

# 'No alternative to Eelam'

*Lankan Tamil leaders want Indian intervention to stop the genocide*

**W**ITH the strife between the two sections of the Sri Lankan population apparently reaching a break-point, THE WEEK has sought the views of some of the top Tamil leaders to find out from them if there is an alternative to Eelam, in other words, whether the republic has to necessarily be split into two. Those who figure in this interview are Appapillai Amirthalingam, secretary-general of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) that has been banned following the refusal of its MPs to take the oath of allegiance to a unitary Lanka; Balasingham, spokesman of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE); Uma Maheswaran, leader of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE); Sri Sabaratnam, leader of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO); and Balakumar, member of the executive revolutionary committee of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS). Excerpts from the interviews:

**Q:** Has the fight for a separate state in Lanka reached its climax now, where results, one way or the other, are expected shortly?

**Amirthalingam:** Yes, I think it is a climax now, because the government has finally closed the doors for a negotiated settlement. Not only have the two proposals initiated by the government itself been dropped, but it has raised its old demand that the TULF should drop its demand for Eelam as a pre-condition to talks. Everyone knows that is not possible. The TULF won its massive mandate in the last elections only on this plank, that it would work for a separate Eelam. We cannot go back, never.... We were always holding on to the precipice that was the Sinhala-Tamil relations. It is just a matter of time before another racial riot breaks out in the Sinhalese areas with the Tamils becoming targets. We have been at the climax for a long time now. Something has to be done to stop this genocide of Tamils.

**Q:** So much is talked about unity of the various Eelam groups. Is unity possible?

**Balakumar:** We are very serious about unity. Three of us—the EROS, TELO and the EPRLF—came together already in April last year, under what we now call the Eelam National Liberation Front



Appeal to India. Amirthalingam

(ENLF). We have been talking with the PLOTE for the last four months and have achieved 90 per cent success. There are some minor problems between the PLOTE and one of the members of the ENLF and even those would be solved very soon.

**Amirthalingam:** I think there is a realisation among the boys that the odds are against us and we are one to four of them in numbers and that they have all the resources they can get from so many countries. There is, however, no response from only the LTTE. ~

**Q:** Why is the LTTE shunning the moves to unite the groups?

**Balasingham:** It is not true to say we are against unity. We have been saying all along that we are willing to come to some kind of working arrangement for the fight against the government forces.

**Amirthalingam:** There is no response (to the unity talks) from the LTTE only. I cannot understand it; why should it be out of the unity talks? If the LTTE thinks it can capture Eelam all by itself, then I must tell you the Tigers are making a very serious mistake and have not properly understood their enemy.

**Q:** There have been several complaints of the groups indulging in gang wars against one another. How do you

think you would be able to achieve unity with such strained relationships?

**Uma Maheswaran:** It is not true that there have been gang fights against one another. In a movement of this size, there are bound to be differences among the groups. But we will surely iron them out very soon. Already, we have been able to meet the other groups and talk to them about unity and a command strategy on taking on the enemy. We will overcome frictions among the groups and also among the leaders of the various groups. In this connection, I also want to tell you we are not going to the talks with any pre-condition for favouring us with the leadership of the joint front. We are willing to make concessions. This we have told the LTTE also, that Prabhakaran (commander of the LTTE), too, has the chances of becoming the supreme commander if he comes to the talks. But so far they (LTTE) have not come.

**Amirthalingam:** Necessity produces the required unity. Differences have to be forgotten, misunderstandings removed, suspicions cleared and unity forged in the face of total destruction, which the present policy of the Sri Lanka government is holding for the Tamil people.

**Sri Sabaratnam:** It is true that there have been problems among some of us. It is wrong to assume that by killing me, they can finish off the TELO. (It was reported that the LTTE tried to kill Sri Sabaratnam a couple of months ago and the plot misfired.) They could not succeed in killing me, though attempts were made. But now, I am ready to forget everything and work for unity. Because people are being killed everyday by the army and the people in Eelam are looking to us to do something to redeem them soon.

**Balasingham:** It is not true to say the LTTE tried to kill Sri Sabaratnam. The TELO had its own problems internally and we were blamed for that. But now is not the time to talk about such differences.

**Q:** How far have your unity talks succeeded?

**Amirthalingam:** The very first point in the TULF strategy now is to get all the youth groups united and we have found good response from the groups generally,

except from the LTTE, which too would soon come in, I hope.

**Sri Sabaratnam:** We have approached the LTTE several times, alone and through our front. We are still trying. If leaders sit comfortably and each one thinks he is bigger than the other, they would be the first traitors of Eelam. So we must forget petty issues such as past ill will and future aspirations for individual leadership, and come together to take on the enemy, who is becoming stronger everyday.

*Q: How is unity of the groups going to help the cause of the Tamils?*

**Amirthalingam:** We feel that it has to be a united mass struggle, where each section contributes what it can. There is no use wasting our energies individually where a concerted action could yield quicker results... I don't think it would be easy to achieve Eelam even if all the groups unite. But if unity is achieved, we can at least stop the present rampage by the armed forces in our areas.

*Q: Then what stands in the way of unity?*

**Sri Sabaratnam:** All groups are talking about unity, but some of them are not putting their words into action. We have united with two other groups. Why can't the others also come together with us? We are prepared to make concessions to others, such as territorial dominance for purpose of launching attacks against the enemy.

*Q: What role do you envisage for India in your Eelam struggle?*

**Amirthalingam:** The strategy adopted by the Indian government, and by us so far, has failed. That is why I say a new initiative is called for from the Indian side. India has to decide as of what form that action should be. It is not possible for me to say. I can tell them (India) in confidence but openly I can only tell them to stop the killings in Lanka and the fleeing of Tamils to India. We are not asking India to advocate and help Eelam but only to stop the genocide there.

**Balakumar:** We had been working for a long time without getting any help from others. We will continue to do so, whatever takes place here (in India). But we would like to have help from India in our fight, though it need not be by way of arms and such other things.

**Sri Sabaratnam:** Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has given us a new hope, for, he is surely not the kind of man to tolerate such unceasing genocide. India has a right and reason to intervene in our problems. We are Tamils; yet they (India) are



'Unity soon'. Maheswaran

very much restrained. If the Indian government is giving any help, it is only directed at trying to alleviate the sufferings of the simple Eelam man fleeing the state terrorism on the island. The Indian government has the right, I tell you again; but it is not giving us arms or training us. We are doing all that by ourselves and in our own land in Eelam. We buy our arms with money we get from our own people settled abroad.

*Q: What will you do if India, using its good offices, brings pressure on the Eelam groups to accept some kind of a federal system within the framework of a united Lanka?*

**Sri Sabaratnam:** I am sure India will not force a suggestion which will not ful-



'Talks are on'. Sabaratnam

fill the needs of our people, because our people are convinced they can live peacefully only in Tamil Eelam and not in Lanka.

**Balakumar:** We hope the Indian government would not do that. Then we will have to continue our fight.

*Q: Why should India help you and further antagonise Colombo?*

**Sri Sabaratnam:** Eelam is important even to India's security. We are placed in a very vulnerable and strategic point in the Indian ocean, where the Americans would like to dominate as friends of Jayewardene and his racist regime. After Deigo Garcia, the Americans have set their eyes on the Trincomalee harbour (in eastern Lanka) and this is surely not a good thing for India.

*Q: What is Thondaman's role in the struggle going to be?*

**Balakumar:** Thondaman is in a difficult situation. He is a minister in Jayewardene's cabinet and his plantation workers live in a Sinhala-dominated area. Still, I think he will do something, though right now I can't say what. He is due here in March first week. He has recently spoken strongly against the repression of the Tamils. However, some of our boys were arrested in the plantations and Thondaman did not help them.

**Amirthalingam:** I think it is not a case of an individual. The unity of all the plantation workers with the other Tamils is necessary. We will do all that is needed to achieve it. So far, there has been no conflict with Thondaman, though he is in the cabinet. Recently, his Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) had openly opposed a government move to settle Sinhalese in the north.

*Q: You (Amirthalingam) had been a great friend of Jayewardene in the past. Are you very much hurt and disappointed by his attitude towards the Tamils now?*

**Amirthalingam:** I think it is a fatal failure of President Jayewardene that at no stage he has been able to stand up against Sinhala chauvinism. Right from the time he was opposed to the Bandaranayake-Chelvanayagam pact of 1957, he has always given in to Sinhala chauvinist elements. Though I am disappointed, I am not surprised he has failed to stand up against them. For, that is in his nature and his political career proves that. I think if he wants he can yet do it, but he does not want to go down in Sinhala history as someone who gave in to the Tamils.

—BHAGWAN R. SINGH