

TAMIL GUARDIAN

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All Change

A new agenda: a focus on old problems

The stalled Norwegian-brokered peace process in Sri Lanka received an unexpected fillip this week when the Liberation Tigers declared that they expected negotiations with the government to resume shortly, pending Colombo's proposals for an interim administration for the Northeast. Amid concerns heightened recently by renewed, albeit sporadic, violence (the most serious incident being the Sri Lanka Navy's sinking of an LTTE merchant vessel in international waters) the Tigers' announcement this week would be welcomed by those concerned with peace in the island. But it is most certainly not business as usual, as far as the future talks are concerned.

Firstly, the resumption of negotiations is predicated on Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government drawing up concrete proposals for the interim administration that he has repeatedly told international forums he intends to set up with the LTTE. Indeed, the main stumbling block to Sri Lanka's peace process of late has been Colombo's reluctance to put forward a tangible framework for an interim administration which would endow the Tamils with sufficient powers to alleviate the considerable hardships they face. Reaching final agreement on a politico-administrative structure will not be easy. But with up to a million people unable to return to their homes the need to begin discussions on the matter is all the more urgent. The government's hesitancy in stating its opening position in black and white is understandable: President Chandrika Kumaratunga's threat to sack the United National Front government, should she deem its efforts to resolve the ethnic conflict too generous, cannot be taken lightly. But making peace - the UNF's central mandate - requires moral and political courage.

Also this week, the LTTE clarified what it means by the 'radical overhaul of the entire peace process' that it has been calling for in the past few weeks. The LTTE wants a rethink on both the modalities and the agenda of the negotiations. Both are based on the experience of the six rounds of talks held since September. In discussions with the Norwegian facilitators this week, the LTTE's Chief Negotiator, Mr. Anton Balasingham, questioned the wisdom of the extraordinarily high profile given to the talks thus far. Whilst the publicity surrounding the inauguration last September of the first direct talks between the protagonists in seven years was understandable, as any student of negotiation could have predicted, unwarranted publicity has restricted both parties' manoeuvrability and made reaching agreements harder. More damagingly, as Mr. Balasingham pointed out this week, the publicity has unreasonably "generated expectations of substantial breakthroughs within a short period of time." Failure to deal quickly, a routine occurrence in lengthy, multi-stage negotiations,

People Power

Pongu Tamils reflects popular sentiments

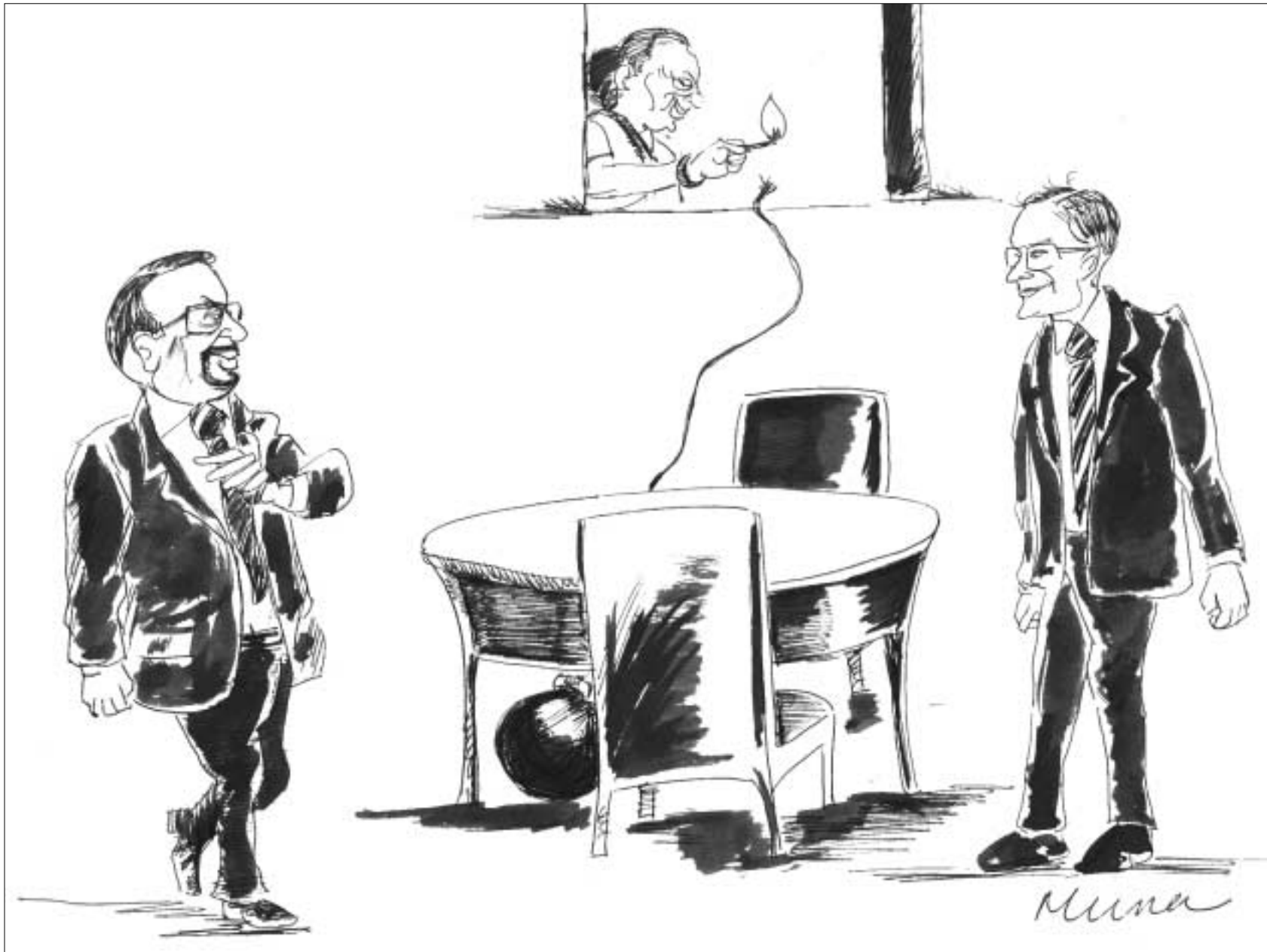
The Pongu Tamils protest rally scheduled to be held in Jaffna this week is a continuation of a civil society phenomenon that began in the northern peninsula in 2001 under the guns of the Sri Lankan military. It subsequently came to represent the collective outrage of the Tamil people as it spread across the North and East. The initial call, incredulously now, was merely for the then Sri Lankan government to reciprocate the Liberation Tigers' unilateral cease-fire and for negotiations. Subsequently, the protests have demonstrated the latent support the LTTE enjoys from the Tamil community - prompting some shrewd repositioning by Sri Lanka's main Tamil parties - as well as highlighting the existential problems they face in the former war zones. Interestingly, from the outset, the Pongu Tamils rallies were downplayed, even ignored, by the

has resulted in unduly negative press coverage. It might be obvious, yet when the even anticipated obstacles are struck by the negotiators, the donor and investment community suffer an attack of jitters, whilst the peace process' many critics find fresh impetus. A shift away from high profile conferences - held invariably with media circus in tow - to a more discrete environment may be just what the peace process requires.

The LTTE has also criticized the 'excess internationalisation' of the peace process. In short, the agenda of the past six rounds have had less to do with the problems faced by Sri Lanka's residents than the geopolitical interests of extra-territorial powers. The issue of the internally displaced is a case in point. Whilst the Tamils and the Tigers have been seeking an agenda focussing on resettlement and rehabilitation, the disarming of the LTTE and curtailing of Tamil political aspirations have instead been given precedence. Indeed, it is the undisguised bias towards Sri Lanka's position exhibited by leading members of the international community that has raised grave doubts amongst the Tamils about the effective neutrality of the Norwegian-brokered peace process. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Balasingham insisted this week that discussions in the immediate future should be focused upon the 'existential realities of the ground situation' - the expansion of the agenda to other matters whilst up to a million Tamils continue to remain homeless deemed, quite rightly, unacceptable.

The surprise that greeted the Tigers criticism of the past six rounds of talks as 'a waste of time' is, in some ways, predictable. After all, the Sri Lankan government has secured \$4.5 billion of aid whilst its war-ravaged economy continues to rise from the depths of the recession it was in two years ago. The Sinhala people have seen rapid normalization of the south. The international community has seen stability return to the region and credible signs of a permanent end to the conflict. Even Oslo, the facilitator, can claim success in one of South Asia's most intractable conflicts. But what peace dividend have the Tamil people received? Apart from an end to deaths, injuries and trauma resulting from war - a benefit accruing more from the cease-fire agreement than the negotiations themselves - precious little, in actual fact. Meanwhile, as the representatives of Tamil people, the Tigers are under pressure to deliver.

So the stage is set once again. Persistent Norwegian shuttle diplomacy has opened up new common ground and the LTTE is prepared to negotiate. But it remains to be seen if the Sri Lankan government will deliver the requisite opening proposals. We fear the optimism generated by the LTTE's positive signal this week must be tempered in the light of recent history: Mr. Wickremesinghe does not have a reputation for bold and decisive action.



Whither moral values and principles?

Sri Lanka's Premier is unwilling or unable to tackle the rampant corruption in his government that has spread to his inner circle, protests *The Sunday Leader* in its latest editorial

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"Cannon to right of them, cannon to left of them, cannon in front of them, volleyed and thundered..."

Lord Alfred Tennyson's Charge of the Light Brigade must ring in Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's ears (assuming, that is, that they read Tennyson at Royal College) as he surveys the political landscape that is unfolding before him. As Wickremesinghe is fast beginning to discover, it ain't all roses being Prime Minister.

To Wickremesinghe's right are the members of his own party, for the most part as corrupt and unscrupulous a bunch of scoundrels as can be found. Except for a handful of Honest Johns, most of them are up to one or more rackets to enrich themselves at the expense of the citizenry at large. There is a four-letter word that has come to personify Wickremesinghe's government, barely 18 months in office: deal.

Hand in glove with businessmen of all complexions, the UNF has settled in to rake it in, and big time too. Week after week we have exposed ministers caught red handed, up to all manner of mischief. Wickremesinghe does not even look into these, let alone at least reprimand the culprits. In voting in the UNF, the nation has fallen among thieves.

We do not for a moment claim that the Kumaratunga administration of 1994-2001 was any better; after all, we went on record by labelling that regime the most corrupt in our nation's history. But the UNF, with its squeaky clean leader, was supposed to change all that.

The nation hoped that seven years of naked and continuous abuse would have been sufficient for the greens to see the light. They have not, and it is there for all to see. Ministers raking it in hand over fist, not a cop in sight, and the Bribery Commission crippled, to everyone's delight.

The problem is: ministers can't make money unless they have willing accomplices among the top rungs of the public service. And given the power and patronage ministers wield, the public service has little choice other than to aid them in their quest for spoils, picking up the crumbs as they go along.

The result has been that the public service has lost all respect for the government. A ready symptom of the disease that among themselves, public servants often refer to the Prime Minister as "Ranil," while referring to the President as "H.E." Such is the contempt into which the government has come, just a year and a half into its term.

Be that as it may, Wickremesinghe appears neither able nor willing to do anything about the hooligans running amok in his party. Apart from making fast bucks by the million, UNF politicians have hardly been an example to the public. The recent pistol shooting by a UNF MP at a wedding, for example, was dismissed even without a disciplinary inquiry.

Then again, ministers threatening and interfering with the police have only been smiled upon. There are even credible stories of one senior minister being a cocaine addict.

The moral code at the UNP's party headquarters, Sirikotha, appears to be not a lot better than that in Welikada Prison. And there is evidence that the rot has spread right into the hitherto squeaky clean inner circle of the Prime Minister himself.

Public repugnance of these excesses will likely be the downfall of the UNF, a reality of which the Prime Minister has taken cognizance of only by burying his head deep in the sand. It is not uncommon to see at cocktail parties these days heated arguments as to which ministers are not corrupt, with protagonists counting them off on their fingers one by one, and seldom having to shift to the other hand.

As if that were not bad enough, the opposition too, has hardly been the blessing it might have been. While last week's coffin fiasco was seen by many as being as good a piece of theatrics as could be found under the circumstances, this does bring seriously into question the

comfort the LTTE is likely to draw from the Sinhala notion of democracy. Is this the democracy we sacrificed 60,000 lives to protect?

While amateur theatrics might be all very good, it has to be said that the opposition is hardly earning its keep (remember that it too lives off the taxpayer). Given the rampant corruption that bedevils the UNF, it is sad that the opposition has chosen to dwell purely on the government's peace agenda. This is the least controversial portion of the government's strategy.

What the opposition could do to their enduring benefit is to expose the government's manifold misdeeds and scams. The people need to know these, and it is time someone started bringing the petty thieves in the UNF to book.

Mahinda Rajapakse would also do well to appoint a shadow cabinet, so as to turn the heat up even more on the government. The shadow cabinet could dog each minister remorselessly, making sure he or she does not step out of line. This is also a good way to get his MPs to think about the issues that face the various sectors in Sri Lanka and assess just how well or badly the government is performing.

Sri Lanka is at a watershed. Both prosperity and peace are within our grasp, and this is in large measure due to Wickremesinghe's foresight and cunning. But more and more people are worrying that the Prime Minister is losing his wits. He ushered in the peace

process by means of extensive backstage negotiations with the LTTE.

It is worrying that the negotiating process has now moved not just to the front of the stage but into the public arena. It is inconceivable that the Tigers will negotiate sincerely in the glare of international publicity. Sadly, it is their frustration with Wickremesinghe's slowness to act that is jeopardising the peace process. In opposition, they saw him not just as a dove but also as a man of courage and daring. Now, says, Wickremesinghe shows no symptoms of either, shackled no doubt due to fear of what the President might do if he acts true to his convictions and deliver on the promises made; an interim administration for the north east, just to name one.

China and India: high stakes for US

Where does the United States fit in a changing landscape of Sino-Indian relations asks **Robert Radtke** in the *International Herald Tribune*.

THE visit of the Indian prime minister to China this week is the first in almost a decade, and the high mark of a trend toward deepening Chinese-Indian relations, which has been largely overlooked by policymakers and pundits. As the rapprochement unfolds, the United States should be watching carefully.

China and India have a lot to discuss - regional security, border issues, economic ties, the war on terrorism and the future of Asia - and the stakes of each of these areas for U.S. national interest is enormous. How China and India resolve them will have profound effects on Asia's strategic landscape and America's place in it.

When India conducted its nuclear tests in 1998 it identified China, not Pakistan, as the biggest threat to its security. India noted with alarm China's undisputed economic power and its growing strategic influence throughout Asia. China's continued support of Pakistan heightened the perception in New Delhi of a potential security threat from China. This dynamic continues to drive Sino-

Indian relations five years on.

One of the agreements likely to be signed during Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit regards the long-standing India-China border dispute. The Chinese have signaled that they want to find a "fair and reasonable" solution to a problem they see as being left over from the history of colonialism in the region. Fingering colonialism gives China and India political cover to craft a pragmatic solution and remove a major stumbling block to deep engagement.

This could provide a historic opening for trade. China has long regarded India as a large potential market for Chinese goods, and also has a deep interest and respect for India's high-tech prowess. But Indians see China as predatory in trade, and look with worry at China's robust growth rates, fearing getting left behind. Currently the two economies are more competitive than cooperative, but that could change as reforms in China take hold.

Industries, India's premier business group, in Shanghai. This is a signal that India intends to engage China and that the Indian business community sees China as an opportunity. Sino-Indian trade volume is up 70 percent in the period January to April 2003. India is poised to become a major player in China's economic development: American firms take note.

India and China also have a common security agenda regarding the war on terrorism. India has long been vexed by cross-border terrorism in Kashmir, and China has its own problems in its western regions with nascent Islamic extremist groups. Both India and China have signed on to the broader goals of the U.S.-led war on terrorism, particularly as it affects their domestically. They both have complicated and long relationships with Pakistan, the nest in which a large number of terrorists hatch.

The United States should watch to see if China begins to distance itself from Pakistan, since it has a lot more to gain now from a relationship with India than it does with Pakistan.

Where does the United States fit in this changing landscape of Sino-Indian

relations and Asia's future? Neither India nor China wants an Asia dominated by the United States. Both see themselves as great powers fallen on bad times centuries ago, but well on their way back to reclaiming their rightful places as preeminent nations. If they settle their differences and deepen cooperation and engagement they can perhaps establish a multipolar world in which U.S. power in Asia is moderated - a stated goal of both countries.

Since Richard Nixon's visit to China, a triangular relationship among the United States, Japan and China has played an important role in the maintenance

of peace and stability in Asia. Perhaps the Vajpayee visit to Beijing foreshadows a new kind of triangular stability with China, the United States and India at the three corners.

Given U.S. economic and military might today, this is a long-term project, but China and India think in terms of generations, not quarterly results. The United States needs to pay attention and adjust to emerging shifts in Asian alliances, lest it play hare to the Sino-Indian tortoise.

The writer is a vice-president of the Asia Society. These are his personal views.

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