

Peace offensive on Jaffna

THREE senior leaders from southern Sri Lanka have visited Jaffna in the last six weeks, beginning a new phase of peace initiatives. There are also other signs of attempts at international mediation in the continuing Sri Lankan conflict.

Colombo Catholic Bishop Marcus Fernando met LTTE ideologue Anton Balasingham in late January to discuss peace. The Tigers responded to his request and released two policemen held as prisoners for the last two years.

On the heels of the Catholic Bishop came the visit of the Anglican Bishop Kenneth Fernando. Rev Fernando who previously visited Jaffna on a goodwill mission in January last year, said after meeting Anton Balasingham and LTTE Political Wing's K Karikalan, that the Jaffna people want an early settlement to the conflict.

Sri Lankan development agency *Sarvodaya* leader Dr AT Ariyaratne also was in Jaffna in early February and brought back a taped message from Mr Karikalan for the government. Dr Ariyaratne says that both the Tigers and the civilian population support peace moves. The contents of Mr Karikalan's message have not been disclosed. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe however, told journalists in mid-February that any peace proposal must come directly from LTTE leader V Prabhakaran.

All three leaders highlighted the sufferings of Jaffna's civilian population after three years of economic blockade and aerial bombing. Although the three have already briefed the government, they were expected to meet in late February to decide on joint recommendations to place before the warring parties.

Tourism Minister S Thondaman disclosed in late January that he had received a letter from prominent

■ **The Embilipitiya magistrate has ordered the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to conduct further investigations into the discovery of mass graves in Suriyakande, Ratnapura District in January, reportedly containing remains of 300 victims. An application by relatives of disappeared persons to continue digging in the area was however denied by the court.**

Airforce chief promises a clean war

Canadian lawyer Max Berger inviting him to visit Canada to discuss possible peace initiatives. Canadian parliamentarians have expressed support for Mr Thondaman's visit. Doubts have been raised whether a peace-maker role can be played by Mr Thondaman, who is currently involved in a bitter power struggle with CWC General Secretary MS Sellasamy and whose relation with the government is at a low ebb.

Reports say that yet another peace initiative, this time from Norway, is in the offing. Worldview International Foundation's Arne Fjoertoft claimed the Norwegian government asked him to be an intermediary in the Sri Lankan conflict. Although the peace initiatives have been widely welcomed, observers say without the genuine desire for peace and visible signals from the government and the LTTE, there can be no progress.

The visits of the peace-makers provided a brief respite for the people of Jaffna. But the bombing and shelling resumed soon afterwards. The Punnalaikadduvan area south-east of Palaly was heavily bombed on 12 February. Three days later five civilians were killed and nine others injured in Jaffna town and Tellippalai in Airforce attacks. According to Army sources several Tiger bunkers were destroyed in Tellippalai and Kadduvan areas in *Operation Air attack*.

Further south in Kilinochchi District three persons were killed and six others injured in aerial bombing in coastal Nachchikudah on 15 February. Many houses were damaged in the attack. Nachchikudah area was bombed again on 18 February killing two fishermen. Nine others missing are believed dead.

New Airforce chief Air Marshall Oliver Ranasinghe said on 19 February that there was no intention to harm the people of Jaffna in air operations and pledged that the Airforce will fight a clean war. A week later Airforce helicopters attacked

civilians crossing the Jaffna lagoon at Kilali. Planes bombed Nallur in the Kilinochchi District killing a civilian waiting to cross the lagoon and injuring ten others.

According to the Ministry of Rehabilitation Rs 56 million (\$1.2 million) of the Rs 200 million (\$4.2 million) for monthly free dry rations is spent on the 243,000 refugees inside Jaffna. But reports from besieged Jaffna indicate that shortage of essential food and fuel continues and prices have risen. Kerosene for December and January has not been supplied by the government. The Jaffna Municipal Council says that the support given by the Sri Lankan government is only sufficient to keep the people barely alive and has appealed to UNICEF for help.

Septicaemia, malaria and pneumonia continue spread without disease control measures and vital medicine. Reports say over 16,000 people contracted malaria in 1993 and the disease has become a major health hazard. Five people, including three children died of disease on 8 February. Two others died at the Jaffna hospital on 25 February.

Sarvodaya's Jehan Perera who accompanied Dr Ariyaratne to Jaffna says in an article in the Colombo newspaper *The Island* that the Tigers somehow obtain their needs, but the ordinary civilian suffers. Mr Perera advocates the lifting of all restrictions on food and medicines which will eliminate the "taxes" borne by the people due to the existence of a blackmarket.

No major military operations have been launched on Jaffna since the Pooneryn attack in November last year in which over 1,500 soldiers and LTTE cadre died. There is an expectation of an offensive in the near future. Analysts say that peace talks in an election year are unlikely and both parties prefer a confrontation in the battlefield rather than across the table, to gain greater strength before negotiations. Many observers believe that the peace offensive is calm before storm.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Colombo's chilling echo

A new report from international human rights organisation Amnesty International says thousands of Tamils are arbitrarily arrested in Colombo every month and that many risk beatings, torture or disappearance.

Amnesty's "Balancing human rights and security: abuse of arrest and detention powers in Colombo" says over 15,000 Tamils have been arrested in the Sri Lankan capital since President Premadasa was assassinated by a suicide bomber last May. Most are released in two or three days but a significant number are held for weeks or months says Amnesty. There are routine beatings to extract confessions. Tamil detainees are interrogated in a language they cannot speak, forced to sign statements they cannot understand and held in grossly overcrowded cells.

Local human rights groups say there is growing evidence of systematic financial extortion in Colombo police stations where detainees are squeezed for up to Rs 12,000 (\$250) to ensure their release within 48 hours. After that they may be detained indefinitely under Emergency regulations.

Some detainees are tortured in secret detention centres says the Amnesty report citing the case of 27 year-old Jaffna student Arulappu Jude Arulrajah arrested last October and kept chained, blindfolded and naked in an Army camp in central Colombo for ten weeks where he was tortured and beaten with wooden clubs and plastic pipes.

Arulrajah was never told why he was detained or brought before a court. Police

denied he was in custody when his mother made an arduous journey to Colombo to find him. The ICRC eventually located Arulrajah now held at CID headquarters and after a habeas corpus court hearing he was released in early February.

Arulrajah's case and many others present "a chilling echo of the past" says Amnesty referring to the detention and disappearance of over 40,000 people in the military's brutal suppression of the insurrection by the Sinhala Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP) between 1987 and 1990. Amnesty calls for an end to secret detention and indiscriminate arrests and for the government to observe five major safeguards for detainees agreed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe and Tamil politicians last June.

Defence Secretary Hamilton Wanasinghe told Amnesty officials in Colombo in January that the government had "no option" but to continue random arrests and identity checks in the capital. Defence sources believe hundreds of LTTE suicide squads seeking high profile targets have penetrated Colombo hidden among the 100,000 Tamil refugees who have fled the north since June 1990.

Arrests continue at over 2,000 a month say government figures. Another 30 Tamil youths were detained in police sweeps of Kotahena and Kochchikade in early February but there are signs that arrest figures are no longer released to the press since the Amnesty discussions in January.

Deadlocked

Struggle for power in the Ceylon Workers Congress remains deadlocked after General Secretary MS Sellasamy obtained an interim District Court order preventing a National Council ruling calling for his resignation along with another seven rebels. CWC President S Thondaman has filed application in the Court of Appeal to quash the order.

Overstay

Over 20,000 foreigners are overstaying their visas and many are involved in Sri Lanka's growing sex tourism industry said the Immigration Controller in mid-February. His Department is updating the "black list" of foreigners who would be denied visas.

Postponed

Analysts say Sri Lanka's annual World Bank Paris Aid Group meeting due on 8 June will be postponed indefinitely after the Colombo government failed to implement tough economic reforms. Sri Lanka may now lose an economic recovery loan of \$100 million from the International Development Association, reports say.

Suspended

The government has suspended work on a highway costing Rs 12.5 billion (\$260 million) after major donor Japan bowed to pressure from environmental groups, reports say. The 32km highway linking Colombo city and Katunayake airport would result in the destruction of 2,500 buildings and relocation of many families.

Search for volunteers

TAMIL NADU'S new senior refugee official Additional Public Secretary Ramamurthy has sent local officials to pressure some of the 70,000 Sri Lankan Tamils in 150 refugee camps in the south Indian state to "volunteer" for the continuing repatriation programme to war-torn northern Sri Lanka.

Over 3,000 returnees arrived on isolated Mannar Island in the latest phase of the programme in mid-February. There are continuing food and fuel shortages on the island, cut off from mainland Mannar District which is largely controlled by the Tigers. The government lifted a six-month ban on fishing in the northern seas in late February which will relieve Mannar's captive population who

have little other form of subsistence.

The Sri Lankan government has denied that refugees were being sent back forcibly from India. According to Rehabilitation officials, around 8,000 of the 36,000 refugees returned from Tamil Nadu since 1992 were still in refugee camps and another 2,300 were living with friends or relatives receiving dry rations from the government.

Over 50 Sri Lankan Tamils were injured in clashes in the Pulal refugee camp near Madras in early February. There are around 1,000 refugees in the camp most belonging to the Tamil group EPRLF. Fighting began after a group of refugees who gave a letter to the Tamil Nadu Rehabilitation Secretary requesting

to be returned to Sri Lanka were attacked by refugees opposing repatriation.

The Indian Navy was accused of seizing ten Sri Lankan fishermen near Kalpitiya on 12 February. The Sri Lankan Navy shot and injured an Indian fisherman near Kachchativu, north-west of Mannar Island on 16 February. Three days later naval vessels attacked another boat killing two Indian fishermen.

Following a demonstration in Madurai by the fishing community, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha wrote to Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao demanding firm action against Sri Lanka. A discussion between Indian and Sri Lankan officials over fishing rights in late February ended without agreement.

Local government elections

Stalemate in the East

THE ruling United National Party (UNP) secured only 37% of the votes in local elections in the Eastern Province and Vavuniya town held on 1 March. Over 2,000 candidates contested for 431 seats in 40 local government bodies and over 60% of the registered voters exercised their franchise.

Independent groups backed by Tamil militant organisations EROS, PLOTE and TELO polled 29% of the votes in the east and took control of 12 local councils. Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) gained majority in six councils, but was successful in only four of the six Muslim majority areas in Amparai District. SLMC leader MHM Ashraf who ran a bitter campaign against the UNP, had pledged earlier that he would resign

his parliamentary seat if his party failed to take control of all six councils.

The results indicate that the voting has clearly been on ethnic lines. Although the UNP received less support than it anticipated, party secretary Sirisena Cooray said the mere fact the elections were completed in the current situation was a victory for the government. Observers say in a closely contested presidential election later this year, the 300,000 votes against the UNP in the east may tilt the balance and the referendum to decide whether the Northern and Eastern provinces should remain merged may be postponed indefinitely.

The Tamil parties which called on voters to indicate their opposition to President DB Wijetunge who continues

to say that there is no ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka say the Tamils have sent a clear message to the government.

The ruling UNP used the 5,500-strong police force in the east to twist the arms of the voters. Reports say the Batticaloa unit of military intelligence, the much-feared *Mohan* group composed of former members of Tamil group PLOTE, was engaged by the UNP for election campaign. People were forced to become candidates and three women fled to Colombo for safety after declaring their candidacy.

Tamil group EPRLF complained to the Election Commissioner that the security forces interfered with the elections by withholding polling cards and distributing leaflets urging people to vote for the UNP. Thousands of ballot papers had been stolen, said EPRLF. Mr Ashraf says that policemen threatened villagers in Amparai of dire consequences if they failed to vote for the UNP.

Security operations were intensified in the east in the run up to the elections alleging that LTTE leader V Prabhakaran had moved to the Vanni and was preparing to disrupt elections. The bullet-riddled body of Nallathamby Arumugam, a senior officer at the Valaichenai Paper Mills allegedly abducted by the LTTE, was found in Thumbankerni on 12 February. Periyasamy Rajadurai, 35, of Nasivantivu in Batticaloa District was hacked to death and his brother Selvam sustained serious injuries. Reports say policemen from the Peithalai police station were responsible for the murder.

All the President's words

PRESIDENT DB Wijetunge's determination to continue his tirade against the minorities has incensed the Tamils and Muslims. Tamil moderates are worried over the about-turn in the rhetoric of Mr Wijetunge and fear that the ruling UNP has returned to the 1956 era when the Official Language Act which made Sinhala as the official language and anti-Tamil campaigns put the two communities on a collision course.

Mr Wijetunge stresses that the Sinhalese must sink party differences and unite to rule Sri Lanka with a firm hand. If the majority race is divided seeking assistance from minorities, the country cannot progress according to Mr Wijetunge who says that the Premadasa government was forced to grant citizenship to thousands of plantation Tamils because of disunity among the majority community. The President compares the Sinhalese to a tree and the minorities to creepers and has pledged to demerge the Northern and Eastern provinces to kill the Tamil homeland concept.

The President's immediate objective for the verbal onslaught seems to be the Southern Provincial elections due on 24 March. But it is clear that he also has his eyes on the presidential and general elections to be held later this year. Results of previous elections show that the minorities hold the balance of power in many areas and voting beyond party lines which would dramatically change the results is unlikely to be achieved. Mr Wijetunge's words may have already cost the UNP substantial number of minority votes.

For the Tamils elections have long been synonymous with violence specifically directed at them caused by inflammatory election speeches by politicians. Observers say for this reason, the President should choose his words carefully. Others fear that he is plunging himself and the country into further chaos.

DFLF takes Vavuniya

THE Democratic People's Liberation Front (DPLF), the political wing of Tamil militant group PLOTE won seven of the eleven seats in the Vavuniya Urban Council election, polling almost 60% of the votes on 1 March. The ruling UNP won only two seats. Thirty people were arrested by police for various election offences including impersonation.

In the run up to the election security was tightened in and around Vavuniya town. A PLOTE cadre was injured on election day by a LTTE sniper at Samayapuram, west of Vavuniya.

In Trincomalee District the UNP was successful in seven of the ten local councils polling 38% of the votes, but the Trincomalee Urban Council was taken by an independent group backed by Tamil

militant organisations TELO and EROS.

Further north in the Weli Oya area in Mullaitivu District, Tigers fired on soldiers bathing in a lake on 21 February killing one and injuring two others. The Army attacked a LTTE camp two days later killing 15 Tigers. Four soldiers died in the operation and six others were wounded. In a LTTE counter-attack on 24 February several soldiers were injured.

Current focus in Trincomalee District is on resettlement and the Rehabilitation Coordination Committee chaired by the Government Agent has been revived. The 1,200 persons displaced from the Kinniya village will be resettled. Reports say the Army has come forward to assist in removing landmines in the area.

Western nations move against false travel documents

The Moscow route

THIRTY SIX Tamil refugees set afloat in three dinghies from a ship in the narrow Oresund Strait between Sweden and Denmark were rescued by Danish authorities on 4 February - Sri Lanka's Independence Day - after spending twelve hours at sea. The Danish sea rescue service was alerted after one of the dinghies landed at Koge, twenty miles south of Copenhagen.

Observers believe that the Tamils came through Moscow which is now favoured as a transit point for asylum-seekers. There are currently around 5,000 Sri Lankans in Moscow living in difficult conditions and awaiting transport to other Western countries. Moscow police are usually satisfied by the claim that they are Indians arriving in Russia to enrol in language classes. The Russian immigration service has recently begun registration of the Sri Lankans.

According to reports refugees arrive in Moscow from Colombo with false travel documents provided by travel agents in the Sri Lankan capital. Many travel agencies are run by Tamil militant groups which control the refugee market. The cost for each refugee is around Rs 400,000 (\$8,000), a life-time's salary for some Sri Lankans. The continuing arrests of Tamils, long detention and fear of torture at the hands of the security forces keep the refugee market alive. Many refugees borrow from money-lenders or relatives in desperation and if returned from the West before paying back the loans, they would be indebted for life.

The false travel document trade extends beyond the shores of Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan refugee Loganathan Sabanayagam was jailed for 15 months in Toronto, Canada for involvement in turning out false Canadian and Sri Lankan passports. Reports say at least 15 centres run by Sri Lankans produced false travel documents of high quality and the Canadian government has been forced to issue new passports with additional security features.

An eight-member foreign delegation, including Director General of Canadian Immigration Ministry Hallan Johnston, German Border Police Director Helmut Sipple and Netherlands Justice Ministry Regional Director Harke Heida arrived in Sri Lanka to work with airline and government officials to prevent the use of

false travel documents. According to the delegation 18% of passengers to Canada without documents were from Sri Lanka. Around 11,000 Sri Lankans had entered Germany illegally and 950 are said to have arrived in the Netherlands without proper documents.

V. Tissaiveerasingham who was informed in mid-February by the Swedish authorities that he would be taken into custody to be deported to Sri Lanka, poured petrol and burned himself on 2 March in Uppsala.

Inspector General of Police Frank de Silva who met the delegation said Sri Lanka was keen to prevent illegal entry of its citizens into other countries. Reports say the foreign governments would introduce tough new measures to combat the 'human trafficking trade'. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) would organise a special training programme for Sri Lankans in the detection of false and forged travel documents.

It is clear that the Western governments intend to continue their tough

stand on immigration and refugee issues and may move to deport rejected Sri Lankan asylum-seekers. The agreement between Switzerland and Sri Lanka for repatriation of Tamil refugees could be a trigger for return from other countries.

PR Segar who was deported from Denmark on 8 February was arrested by Colombo police two days later. He was released after a week on the intervention of a local politician and fled to Singapore where he has applied for asylum at the Danish embassy. No decision has yet been taken by the Danish authorities. The Danish government continues to insist that any refugee camp in south Sri Lanka is appropriate for returned asylum-seekers. Three senior Scandinavian officials led by Hans Kofoed from the Danish Foreign Ministry arrived in Colombo on 27 February to observe the situation.

Sri Lankan Tamil Vinash who was deported from Sweden on 25 February was detained at the Colombo airport because he had only an identity card. While in Stockholm he had refused to go into the Sri Lankan embassy to obtain a Sri Lankan passport.

Vickramaraja Tissaiveerasingham who was informed in mid-February by the Swedish immigration authorities that he would be taken into custody to be deported to Sri Lanka, poured petrol and burned himself on 2 March in Uppsala. He suffered severe burn injuries and lies unconscious in a hospital. Swedish government continues to maintain that conditions in south Sri Lanka are conducive for returns.

Refugee workers believe many refugees in the West will go underground rather than be deported to Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan refugee organisations say their experience with Indian refugee returnees indicates that the Sri Lankan government is not committed or able to attend to the needs of the refugees and employment, education, accommodation and security will not be accessible to returnees from the West.

Observers are convinced that refugees will be free to return only when comprehensive measures have been taken to ensure a just settlement to the Sri Lankan conflict. Tough action by Western and Sri Lankan governments will only complicate an increasingly complex situation and guarantee further human misery.

THE SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas. If you have any information you wish to share, or any enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact

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