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Peace talks to resume soon, Tigers say

THE Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) this week sent a positive signal to the Sri Lankan government that the peace negotiations, stalled for the past few months, would resume soon once the Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's administration submits concrete proposals for an interim administration.

Mr Anton Balasingham, the LTTE's chief negotiator, conveyed this message to Mr Erik Solheim, Norwegian special envoy, who met him in London on Monday. The discussions, which lasted for three hours, were primarily centred on defusing the current impasses in the negotiating process. Ms Lisa Golden, Executive Officer of the Royal Norwegian Foreign Ministry, accompanied Mr Solheim to the meeting.

Mr Balasingham conveyed to the Norwegian facilitators that the LTTE was seriously committed to a negotiated political settlement, Tamil Guardian learns.

"Our leadership is awaiting the government's proposal for an interim administration. If a concrete set of proposals is presented the LTTE will study the framework and suggest amendments and improvements. Thereafter, the parties could enter into negotiations to formalise and finalise the envisaged interim administration," Mr Balasingham said.

"The LTTE cannot suggest any inputs at this stage. We expect the government to place something solid on the table so that we can work on it," Mr Balasingham further told the Norwegian envoys, commenting on calls by the government last week for the

movement to propose a way past the present impasse.

The discussions between the Norwegian officials and Mr. Balasingham were also focussed on a new, redefined agenda. Mr Balasingham also presented a critique of the proceedings and modalities of the past negotiating sessions and argued that the facilitators were inclined to work on an agenda to placate the international donor community thereby ignoring the urgent problems of the people.

'We expect Sri Lanka to place something solid on the table'

"Instead of pursuing guidelines, milestones and roadmaps, for an imaginary solution, the talks should address crucial issues related to the harsh existential realities of the ground situation," Mr Balasingham said.

He also criticised the extra-ordinary high profile given to each round of talks propping up international press conferences that generate expectations of substantial breakthroughs within a short period of time.

Mr Balasingham also told the Norwegian envoys that excess internationalisation of the peace process allowing the involvement of powerful extra-territorial forces might complicate the process and upset the balance of equal partnership.

"The recognition of the

parties in conflict as partners in making peace by concerned international governments is a crucial factor in promoting peace and ethnic reconciliation," he said.

The negotiations between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government have been stalemated since April this year following the LTTE's decision to temporarily suspend the talks complaining of bureaucratic hurdles in implementing decisions.

Following Monday's discussions Mr Solheim briefed the Sri Lanka Prime Minister Mr Ranil Wickremesinghe and chief negotiator, Prof. G. L. Pieris, who are in London on an official visit.

Mr Wickremesinghe last Thursday said his government was prepared to discuss an interim administration for the Northeast. "We plan to establish an interim council with the agreement of the LTTE that will safeguard the rights of all communities," he said.

Observing that this was not a new offer from the government, Mr Balasingham called on the government to come up with concrete proposals. "This statement of intent, as we have already stated, cannot be a basis for negotiations," he said.

Mr Wickremesinghe is expected to return to Sri Lanka on the weekend, was also accompanied by Sri Lanka's Attorney General K.C. Kamalababson, fuelling speculation the Premier would seek expert legal advice in London before formulating his government's proposals to the LTTE.

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Residents of the Jaffna peninsula walk by a shelled-out building housing Sri Lankan soldiers in Chavakachcheri. Military occupation and failure to begin resettlement and rehabilitation work is keeping up to a million Tamil refugees and internally displaced people from returning to their homes, despite eighteen months of ceasefire. Photo Reuters

Sri Lanka is safe for asylum seekers, says UK

Britain is to close the door on thousands of asylum seekers by adding seven countries, including Sri Lanka, to its "whitelist" of countries presumed to be safe, but the Refugee Council and Amnesty International criticised the decision. The Guardian newspaper reported.

The immigration minister, Beverley Hughes, said the countries involved were regarded as "generally safe". Asylum seekers from whitelisted states have their applications dealt with within 10 days at Oakington fast-track reception centre near Cambridge, and have no right of appeal while they remain in Britain.

The seven new whitelisted countries are Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Ukraine. Asylum applications from 24 countries are now presumed to be unfounded by the Home Office under the scheme, which was introduced in November.

When the whitelist was introduced in November, monthly asylum applications from the original 10 countries fell from 285 to 40.

Last year 4,980 asylum seekers came to Britain from the seven countries - the bulk of them, 3,180, from Sri Lanka. A total of 820 from the seven countries were given permission to remain in Britain. A further 170 from Sri Lanka were given permission to stay in the first three months of this year under appeal rights which are to be changed.

"This is part of our continuing drive to stop the widespread abuse of our asylum system," Ms Hughes said. "The countries that we are adding to the list are generally safe - individuals from

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Kumaratunga ordered attack on LTTE vessel Sino-Indian ties 'transformed'

SRI LANKA'S President Chandrika Kumaratunga said Saturday she had personally ordered the sinking of a merchant vessel belonging to the Liberation Tigers by the Sri Lanka Navy last week.

She also lashed out at the United National Front (UNF) government for undermining Sri Lanka's armed forces and allowing the LTTE to strengthen itself by engaging in peace talks with the movement.

"The government is helping the LTTE to smuggle weapons into the country under the cover of the ceasefire agreement," the hawkish President told the fourteenth national convention of her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the main constituent

of the opposition People's Alliance (PA).

She cannot allow this go on forever and that's why she ordered the Navy to intercept and destroy the LTTE merchant vessel, Kumaratunga, who is also Commander-in-Chief of Sri Lanka's armed forces, said.

"I ordered the Navy to destroy the LTTE ship that carried weapons last Saturday to safeguard the country and its people," she said.

Two weeks ago the SLN had intercepted and sunk one of the LTTE's merchant vessels whilst it was travelling in international waters, after ordering taking its crew into custody, the Tigers said.

The SLN however initially claimed it had been forced to fire on the LTTE

vessel in self defence, but later said the Tigers had scuttled the vessel. The Navy also denied taking LTTE cadres into custody.

The pro-peace UNF says it was kept in the dark about the SLN's operation until the LTTE vessel had been sunk. The Navy also did not alert the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) of the four hour confrontation till the attack was over.

Claiming that her service chiefs had provided her with "credible information that the LTTE is preparing for another war" Kumaratunga said the armed forces were not prepared for an assault by the LTTE.

Kumaratunga criticised Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's administration

for not replenishing the military's armoury since the ceasefire was signed with the LTTE last February.

She said that the island's armed forces had ammunition sufficient for 10 days if the LTTE launched a sudden attack.

"Half the fighting craft and fighter planes are unfit for use since the Government had not purchased the required spare parts during the past few months," she claimed.

It is not immediately known if the President's observation at the SLFP rally was a statement of military fact or her known resort to political rhetoric to convey a hard message to the masses, press reports said. Kumaratunga, who is bit-

terly opposed to Wickremesinghe's negotiations with the LTTE, has repeatedly warned she would use her considerable authority and dismiss the government if its actions, in her view, threaten national security.

"Action taken to solve the ethnic issue is acceptable to us but the Sri Lanka Freedom Party opposes the moves to betray the country by allowing every thing in the name of the peace" she said.

The President's latest attack comes as the PA and the Janatha Vimukthi Perumana (JVP), the third force in Sinhala politics, inch closer towards a political alliance to overthrow the UNF. Both advocate hard-line positions on the Tamil question.

INDIA'S relationship with China, long bedeviled by mutual suspicion and border disputes, has been transformed by a determination to cooperate and deal with problems, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said on Tuesday.

"I must say, with great satisfaction, that my meetings with the leadership of China have been excellent," Reuters quoted him as saying as the two countries prepared to issue a declaration expected to give a push to resolving territorial disputes.

"They have confirmed the desire to build stable, enduring and forward-looking ties of friendships shared by the highest political levels in both countries," he said after talks with ex-President Jiang Zemin, who commands China's vast military.

"Our present course of developing all-round bilateral cooperation while simultaneously addressing our differences has transformed the quality of our relationship," Vajpayee said.

The two countries signed the declaration Monday. They refused to make it public immediately, but officials from both sides said they expected it to help them work to resolve disputes over their border, which crosses some of the world's most mountainous and remote terrain.

Nuclear-armed China and India fought a brief border war in 1962 and despite a thaw in relations, and years of talks, have failed to pin down exactly where their 3,500 km (2,175 mile) border lies.

Vajpayee, making the first trip to China by an Indian

prime minister in a decade, declared the era of mutual suspicion dead Monday.

During his busy six-day visit, he is also due to meet President Hu Jintao, who took over in March, and Vice President Zeng Qingho-ng.

The two neighbors, whose combined populations comprise a third of humanity, signed a series of agreements Monday laying out their vision of a new, closer relationship. The official China Daily said ties with India had entered a new phase after New Delhi explicitly recognized Tibet as part of China in the declaration.

China has long resented India's decision to give shelter to the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader, following a 1959 revolt against Chinese rule.

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