

NEWS

Tigers firm on EU monitors leaving

SRI LANKA'S Tamil Tigers are being unreasonable in demanding the exit of truce monitors from European Union nations which have banned them, and the observers will have to pull out unless their safety is guaranteed, a top Swedish envoy said last.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have given monitors from Nordic nations in the EU - Sweden, Denmark and Finland - until September 1 to leave Sri Lanka in light of a new EU ban against them, which analysts warn would leave a dangerous vacuum as growing violence kindles fears of renewed civil war.

The Tigers insist 37 monitors from the three countries must leave, which would leave just 20 from Norway and Iceland - not enough to properly oversee a 2002 truce.

But it is not clear why Norway and Iceland cannot increase their contribution to the SLMM.

Even before the EU ban the Tigers had warned they would not be able to guarantee the safety of monitors who travel aboard navy ships, but it is not yet clear what will happen if the unarmed Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) ignores their demand.

"If they can't guarantee their safety, it means they cannot accept us, and then it's not only the safety it is also the working conditions for the Swedish, Finnish and Danish members," visiting Swedish Ambassador-at-Large Anders Oljelund told Reuters in an interview late on Friday.

"Then we will have to pull out," he added. "If LTTE sticks to their decision to exclude three northern countries for these reasons from the mission, I think the work of the mission will be hampered and I think also the credibility of the mission will be reduced."

The Tigers rejected Oljelund's plea on Friday to reconsider their decision.

Tiger political wing leader S.P.



Swedish Ambassador-at-Large Anders Oljelund (l) met with LTTE Political Wing head, S. P. Tamilselvan to discuss monitors' role.

Tamilselvan told Reuters this month the LTTE would only review their position once the EU removes them from their list of terrorist organizations.

"I can understand the reaction of the Tigers. They perceive this (EU) decision as a ban of their whole organization. They don't see that there is any balance," Oljelund said on his return from a visit to the Tigers' northern stronghold of Kilinochchi.

"But I think it is unreasonable still, because also the Tigers must little by little be able to look upon themselves (and see) this is a wider peace process in which the international community ... must be taken into consideration."

"I think there is a possibility that they will change their mind ...

(but) LTTE told us that their decision taken already is not going to be changed," Oljelund said.

The monitors themselves say opinions range from withdrawing the mission to ignoring the LTTE demand and continuing work as normal - a dangerous option after close shaves during attacks.

"The situation has changed after September 11, the situation has changed after the Cold War, and if you can't act politically and adapt yourself to new circumstances, (the Tigers') credibility ... will be affected," Oljelund said.

Many people fear escalating attacks and clashes between the military and the Tigers that have killed more than 700 people so far this year - more than half of them civilians - could reignite the war.

Indian PM wants Tamil grievances addressed

INDIAN Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has expressed serious concern at the lack of progress on the peace front in Colombo and called for the legitimate grievances of the Tamil people to be addressed urgently, the Sunday Leader reported this week. Meanwhile a Sri Lankan delegation has rushed to China on security-related matters, the paper added.

The Indian Prime Minister who met with the leader of Sri Lanka's main opposition United National Party (UNP), Ranil Wickremesinghe, in Delhi last Thursday had also said war was not an option to solve the ethnic conflict.

A UNP delegation led by Wickremesinghe flew to Delhi last week to discuss its withdrawal from a bi-partisan arrangement between the UNP and the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) thrashed out by a senior Indian envoy earlier this month.

When he met the UNP delegation, the Indian Premier was accompanied by National Security Advisor, N. K. Narayanan, External Affairs Secretary Shyam Saran, High Commissioner Nirupama Rao and head of the Sri Lanka desk in Delhi, Mohan Kumar.

Wickremesinghe was accompanied for the meeting by MPs John Amaratunge, Milinda Moragoda and Dr. Valsan.

The Sunday Leader learnt the Indian Premier had also stressed the importance of the UNP and SLFP working together to achieve a solution based on devolution of power to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Tamil people.

Wickremesinghe, it is learnt had informed the Indian Premier his party's proposals were already on the table and he stands ready to discuss them with President Rajapakse at a bi-lateral level.

The UNP Leader said his party did not see any purpose in participating at the Representative Com-

mittee tasked with formulating a set of proposals since there was no consensus possible and in the absence of a clear government policy.

However, he said the UNP stands ready to have bi-lateral talks with the SLFP both at leadership and party levels to work on a viable solution and discuss the party's proposals.

Meanwhile, as the UNP opposition went to Delhi, a government delegation rushed to China, the Sunday Leader reported adding, the latter "was almost a knee jerk reaction" to the former.

"A secret visit by the President's Co-ordinating Secretary Sajin Vass Gunawardene to China last week in the company of some service personnel becomes significant, details of which of course cannot be divulged due to security considerations," the paper said.

"Suffice it to say, five tickets were booked on a Singapore Airlines flight hurriedly in the morning to fly out the same evening [of the UNP's visit to India]."

"That move alone underscores the approach of the government to the issues confronting the country," the pro-UNP Sunday Leader's political column added.

Controversial UNP frontliner Milinda Moragoda this resigned from the party's Political Affairs Committee, saying: "unfortunately, the composition of the Committee and attempts by some of its members to broaden its functions, has led the committee to become dysfunctional, and detrimental to the party's interests. The Committee has become the means by which the public is made aware of divisions and discontentment within the party, exacerbating problems, and leading many including myself, to question its usefulness." (Daily Mirror)

Numbers conceal ceasefire truths - Sampanthan

VIOLENCE in the Northeast should not be measured in numerical terms as it distorts the picture of what is happening there, the Parliamentary group leader of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) R. Sampanthan, told the Sunday Leader newspaper.

Asked to comment on India's role, the TNA leader pointed out that India has grievances against both sides in the Sri Lanka conflict, but may still be willing to help resolve the Tamil question peacefully.

Responding to the reporter's suggestion the Liberation Tigers are responsible for the weakening of the February 2002 ceasefire agreement, the TNA leader said "Violence should not be discussed

in numerical terms as it distorts the picture."

"Yet if this is the argument, then every civilian who has not been resettled would add to the CFA violations by the government and the numbers would far exceed those of the LTTE."

"One could say the CFA is no longer there given the present situation. Of course, we want it resuscitated. It has broken down and there is low intensity war today.

"The unfortunate thing about security for the northeast Tamils is that armed forces are hostile to the people. There is little exception, but most look at civilians also as if they are enemies.

"The composition of the armed forces is such that they are 99%

Sinhalese. There are an increased number of checkpoints, army camps and road barricades. The forces are more severe with ordinary Tamil civilians who are on combat training. This is why they are fleeing the country at great risk."

"The present composition of the forces needs to be changed to restore confidence amongst the Tamils that they are safe in their hands. Also, no credible investigations are held in connection with the human rights violations which show that the law enforcement mechanism is also not supportive. Those who feel unsafe have commenced fleeing."

Asked to comment on recent comments by LTTE Chief

Negotiator and Political Strategist Anton Balasingham, saying India should forget the past and take a greater diplomatic and political role in addressing Tamil grievances in Sri Lanka, Mr. Sampanthan said:

"The LTTE reached out to India much earlier when they suggested our neighbour at the talk's venue. Next, the LTTE suggested India as an observer at the talks which clearly indicated the recognition of India's role in settling the conflict."

Asked to comment on India's cautious approach to Sri Lanka, Mr. Sampanthan said: "India has all the reason to be an aggrieved party, and that too for more than one reason."

"Gandhi's assassination was absolutely tragic; The IPKF arrived in Sri Lanka at the invitation of the government. [But] the state [also] provided arms and vehicles to the LTTE to fight the IPKF."

"A sailor at the ceremonial parade here [in Colombo] assaulted Premier Gandhi, during his visit to sign the Indo Lanka Peace Accord. He was given a jail term by a Sri Lankan president and pardoned also by a president."

"Despite all the blunders committed by Sri Lanka, India may still be willing to lend a hand. India has tremendous love for Sri Lanka and we could benefit from her genuine affection in our decisive moment."