

EDITORIAL & OPINION

TAMIL GUARDIAN

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WEDNESDAY JULY 26, 2006 No. 328

Inopportune Moment

A Japanese ban will have the same effect as the others

As the simmering 'low-intensity' conflict in Sri Lanka's Northeast escalated this week, southern press reports indicated political developments with far reaching consequences for the island's peace process are underway. President Mahinda Rajapakse is in serious negotiations with the ultra-nationalist JVP about the latter's entry into his ruling coalition. Loathed by many of Sri Lanka's political commentators, the Marxist party is always being described as on the wane. But despite the repeated confident assertions by its detractors, it has demonstrated its political potency and resilience time and again. The JVP says it is in serious discussions with the President about a common program on the peace process and there is much speculation as to the nature of the deal.

But it is not mere ministerial perks the JVP wants. As always, it is after a firm grip on the genuine levers of power. It may get it. President Rajapakse is ideologically closer - and more reliant - on the JVP than his own divided SLFP. Despite the manifest developments of the past eight months, the international community still remains supremely confident that the exigencies of governance will eventually bring Rajapakse round to their view - the only 'reasonable' one in town. But they underestimate the ideological resonance of Rajapakse's Presidential election manifesto - 'Mahinda Chintanaya' - with the man, his allies and, above all, the voters who swept him past Ranil Wickremesinghe to power. Amidst the furore about the LTTE boycott, few noticed how the UNP leader was left fumbling with a lion flag in the dust behind the JVP-JHU vehicle. The Sinhalese overwhelmingly wanted Rajapakse.

If the JVP does join the ruling coalition and, as is then likely, exerts influence over Rajapakse and the government, then the fragile skeleton of the Norwegian peace process will crumble rapidly. The JVP has already demanded the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) be thrown out. Incredibly, it also wants Rajapakse to disarm the Tigers before holding peace talks. It knows very well that its demands mean war, yet it is boldly making them. Last week JVP Propaganda Secretary toured the Jaffna frontline (by Air Force helicopter - and the party is not in government yet) and addressed the Sinhala troops. He is unlikely to have been extolling the benefits of peace.

And it is amid all this that Japan's

Special Envoy to Sri Lanka, Yasushi Akashi, chose to make a thinly disguised threat to proscribe the Liberation Tigers. Mr. Akashi told reporters he wished to meet LTTE Vellupillai Pirapaharan to tell him that Japan is "on the verge of an important decision." Japan, he pointedly said, is "seriously considering tangible measures as some other governments have taken." It is manifestly clear that Japan intends to proscribe the LTTE. In an extensive interview to IANS, Mr. Akashi complained that the LTTE was responsible for "more violations of the ceasefire than the government side." As TNA Parliamentary group leader R. Sampanthan pointed out only this week, violations cannot be measured by a numerical count. Every civilian who has not been resettled under the terms of the CFA ought to be added to the violations by the government, for example. But Mr. Akashi is an intelligent man and his rationale is justification, not explanation, of Japan's policy decisions.

The argument that international proscriptions of the LTTE will tame the Tiger and encourage the government to talks is being proven fallacious before our very eyes. It was with the same confidence that the EU banned the LTTE in May. But matters have not improved. In fact, they have become much worse, and more quickly than even those who have made themselves hoarse shouting warnings and protests could have thought. The Sinhala right is on the ascendancy. Rajapakse's regime is laying the foundations for a protracted war against the Tigers, purchasing weapons and conducting a pernicious psychological campaign amongst the southern population. Those elements from which the liberal peace was to be stitched together are withering before the Sinhala right's onslaught.

Mr. Akashi's veiled threat this week will therefore only make both protagonists focus on their preparations with more determination. Sri Lanka knows that Japan is a reliable friend, irrespective of the atrocities Colombo inflicts on the Tamils. So do the Tamils. The Tamils are also well aware of the how much each international actor has (and hasn't) contributed to the alleviation of our people's suffering over the past few years. But international name-calling is not our concern now. Rather, it is the impending war that Japan, like the EU and Canada before it, has contributed to by encouraging, emboldening and supporting the Sinhala regime.

We have come full circle

The international community has put - again - the Sinhala establishment in charge of the Tamils' future.

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IN a number of policy statements by prominent representatives of the international community, there has been a belated but welcome call upon the Sri Lankan government to address the legitimate grievances of the Tamils. The immediate redress that is deemed necessary by Sri Lanka's various foreign supporters is the delivery of peace proposals which might satisfy their aspirations.

The wording of many of these statements suggests that President Mahinda Rajapakse has escaped the Tamils' characterisation of him as a Sinhala chauvinist. For his part, he has enthusiastically assured the international community that he intends to do just what they want. He assured even the sceptical Indian government that his committee, which includes minorities, even if led by a Sinhala hardliner, would produce a proposal which, without using the word 'federalism' would be just that.

Doubtful logic

My doubts are not on whether Colombo will or not - though almost everyone is convinced it will not. Rather, I question the very logic of seeking proposals for a 'final solution' at this stage.

An unwelcome and fairly alarming aspect of recent foreign statements has been the increasing omission of earlier calls on the government to disarm the Army-backed paramilitaries. Whilst possibly an oversight or even a given, the disappearance of such demands from the policy statements of powerful international actors would suggest this is a rather a deliberate and concerted shift.

The silence comes, moreover, in the aftermath of a spate of abductions of children by the paramilitaries and a notable escalation of violence by them. Lest it be forgotten, the Sri Lankan state had pledged to disarm at the last round of negotiations, widely termed as Geneva I, to disarm them.

The emphasis on seeking a lasting solution to the conflict with no consideration for relieving the unbearable ground conditions of the Tamils residing in the Northeast (and, in particular, addressing security-related issues, which includes the disarming of the state-backed paramilitary groups) suggests that the international community has decided to unwind the stalled peace process and approach the

ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka from an entirely different perspective.

Key pillar

The most important pillar of the Norwegian peace process has been the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The implementation of the CFA was intended to create a stable and peaceful environment from which the two parties could discuss more substantive issues related to reaching a permanent solution.

Due to various obstacles, ranging from the divisive politics of the South to the bureaucratic hurdles, most of the pledges made by the state under the CFA, with the exception of the cessation of hostilities, are largely unimplemented. Despite Sri Lanka's promises, Tamil homes and schools remained under military occupation. Due to various obstacles placed in the way by the Sri Lankan state, the rehabilitation and development of the Northeast remains impaired.

The international community has unwittingly allowed Rajapakse to fulfil his election manifesto - i.e. to disregard the present peace process.

Instead, for the past few years Tamil paramilitary groups, which function as a covert wing of the Sri Lankan military, have been stepping up their relentless campaign against the LTTE and its supporters, while extorting funds from businessmen and abducting children for their forces. They remain armed, in defiance of the CFA and the Geneva I agreement.

Southern satisfaction

By contrast, for the South the 2002 cessation of hostilities brought investment, tourism and allowed the state to regain a strong economic footing.

The reason for the failing peace process is the inability, or as Tamils assert, the unwillingness of