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Trivial Pursuit

Kumaratunga takes aim at the UNF - and peace

The increasingly acrimonious political scene in Colombo sometimes borders on the farcical: the furore that erupted last week over the contents of President Chandrika Kumaratunga's handbag is a case in point. The central point of contention - as reported in Sri Lanka's press - will no doubt be a source of acute embarrassment for Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as he prepares to meet US President George Bush this week.

But then the Premier has only himself to blame. As we and other voices have pointed out since the United National Front (UNF) came to power last December, Kumaratunga's personal political ambitions and her sweeping executive powers pose the most serious threat to the UNF government's stability - and thus to the chances of peacefully resolving the island's protracted ethnic conflict through dialogue with the Liberation Tigers.

When the UNF launched itself into the Norwegian peace process at the start of the year, Kumaratunga's histrionics quickly earned her the ire of the international community - so much so that at one stage, senior ministers insisted she was now reduced to 'a ceremonial' President. They couldn't have been more wrong. But then they couldn't have anticipated the Mr. Wickremesinghe getting cold feet whilst taking Kumaratunga on.

A few weeks ago, the UNF cabinet felt it had gathered sufficient evidence and parliamentary support to challenge the President with impeachment on the basis of corruption. Even the dithering Premier seemed to have decided to commit his hand. Yet when the President last Thursday called him to a private meeting and suggested reconciliation anew, Mr. Wickremesinghe gratefully leapt at the chance - no doubt horrifying a key section of the UNF and its supporters which has been spearheading the campaign to remove Kumaratunga.

But Wickremesinghe's gullibility was laid bare within hours of the two leaders' tête-à-tête: the President decided to make an issue out of Commerce Minister Ravi Karunana-

yake's accusation last Wednesday that she had brought a handbag fitted with a camera and microphones to record cabinet meetings. Whether the accusation is true or not is now irrelevant. It drove Kumaratunga to fury and blew Mr. Wickremesinghe's renewed hopes for cohabitation out of the water.

The President's vow to her party last month that she would soon restore her main opposition coalition to power no longer appears an idle boast. As the UNF is uncomfortably aware, Mr. Wickremesinghe has squandered several months in pursuit of amicable coexistence with Kumaratunga. As of December, the President will be able to dissolve Parliament and hold for fresh elections. Her assurances that she will not abuse her powers thus are laughable, given the tumultuous past 18 months.

But from a Tamil perspective, the Sword of Damocles hanging over the UNF will also sheer through the Norwegian peace initiative when it falls. Oslo's team is reportedly stepping up its activities behind the scenes. But whether events in Colombo will render its efforts futile remains to be seen.

The past few weeks have underlined two key points, however. Firstly, the UNF government, despite its sweeping popular mandate, remains hostage to Kumaratunga's whim - primarily on account of its own less than confident leadership. Secondly, with the acrimony at the heart of the Sinhala establishment readily erupting over absurdly trivial matters, substantial issues like the ethnic conflict and the peace process are unlikely to elicit in Colombo the mature and broadminded outlook they deserve.

Whilst direct talks between the LTTE and the government continue to be delayed by the Sri Lankan military's stubborn resistance to implementing its obligations under the permanent ceasefire accord, it remains to be seen whether the UNF will be able to remain engaged in the Norwegian initiative through to a stable peace - a point underscored by the caution over Sri Lanka being exercised by international lending bodies.

Delayed Action

Sudan's protagonists take a risk for peace

The announcement last week that the government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement are to sign a comprehensive peace deal next month will come as welcome relief to millions of people in the shattered country - and an pleasant surprise to external observers. An estimated two million people have died in Sudan's war - another of the world's bitter 'internal' conflicts. The breakthrough in negotiations last week results from the Sudan government's apparent new readiness to consider the non-Muslim people in the south as distinct community - and to allow the legal, political and ideological room for mutually acceptable solutions to emerge.

"We have agreed on a structure which resolves the basic question of state versus religion and self-determination (for the south)," the government's chief negotiator told reporters. In effect, Sudan is acknowledging it cannot impose the religion of the numerical majority on its minorities. It even acknowledges the possibility that its governance of the southern peoples may not be as benevolent as it likes to think. Whilst it is dangerously simplistic to draw parallels between wars in different parts of the world - something possible only by the exclu-

sion of crucial facts - it is clear that the issue of state versus religion - or the lack thereof - is an important aspect of Sri Lanka's protracted ethnic conflict also. Just as Sudan's Islamic government has been attempting to force sharia law down the throats of its Christian citizens, Sri Lanka's Sinhala establishment is determined to subjugate non-Buddhist (read non Sinhala) peoples on the island to its rule - something Colombo's liberal supporters choose to ignore.

Admittedly there is a deep distrust between the two sides in Sudan and past deals have been violated. However, with the government effectively prepared to allow the southern peoples' the right to choose if it can govern them, the prospects for peace seem brighter this time. The six intervening years before the issue of self-determination is taken up will enable the normalisation of life for millions of suffering peoples first. The peace deal enshrines bold steps, particularly given the brutality and scale of the conflict in Sudan. But the fact that this agreement has been reached should raise optimism elsewhere that protracted, bloody - even vicious - conflicts can be resolved through dialogue - provided there is a will for peace on both sides, of course.

Pioneer Squad

A cricket team's tour is a community success

The successful tour of Britain this month by a cricket team from Jaffna is as significant as it is novel. Undoubtedly, the trip is only possible because of the ongoing Norwegian peace process and permanent ceasefire in Sri Lanka. But the team's visit has been initiated and conducted by Tamil expatriates taking advantage of the prevailing conditions to assist fellow Tamils in the north and east. That sports teams from the north and east have hitherto not been able visit expatriate Tamil communities in the West is indicative of the dismal ethnic dynamics in Sri Lanka.

Despite the near-fanatical enthusiasm cricket invokes in Tamil youngsters, decades of state and private dis-

crimination and underfunding - along with conditions of war - have denied the best talent of the north and east professional success in the sport. The Jaffna team has given a good account of itself against British teams. Next weekend it is to make a guest appearance at one of the largest community cricket tournaments in Britain - where the tourists will undoubtedly recognise the flags and colours of many of the other teams - those representing past pupil associations of schools in the north and east.

The visiting team's presence should be a source of pride for Tamils everywhere - irrespective of the damage they may inflict on the dignity of expatriate teams this weekend.



Getting peace efforts back on track

The extent of the implementation of the ceasefire agreement in early August will dictate the pace of the Norwegian peace process, writes **DBS Jeyaraj** for *The Sunday Leader*.

The idea of July, unlike that of March bearing death to Julius Caesar proved somewhat auspicious to the beleaguered peace process in Sri Lanka. The long awaited direct meeting between Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen and Anton Balasingham took place amid pleasant circumstances on Monday, July 15, in London.

No significant breakthrough was achieved in the talks but most doubts concerning the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) perspective on the on-going peace process were clarified. It was made refreshingly clear to the facilitators that contrary to adverse reports in sections of the media, the Tigers were very much interested and involved in the pursuit for peace. The three hour meeting from 10.00 am to 1.00 p.m. was described as "constructive and cordial" by knowledgeable sources.

The Norwegian delegation was headed by Vidar Helgesen and consisted of Erik Solheim, the special adviser to the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and Lisa Gold, an executive officer attached to the ministry. The LTTE was represented by its political strategist and chief negotiator Anton Balasingham while his spouse Adele Anne functioned as usual, in a secretarial capacity.

The fact that the meeting took place, was by itself, positively significant in the backdrop of media speculation that Balasingham was avoiding meeting Helgesen in London and that the Tigers were having second thoughts about continuing to participate in the peace process.

Three channels utilised

Apparently the impression that Balasingham was playing truant was incorrect according to informed Tamil circles. Although two scheduled meetings between Helgesen and Balasingham did not materialise in London as scheduled, there was no deliberate reasons for the non-events, said these sources.

On the first occasion Balasingham had gone to Switzerland and was expected to return to London on a specific date. He was however held up in "Helvetia" because of a series of meetings with UN and other diplomatic officials. These were sudden and were not scheduled earlier. Due to a communication gap Helgesen had arrived in London as planned earlier. The misunderstanding was subsequently cleared. The Norwegians were fully aware of Balasingham's Swiss trip because they were instrumental in arranging it and devising the preliminary agenda.

The second occasion was when Helgesen met Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in London. The Norwegian had wanted to meet Balasingham also to follow up. But unfortunately, Balasingham was unavailable as he was severely indisposed due to a serious ailment caused by a urinary infection. The Tiger ideologue suffering from a number of health problems was not in a proper physical state for such a meeting. This was explained clearly to Oslo.

Moreover, it was Balasingham's delicate state of health that delayed the long awaited meeting with Helgesen said the sources. Informed Tamil sources also pointed out that despite the face to face meeting between Ba-

lasingham and Helgesen being delayed, interaction between the facilitators and the LTTE had continued and was continuing without any breakdown. Three channels are being utilised.

Suitable opportunity

Firstly, there is constant communication between the LTTE political secretariat in Kilinochchi and the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Colombo. Secondly, the Oslo led monitoring mission was interacting with Tiger representatives at centralised and peripheral levels. Thirdly, Balasingham in London was also frequently in touch with Norwegian officials in Oslo via telephone, facsimile, electronic-mail and special courier. The delay in meeting Helgesen, directly did not mean that all communication had ceased, pointed out the sources.

The July 15, confabulations provided a suitable opportunity for both parties to clear the air over doubts and misgivings. It has been openly acknowledged that Balasingham is the driving force behind the Tiger offensive for peace. As such the conclave enabled the Norwegians to obtain a first hand revelation of the LTTE mindset. The talks hinged around a number of issues pertaining to the Tiger viewpoint on the current politico-military situation in Sri Lanka and the LTTE's position on forthcoming talks in Thailand. The Tiger position was disclosed in detail by Anton Balasingham.

The primary issue clarified and amplified was the Tiger position on the ceasefire agreement or (CFA). The Sunday Leader reliably learns that Balasingham had categorically stated to Norway that while not being averse to talks in Thailand as early as possible, the LTTE was firmly of the view that substantial progress on ground had to be achieved in implementing the full provisions of the ceasefire agreement.

The CFA that came into force from February 23 this year, consists of several clauses relating to the easing of burdens on Tamil civilians, de-escalating hostilities and ushering in a climate of normalcy to the north-east. Balasingham noted that while some clauses have been implemented, substantial progress was needed on a number of others, particularly those concerning the withdrawal of the armed forces from places of worship, schools and public buildings. In addition, Balasingham charged that the armed forces were acquiring fresh lands and buildings to set up new camps and also declaring vast areas in the north-east as high security zones. Ironically enough, after the CFA came into force.

The CFA envisaged the de-escalation process to be conducted in a staggered manner. Certain provisions had to be implemented within 30, 60, 90, 120, 150 and 160 days of the CFA coming into force. It was however, regretted that the deadlines had been adhered to only in the breach on several obligations. It remained to be seen whether the government will expedite matters even at this late stage and ensure full implementation of CFA provisions.

The LTTE will therefore, bide its time and make a full assessment of the ground situation after August 2 - the

final deadline for armed forces to vacate public buildings in terms of the CFA. (February 23rd- 160 days)

Essential pre-requisite

The Tigers will decide thereafter, on the extent to which CFA provisions have been fulfilled and whether sufficient normalcy has been achieved on ground to progress on to the next phase of the peace process, namely the Thailand talks. If the LTTE is satisfied about the assessment, it would then indicate a definite date for the talks to commence in Thailand where upon the Colombo government will de-proscribe the Tigers at least 10 days before the scheduled date of talks.

On the other hand the LTTE made it known unambiguously and unequivocally that it would be constrained to defer the date of talks in Thailand, if it opines that the CFA has not been satisfactorily implemented and that a conducive climate for talks has not been created. It was agreed that Anton Balasingham would personally undertake a trip to the Norwegian capital of Oslo to convey a first hand to the Norwegians, the details of the LTTE assessment and also engage in follow up discussions regarding relevant and related issues with the facilitators. The trip was likely to be in mid-August.

Two points emphasised by Balasingham in explaining the LTTE stance on this matter was that the ushering in of normalcy in the Tamil areas was an essential prerequisite for further talks as far as the Tigers were concerned. The Tamil people had suffered immensely as a result of oppressive policies practised by successive governments under the pretext of waging war with the Tigers. The Tiger request to de-escalate the conflict and create a conducive atmosphere for talks were aimed at remedying the situation.

It was morally and practically impossible for the LTTE to enter into direct talks with Colombo before this oppressive apparatus was dismantled to a reasonable extent. Unless and until the suffocating Tamil people breathed the air of normalcy again, it would not be possible to enter into direct talks. The second point was that the imposition of various deadlines to be implemented by the armed forces had been incorporated in the CFA after discussions conducted directly through the good offices of Norway.

As such, both Colombo and Oslo were duty-bound to honour them. If there were bona fides - logistical difficulties, as opposed to mala fides - obstructionist tactics by sections of the armed forces in implementing the provisions, the LTTE was prepared to wait for a reasonable period. But the Tigers should not be pressurised into the preliminary round of talks before the provisions were implemented.

The LTTE was not insisting that all provisions should be implemented totally before Thailand talks commence. But it expected a reasonable amount of progress in achieving normalcy before that. At present, the performance was woefully inadequate said Balasingham.

Tentative date

When the Norwegians inquired whether the LTTE would provide a tentative date for Thailand talks to commence, the Tiger interlocutor replied that it was not possible at this stage as the CFA implementation progress had to be assessed first. Balasingham also requ-

ested the Norwegian facilitators to provide precise and accurate details of what the Ranil Wickremesinghe government proposed to discuss at the Thailand talks.

Refreshing Norwegian memories, he pointed out that while the agreement arrived at talks prior to the CFA coming into force, envisaged the preliminary round of talks to centre around the setting up of an interim administrative council for the north-east recent media reports quoting cabinet ministers, suggested that the government was having different ideas like discussing core issues and constitutional reforms. Certain observations made by Wickremesinghe also suggested that the government was now adopting the Kumaratunga - Kadigamar line on, would be negotiations. Citing past experience, Balasingham enlightened Helgesen that the "KK" approach was not helpful for promoting peace and had only resulted in aborting the peace process earlier.

The 'KK' approach

The LTTE had mooted a structured approach on a staggered basis for the peace process. Each stage was predicated on the other and required smooth implementation of each for the next one. The UNP had agreed to this and Norway had accepted it. In terms of this procedure, the preliminary round of talks had to focus on ways and means of setting up an interim administration under LTTE aegis for the north-east. There would be Muslim and Sinhala participation.

Now, the government influenced presumably by the "KK" like was contemplating "other" issues also. The situation was therefore, vague and the Tigers were puzzled about the intentions of Colombo at Thailand. Therefore, the LTTE would require clear details of the Thailand talks agenda before finalising dates said Balasingham. The LTTE also revealed its concerns about the current politico-military situation in Sri Lanka, while reiterating that the LTTE considered southern politics as an "internal matter of Sri Lanka".

Balasingham stated that the sharp and serious tensions between President Kumaratunga and the government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, were reaching a point of open confrontation that could plunge the country into deep crisis and chaos thereby, threatening its political stability. If and when such a situation occurs, the ongoing peace process could be affected immensely, it was said. Balasingham observed that the outcome of this political struggle could affect the future of the peace process and that it may be imprudent at this juncture perhaps to accelerate the pace of the peace process in that context.

Balasingham also lamented that sections of the armed forces were wilfully sabotaging the ceasefire and engaging in provocative tactics aimed at undermining the peace process. Misjudging the LTTE's past track record, sections of the armed forces instigated by powerful people were indulging in these moves to anger the Tigers and force them to break the ceasefire and opt out of the peace process. This was a false hope as the LTTE and its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran were firmly committed to the search for peace and were not going to be stampeded into hasty decisions.

Nevertheless, this constant harassment and provocation was imposing tremendous strains on the peace

process. A major contributory factor to this state of affairs was the cohabitational conflict between Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe, and also the influence exerted by the executive president over the armed forces, said the LTTE leader.

Minor irritants

The performance of the Norway led ceasefire monitoring mission was also discussed. Balasingham conveyed on behalf of Pirapaharan, wholesome praise and appreciation of the SLMM's role so far, despite minor irritants. It was agreed that the structure, scope and functions of the monitoring mission needed to be enhanced, to ensure the success of the ceasefire. Recent problems involving the SLMM and LTTE were also delved into and misunderstandings cleared up.

The controversial incident concerning the navy, the LTTE and the ceasefire monitors off the waters of Iraniatheevu was one such instance. After explaining the LTTE's position and failure on the part of Tiger cadres to communicate clearly to the monitors, Balasingham also conveyed to Norway the historical background of Tiger sensitivity in such types of incidents.

He drew attention to the October 1987 incident of the Sri Lanka Navy (SLN)'s seizure of the Tiger boat "Kadalpura" and unauthorised capture of senior leaders like Kumarappa and Pulendran. This, led to that ceasefire collapsing. The SLN was continuing in that fashion now also, charged Balasingham and detailed several such provocative acts by the navy. The LTTE however regretted the inconvenience caused to the SLMM. The LTTE statement expressing public apology over the incident on July 16, was a result of the previous days meeting, it is understood.

Another issue discussed was the logistics of transporting Balasingham, the chief negotiator and the LTTE negotiating team, to and from the northern mainland of the Wannu to Thailand, for talks. It was decided that more thought would be given to this problem when the date for Thailand talks loomed closer. Incidentally, the Thailand talks will neither be in Bangkok or Phuket but at a sea side resort, about 200 miles away from the "Siamese" capital.

Disappointment expressed

Balasingham also expressed disappointment at the "hostile and negative" approach adopted by certain opposition parties, organisations, sections of the Buddhist clergy and some media circles towards the peace process. There was much deliberate mud slinging at the LTTE and doubts were being sown in the minds of ordinary Sinhala people. The LTTE however would continue to participate in the peace process and co-operate with the government in all its endeavours, on a reciprocal basis, assured Balasingham.

Vidar Helgesen who is personally overseeing the facilitatory effort in Sri Lanka said that he was elated and encouraged by the LTTE's attitude and approach towards the peace process. Due note of the LTTE's position would be taken and its queries answered after consultations with Colombo, he said. A Norwegian team is likely to visit Colombo in August for further discussions in this regard with the Ranil Wickremesinghe government.