle above his government for as long as President Chandrika Kumaratunga - who opposes it and its efforts towards peace - retains her executive powers.

Under the current constitution the president has the power to dissolve any government a year after its election. As long as the president has these powers it is questionable if the Ranil government can survive or move the peace process along a positive path.

President Chandrika will be able to use her power [to dissolve the government] in

seven months time. There is no chance of reaching a permanent deal to end the ethnic problem by then.

Therefore, if Ranil is to make his plans for peace a reality, it becomes necessary for him to strip the President of her powers. For that he has to enact a change in the constitution in the parliament. He needs the support two-thirds the MPs to carry in through.

Ranil's ruling party will have to bring around at least twenty MPs from President Chandrika's opposition People's Alliance. She is trying to pin down her own MPs and with her chauvinist rhetoric to invite the support of racist parties such as the JVP.

Therefore, the Prime Minister has a need to take a harsher line on the ethnic

question - in common with the chauvinists - to ease the President's grip on a number of her MPs and bring them around to his side. If his speech in Matara falls in this category then it is wise for the Tamil people to avoid making a big deal out of it and tolerating it.

However, the Tamils should not forget that the Prime Minister's assertion that "we will never accept parts of this country as traditional homelands" has been the reason for their homelands in the north and east being invaded by Sinhalese settlers and their land being seized.

If the Prime Minister's statement came from deep within his heart to endorse this planned act then he should not forget he will have to face the consequences.

The economic colonisations of the North

The Jaffna District NGO network questions the actual benefits to the region's residents of the redevelopment plans being touted by the government.

THERE is a saying that politics without economic freedom is politics without freedom. Eager investors and businesses are swarming into Jaffna under the pretext of developing the region. In fact, they are studying the ground conditions to exploit the situation. Some local business figures and senior government officials here are collaborating in this regard.

Colombo-based companies are trying to secure the market in Jaffna - with its half million population - that was shut to them for over ten years. People should carefully consider what the consequences of this development might be.

The earning potential of the people in Jaffna was affected severely by the Sri Lankan government's economic blockade that was in force from 1990 to 1995 (officially). Around half the population of Jaffna lived under the poverty line during that time. Those same people lived in an open-prison environment, with an effective yet unofficial economic blockade from 1996 until 2001. Seventy to eighty per cent of the community struggled to acquire even basic necessities.

Although some restric-

tions have been lifted in 2002, no real improvement has yet been seen in the major sectors of employment and development; namely agriculture, fisheries and cottage industries. Ninety thousand families rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, while another fourteen thousand rely on fishing. Therefore, most people are in great difficulties. They have very little buying power. But what steps have Sri Lankan government officials taken to redress this situation?

The private sector can be divided in two: commercial enterprises and cottage industries. The cottage industry can then be further divided into production and construction. All these sectors have suffered greatly from the war. The development of these sectors should be fostered with meaningful plans for rehabilitation and reconstruction along with compensation for the losses suffered during the war.

The theatres of war used to have special restrictions and practices. It is essential that these areas now be classified as 'war affected' and given special grants and incentives for development. Instead, the laughable notion

of making entrepreneurs and businesses from the south invest here is being suggested.

The primary objective of an investor would be to see how much profit can be made and how much money can be extracted to Colombo. A method is hence forged for the limited finances of the people here to be removed to the south. Any shareholders from the north would have little financial muscle and so will remain shareholders only in name. The control will remain in the south for all practical purposes. Every one of us should realise the damage such an arrangement could cause in the future.

How many have come forward to build new factories and create new employment opportunities in this area? What support is given for initiatives taken locally? Figures indicate that banks here gave the south Rs 100 million of people's savings over the past twelve years. Only a fraction of that was given back to the people in the form of loans.

The non-governmental sector may be divided into three: foreign companies, national companies (centred around Colombo) and local companies.

Whilst there was a shortage of resources from 1990 to 1995 as a result of the economic blockade, government and non-governmental organisations were involved

in relief and rehabilitation work during this time, coordinated by us. The government placed strict controls on our activities from 1996 to 2001. All the while controls on foreign companies were gradually eased. Though controls on local organisations were eventually also relaxed, government officials employed various duplicitous strategies to curtail their activities. The local organisations were hence pushed into financial difficulties and weakened.

In this difficult state, we faced up to the trials faced by our people, pressured the government and organised protests in many shapes and forms according to the needs at each instance. We challenged the illusions created by the government by highlighting major shortcomings in its relief and rehabilitation measures. We stopped the plan devised by government officials for a house-building scheme in Valigamam North that would have effectively given the region to the Sri Lanka armed forces.

Rehabilitation and reconstruction might take off on a major scale considering the ceasefire that is in force. Foreign money may be forthcoming. Having analysed this situation, some national companies have started taking a foothold here. What is the ulterior motive of those who never cared during the times when people here suf-

fered and never did anything so much as express some sympathy, suddenly announcing they are going to help the humanitarian effort?

Jaffna is the ultimate market for making money right now. They think they can extract gold here and remove it to Colombo through clever commercialism.

It is the local civil servants who in the past applied a gloss to the plans for the development of Jaffna drawn up by the government. Though the government has changed, its machinery has not. Neither has the mentality of the civil servants. Even now they are trying to keep local companies and institutions out of the development work under the pretext that they are 'less able'. And through that they are not only letting Colombo-based companies secure work here but also extending considerable support to them. But local institutions will also blossom if given proper funding. People have not forgotten the work done [by them] prior to 1995 [when Jaffna was controlled by the Tamil Tigers].

When the ongoing activities are collectively analysed, it is becoming clear that a planned economic colonisation is underway in the north. We'll end up duped in the rush for peace if we do not resist this. We plead with the Tamil public to be vigilant on this matter. (Translated from Tamil)