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Stable Platform

Sri Lanka's 18th amendment is vital for peace

As the start date for the first direct talks between the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan government nears, the related diplomatic activity is gathering pace. As Thailand prepares the venue, which - like the agenda for these preliminary discussions - has been mutually agreed upon, the negotiating teams for both sides are being assembled. There is growing confidence - both in the island and abroad - that the talks will be constructive and successful - last week France was the latest of several members of the international community involved in Sri Lanka to welcome the talks scheduled to start on September 16. So much so that some focus is already being given to logistic and other issues involved in the next phase of the Norwegian facilitated peace process.

In the meantime, the process of de-escalation is continuing, albeit with continued resistance from sections of the Sri Lankan military, particularly the Navy, whose personnel this week reimposed fishing restrictions in Jaffna, assaulted civilians and continue to refuse to withdraw from public places. Despite resistance by military units in other places also - often on direct orders by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the armed forces' Commander-in-Chief - there is nevertheless a justifiable sense that the ceasefire is being steadily entrenched. With the truce now being taken as a natural part of conditions in the north and east, efforts to normalise life are being stepped up. The meeting this week between political leaders of the Liberation Tigers and a delegation of senior Sri Lankan and Japanese bankers headed by Mr. Bernard Gunatillake, Secretary General of the Peace Secretariat, is a key step in this regard. The exchange of prisoners of war expected this weekend is another goodwill gesture that will help build confidence in the peace process.

But these causes for optimism should not detract from the immediate problems in Colombo where the stand-off between President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's cabinet is coming to

a head. Hectic horse trading last week has seen the United National Front (UNF) government consolidate MPs' support ahead of the tabling of the 18th amendment to Sri Lanka's constitution. Such is the certainty that the President will dismiss Wickremesinghe's government at the earliest opportunity, that fear of being forced into a punishing election is rife in the ranks of Kumaratunga's main opposition People's Alliance (PA). Furthermore, diplomatic pleasantries aside, it is clear that the international community is supportive of Mr. Wickremesinghe's government and opposed to President Kumaratunga's efforts to destabilise both the UNF administration and - by extension - the Norwegian peace process. It is also equally clear that the peoples of Sri Lanka now have high expectations of the Norwegian peace process and the rising optimism regarding Oslo's initiative is as much to do with the UNF administration's new determination to curb the President's powers as in the demonstrable readiness by both protagonists in the conflict to sincerely pursue the peace process.

As UNF ministers have repeatedly pointed out recently, the stability of the government is a prerequisite for its ability to negotiate an end to the conflict. President Kumaratunga's protestations this week of the need for 'southern political consensus' and 'checks and balances' for the success of the peace process are duplicitous: the UNF has struggled to implement the least contentious of its policies due to Kumaratunga's disruptive authority. Whether Sri Lanka's Parliamentarians abide by the explicit wishes of their electorate - which unequivocally rejected the PA's headline policies and endorsed the UNF's peace platform at three polls - remains to be seen. But the long term stability of the island - which is contingent on a lasting peace and rapid economic revival, both of which will foster ethnic harmony - is dependent on them collectively doing so. The island's peoples - and the international community - await the outcome of the 18th amendment with keen interest.

Eagle's Eye

Mr. Armitage's visit furthered peace

The visit to Jaffna last week by the United States Deputy Secretary of State, Mr. Richard Armitage, as part of a rapid five-nation tour of South and South East Asia, is the highest level US visit to the island since the 1950s and has understandably provoked considerable interest and speculation. Undoubtedly, the most significant impact of Mr. Armitage's visit has been to reinforce US endorsement of the Norwegian peace initiative in Sri Lanka. As such, whilst the Sinhala hawks have gleefully claimed the visit was directed as a caution at the Liberation Tigers, the Tamil perspective is quite different. The present international support for negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE is reflective of an emergent appreciation abroad that issues linked to ethnic rivalry have provided the antecedent to one of Asia's most protracted conflicts - and subsequently exacerbated and prolonged it.

Since the mid-nineties, the United States - predominantly - has been acutely involved in training, arming and otherwise assisting Sri Lanka's military, even through the high intensity conflict that the island's war became under President Chandrika Kumaratunga. In line with the 'war for peace' strategy pursued by President Kumaratunga, the international community accepted Sri Lanka's argument that the island's conflict was merely a form of terrorism based on fanaticism and that militarily marginalizing the LTTE was the only practical - even moral - way to end to the conflict. As such, from a Tamil perspective, Mr. Armitage's declaration last week that "enough is enough" reflects the international community's rejection of the 'war for peace' strategy and those who extolled it.

Furthermore, and much to the chagrin of critics of the Liberation Tigers, international backing for talks - by

extension - endorses the LTTE as the partner in peace with the Sri Lankan government. That the lifting next month of Sri Lanka's proscription of the LTTE also has implicit international support underlines prevailing foreign attitudes. Indeed, Mr. Armitage's visit - like the meeting between Sri Lankan Premier Ranil Wickremesinghe and US President George Bush a few weeks ago - has primarily bolstered the pro-peace United National Front (UNF) government in its ongoing standoff with hawkish President Kumaratunga.

Mr. Armitage's visit to the Jaffna peninsula, albeit a brief one, nevertheless provided him with an opportunity to hear opinions from the disparate elements of civil society and the spectrum of political views. Thus, there was an expectation that the US Deputy Secretary of State would have met organisations and prominent individuals who reflect public sentiments in Jaffna today. As such there has been criticism that Mr. Armitage did not meet the Liberation Tigers' political section in Jaffna, or organisations of standing in the community. Whilst the Tamil National Alliance parliamentarians would have presented the views of the Jaffna people, the recognition given to some marginalized individuals and organisations by their meetings with Mr. Armitage has drawn understandable criticism amongst local actors and press.

The international community's increased interest in resolving Sri Lanka's conflict has provided much needed transparency to events in the island and has undoubtedly strengthened those seeking a lasting and just peace through sincere negotiations. However, it is incumbent on those seeking to further the search for peace in the island to establish with accuracy the sentiments and aspirations of the peoples of Sri Lanka.

A step forward

Tamil mine clearers finally get foreign help

The provision by a British demining agency - with assistance of the Canadian International Development Agency - of protective gear to the Humanitarian Demining Unit (HDU) and the training provided by British and Norwegian NGOs are welcome and long awaited. De-mining has regrettably long been a politicised issue in Sri Lanka. The lack of the necessary mine detection equipment has resulted in

unnecessary heightening of danger to both mine clearers and the public.

Whilst the expansion plans put forward this week by HDU seem ambitious, they are by no means unreasonable and compared to the scale of the problem are extremely modest. And with rehabilitation a key part of addressing the existential problems of the Tamil people demining now has an increased urgency.



Why Norway seeks a safe route to Vanni

Establishing a convenient route for the LTTE's chief negotiator to consult with the movement's leadership in Vanni is a key requirement for the progress of the Norwegian peace initiative, writes **D B S Jeyaraj** in *The Sunday Leader*.

NORWEGIAN officials involved in facilitating the fledgling peace process in Sri Lanka are currently grappling with a problem that seems quite simple at a superficial level.

The issue at hand is the 'pokkuvarathup pirachinai' or transport problem faced by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Political Advisor and Chief Negotiator Anton Balasingham. The senior Tiger leader based in London along with his Australian wife Adele Anne has to reach the northern mainland of the Vanni to meet LTTE leader Velupillai Pirapaharan for consultations amid direct talks with the Sri Lankan government in Thailand. How this is going to be worked out is the problem.

Those not so familiar with the intricacies of the Sri Lankan peace process may feel that the transport problem faced by one man and his wife has no bearing on the larger issues involved. Besides, a question may arise as to whether a problem exists in the first place. Given the ultra-modern transport facilities available and the prevailing peaceful atmosphere, the comings and goings of the Balasinghams need not be a problem at all.

The reality however, is that Balasingham's presence and active involvement is crucially necessary for the ongoing peace process to progress smoothly. It is widely acknowledged nationally and internationally that he has been the driving force behind the peace process from the LTTE side. The Norwegians and the government know this and hence the extraordinary attention and concern being shown on this account.

Complications

Unfortunately for the peace effort, there are complicating factors such as health, security, proximity, the availability or non-availability of proper facilities and also questions of trust and political compulsions.

It is well known that Balasingham is a sick man. He left the Vanni amid much hardship in 1999 to obtain advanced medical treatment. It would be no exaggeration to say that had he not left the island and reached the west to get a kidney transplant, Balasingham would not be among the living now. His continuous stay in London has enabled him to get proper health care on an ongoing basis. Therefore, he needs to stay in London unless he can get proper medical care in Sri Lanka.

The LTTE controlled regions do not have the medical facilities available thanks to the war and systematic deprivation policies practised by successive Colombo governments. So, he cannot stay there for long. Staying in Colombo is not an option for the LTTE at this point of time. Without any settlement being reached, the Tigers do not want to use Colombo facilities for a high

profile leader. A paramount consideration is the security of the LTTE members. On the other hand, Balasingham also needs to meet and discuss matters with his leader Pirapaharan on a face-to-face level. He has also to brief him of each and every stage of the talks. So, Balasingham has to shuttle back and forth to the Vanni.

Seeking good offices

It was this problem that compelled Balasingham to seek Indian good offices for the talks. He wanted to reside in the Tamil Nadu capital Chennai for the duration of the talks. Chennai has the medical facilities required by Balasingham. The LTTE also wanted the talks to be held in a South Indian city like Chennai. Thiruvananthapuram or Bangalore to facilitate the logistics of transporting LTTE delegates from the Vanni. India has neither consented nor rejected these requests officially so far. Sections of the media, several political parties and more importantly the Tamil Nadu government headed by Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram vehemently opposed the LTTE request.

It was against this backdrop that Norway devised a novel way of travel for Balasingham to reach the Vanni in March this year. The Balasinghams arrived in the Maldives and after a respite, boarded a sea plane along with Norwegian diplomat Tomas Strangland. The plane piloted by two Canadian nationals made an unprecedented landing at the Iranaimadhu irrigation tank in Kilinochchi on March 25. After a month long stay, the Balasinghams returned to Britain the same way.

The fact that Balasingham is a key player in the peace search was demonstrated by his earlier stay in the Vanni. Several important meetings were held with the Norwegians and political groupings like the Tamil National Alliance, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, Ceylon Workers Congress and the Up Country Peoples Front. A notable feature was LTTE leader Pirapaharan's active participation in these. There was also the widely attended press conference by the LTTE leader who was meeting members of the fourth estate after 12 years. Balasingham presided and interpreted. He amplified and clarified many questions and answers. He even ventured to answer some questions directly claiming to "speak in one voice with Pirapaharan."

On another level, the process slowed down considerably when Balasingham's health got affected in Britain due to an urinary infection. Again, after his recovery, the process accelerated again culminating in dates for direct talks being fixed.

What has complicated the issue now is that the route via Maldives option has run into difficulties. The snags began in April itself. The sea plane that dropped

off the Balasinghams in Iranaimadhu flew over Thalaimannar initially. The return to Maldives too was planned the same way and the plane flew from Maldives for the pick up in that mode. The Canadian nationals who piloted the sea plane detected an extraordinary amount of activity by the Sri Lanka Navy off Thalaimannar. This created suspicion. So the pilots after consulting the Norwegian officials changed the return route. Instead of flying over the north-western coast to the sea, the plane went over the north-eastern coast.

This extra vigilance was necessitated not because of mistrust towards the Wickremesinghe government, but, because the Sri Lanka Navy under Daya Sandagiri was enjoying a great deal of 'independence' in taking certain types of action. The

statement clarifying the situation. True to form, none of those who accused Balasingham of diabolical design rectified the earlier accusations.

Complications

This incident cast a shadow on the Maldivian route being utilised again. Other developments complicated the matter further. The Maldivians had been worried earlier as they feared any untoward incident concerning Balasingham in their country could have a negative impact and consequences. Also, Maldivian officials were concerned that tourism could be affected if it was known that a representative of an organisation banned as 'terrorist' by western countries like Britain and US was given special treatment in the Maldives.

Maldivian concerns were further exacerbated by Indian political maverick, leader of the Janata Dal Party and former Law Minister, Dr. Subramanian Swamy. Citing the 1988 event of an abortive attempt by the Sri Lankan Tamil People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) to overthrow the Maldivian government through force, Swamy reminded President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom that it was the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi who sent troops instantly and 'saved' him. Swamy had queried from Gayoom as to how he could allow one of 'Rajiv's killers' to transit through the Maldives.

Apparently, a troubled Gayoom has replied Swamy explaining that he was not aware of who was coming till the last minute as the Norwegians had not given him full information. Referring to Rajiv Gandhi with gratitude, the Maldivian leader had assured Swamy that he would keep the latter's sentiments in mind when the opportunity arose again.

An additional factor negating the Maldivian alternative was the condition of the Iranaimadhu tank itself. Water had been used extensively for an extra crop of paddy cultivation. This along with the prevailing drought had resulted in water levels decreasing drastically in the tank. The deep waters of the greater canal sluice area where Balasingham had landed before is now shallow and muddy. Other choices like the Giants Tank, Vavunikkulam, or Nandhikkadal etc. were also ruled out because the water level has gone down. So even if the Maldivian route was available, the sea plane could not land or take off in any stretch of water in LTTE controlled territory.

Other options

Other options available at one point included passage through India. Although India had not responded formally to the LTTE request, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had indicated privately to Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) leader Vaiko that Balasingham could be given transit facilities through Bangalore. Even before this private communication became official, the situation changed drastically in India. On the one hand, Vajpayee was 'downsized' and the hard-

line Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani became Deputy Prime Minister and the 'real' power calling the shots in New Delhi.

On the other hand, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jeyaram cracked down and acknowledged LTTE sympathisers like Vaiko, Tamil National Movement Leader Nedumaran, Secretary Subha Veera Pandian and several MDMK functionaries. They are being charged under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) for allegedly supporting the LTTE.

There is of course the logical option of a straight avenue. Balasingham could fly directly to Katunayake and then be whisked off by helicopter to the Vanni. Again, the LTTE seems to be reluctant. Again, it is not the bona fides of Wickremesinghe that is in doubt but the 'whims and fancies' of the executive president and the various 'agencies' running amok in the defence establishment.

With the Athurugiriya arsenal incident fresh in the LTTE mind, it may not be willing to run unnecessary risks as long as Kumaratunga remains the supreme commander of the armed forces. Interestingly, there is a school of thought within the LTTE that suspects foul play in the death of SLMC leader M. H. M. Ashraff.

Constraints

There is also the anxiety that if Colombo becomes safe for Balasingham to travel through, then the LTTE delegation to Thailand too could be 'compelled' to do so. This, is unacceptable at this juncture for the LTTE. Also, if Colombo becomes increasingly 'safe', the talks too could be shifted there. This is not acceptable to the Tigers for political reasons right now. The LTTE sees the ethnic crisis as a 'national question' and not a minority grievance. So, it would like the talks to be held in a third country with third party facilitation. There is the possibility that as time progresses and a greater level of trust and rapport is reached, the Tigers may feel confident and amiable enough to attend talks in Colombo. Much progress is required on the peace process front before that stage.

For now, the Norwegians are wrestling with the problem. One suggestion being actively pursued is to get Balasingham to fly down to Singapore and then get on board a Norwegian ship and reach the Mullaitivu coast. If that works out, then the LTTE delegation too could be transported to Thailand the same way by sea.

If however, the Norwegians succeed in convincing Balasingham that utilising the Colombo route would not pose any risk personally or politically, one may very well see the Tiger ideologue landing at Katunayake. If however, the Norwegians do not find a suitable alternative mode of travel for Balasingham then he may simply go to Thailand this time without reaching the Vanni. That is only a reprieve because finding a way for Balasingham to travel to the Vanni is of utmost importance for the success of the peace process.