

# The Sri Lanka Monitor

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## August election showdown

IN a surprise move, Sri Lanka's President DB Wijetunge has called a snap general election on 16 August, six months ahead of schedule, in an attempt to outflank growing support for the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its People's Alliance (PA) in forthcoming presidential elections in December.

Mr Wijetunge dissolved parliament on 24 June after a grass-roots tour of constituencies convinced him that MPs from his faction-ridden United National Party (UNP) needed jolting out of apathy and corruption by making them face their own re-election first.

After 17 years of UNP rule, a pendulum swing to SLFP seems increasingly real. Mr Wijetunge, who lacks the charisma and profile of his predecessor Mr Premadasa, fears a defeat at presidential polls would lead to a landslide at general elections. But the alternative is equally ominous. An opposition victory in August under Sri Lanka's Gaullist constitution leaves Mr Wijetunge a lame-duck president saddled with an SLFP cabinet for three months before the December polls.

UNP reaction to Mr Wijetunge's decision ranged from "suicidal" to "sensible". If SLFP triumphs in August, Mr Wijetunge may step aside as presidential candidate clearing the way for party heavyweights like Gamini Dissanayake who returned as Mahaveli minister in a cabinet reshuffle in mid-June. Former Finance minister Ronnie de Mel also returned as Ports and Shipping minister and the opposition leader's prodigal son Anura Bandaranaike, who joined the UNP in October 1993 after an SLFP succession struggle, becomes Sri Lanka's first minister for National Reconciliation. Six SLFP MPs close to Mr Bandaranaike crossed over to the UNP, hours before parliament was dis-

■ **As a controversial bilateral government programme to deport Sri Lankans refused asylum in Switzerland got underway, NGOs told United Nations refugee agency UNHCR that plans to monitor the safety of those forcibly returned were inadequate. NGOs now plan their own parallel monitoring operation. The full story on page four.**

### Colombo police foil LTTE bomb plot

solved. His sister Mrs Chandrika Kumaranatunge, acting leader while Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike undergoes surgery in Singapore, told leading businessmen at a Colombo seminar in late June that the SLFP has a political formula to end the ten-year civil war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Tigers are not impressed. Recent editions of the LTTE's *Viduthalai Puligal* publication say Chandrika is trawling for Tamil votes and is the inheritor of Mr Premadasa's double-track policy of talking peace while making war.

A few days earlier, Mr S Thondaman, political godfather of one million Plantation Tamils and Mr MHM Ashraff leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) launched a joint peace proposal endorsing a federal solution to the north-east war with separate sub-councils in Muslim areas. Last month Mr Ashraff wrote to LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran calling for a rapprochement with Sri Lanka's 1.8 million Tamil-speaking Muslims.

Mr Wijetunge's general election gamble means he retains, for the moment, the support of Mr Thondaman's Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and its bloc vote in the Hill Country. Some 13 seats have been reserved for CWC candidates on the UNP ticket. But Mr Thondaman's backing is contingent on a five-point programme to improve Plantation workers' conditions before the December elections. If UNP reneges or does badly in August elections, he may switch allegiance.

Mrs Kumaranatunge leading the SLFP charge, says she will sweep away the coterie of over 60 non-cabinet ministers who retain the feudal apparatus of government in the run-up to elections and institute reforms to represent 70% of the population under 30. Her main worry may be to organise country-wide monitoring in only seven weeks before the poll.

Meanwhile, defence sources

believe six *Black Tiger* suicide commando squads operating independently have penetrated Colombo seeking high-profile targets to destabilise the elections.

Police smashed a major LTTE cell when they arrested three Tamils after a minor collision between two vehicles in Dehiwela on 23 July. The arrests led to the discovery of 300 kilos of C4 explosive smuggled from Jaffna in a vegetable lorry and a Tiger safe house in Wattala where more weapons and communications equipment were recovered. Two of the three arrested took cyanide capsules, a Tiger trademark. Dharmalingam Shasheedaran died and Parameshwaran is in hospital. Four women and a man from Nelliady, Jaffna were arrested when they called at the house two days later.

Police say the Tigers' first target was to blow up Airforce headquarters in Colombo on 5 July, *Black Tiger Day*, the LTTE's annual commemoration of over 300 elite cadre who have died in suicide missions. A white Elf van loaded with 300 kilos of explosives and detonators was found parked in the compound of a Kotahena Hindu Temple on 30 June. Over 20 LTTE cadre have been arrested in the capital and police are seeking *Navaratnam* from Kalviankadu, Jaffna who organised the Wattala network for Tiger intelligence chief *Pottu Amman*.

The Tigers' Colombo offensive puts new pressures on over 100,000 Tamils in the capital who have fled the north-east war since June 1990. Checkpoints have been doubled across the city and over 700 Tamils arrested with an unknown number still in custody. Those without identity papers, who have not registered at police stations or who cannot give police "a satisfactory explanation for their presence in Colombo" are immediate suspects.

Commissioner for the Registration of Persons, KJV Ranasinghe, agreed after talks in early June to set up a fast-track to replace lost identity cards for Tamil refugees in the city but while the LTTE threat continues, they will be first in the firing line.

## THE NORTH

## Shellfire and stagnant water

JAFFNA Government Agent K Manickavasagar says over 40,000 refugees in 200 camps around the peninsula are increasingly at risk as infection spreads and housing and water supplies collapse. Over 250,000 of Jaffna's one million plus population are refugees including 100,000 who fled the islands west of Jaffna when the military invaded in October 1991.

Tiger guerrillas launched a new series of hit-and-run attacks on the islands this month. Three sailors were killed and six wounded in a rocket attack near Karainagar naval base in mid-June. Another sailor died in a landmine ambush, a week earlier. Two LTTE cadre died in a clash on Kayts further south.

Other reports say the Navy fired on a civilian ferry returning from a temple festival on Nainativu on 22 June, killing two people and injuring ten. Fewer than 3,000 civilians remain on the islands most of them too old or infirm to flee.

Over 20 LTTE cadre were killed as the military pushed out from its foothold inside the peninsula at Mathagal in early June. Three civilians died as the accompanying artillery barrage hit a refugee camp at Pandatharippu. The Tigers are preparing a new ring of bunkers around Army positions to thwart a major offensive.

LTTE ideologue Anton Balasingham offered unconditional peace talks through a BBC intermediary in mid-June which Colombo's military hierarchy again dismissed as a signal that the Tigers were in

trouble. Indiscriminate air attacks and shelling continue throughout the peninsula. A shell which landed near St Anthony's church on its annual festival day on 13 June failed to explode but three civilians were injured when a nearby Hindu temple was hit. New artillery attacks from Palaly airbase began in late June.

Staff from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) held talks with military officials to ensure the safety of the demilitarised zone around the Jaffna hospital and to ascertain the fate of eight fishermen arrested by the Navy off Sulipuram. There are continuing shortages of oxygen, antibiotics and painkilling drugs in the peninsula's hospitals. Some 85 babies have died in the last three months, 54 within seven days of birth say Health department reports.

High seasonal *solagam* winds have cut the number of ferry crossings of the Jaffna lagoon at Kilali, driving up prices of vegetables and basic commodities in Kilinochchi and the peninsula. High winds also damaged homes and refugee camps in Kilinochchi in early June.

In Mullaitivu, the shelling of remote villages around Mullivaikal from Mullaitivu Army camp continues. Further south over 100 LTTE cadre stormed a police post on 16 June, at remote Kebelligollewa, south-west of Vavuniya killing two reserve constables and a Home Guard. Another eight policemen are missing.

### Protest

Catholic Bishop of Mannar, Rayappu Joseph, met with senior military officers in early June to voice concern over indiscriminate night arrests of Tamil youth on Army-controlled Mannar Island. Over 4,500 Tamil refugees have been returned to Mannar Island from south India this year.

### Asylum appeal

JVP leader-in-exile Somawansa Amarasinghe has appealed to Western governments to offer asylum to the wife and four children of former JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera, killed in custody by Sri Lankan security forces in November 1989. The Wijeweera family has been held in "protective custody" at Trincomalee naval base for three years and the eldest daughter has attempted suicide.

### Fast threat

Almost 50 Sri Lankan soldiers and policemen held prisoner by the LTTE in Jaffna told a *Reuters* correspondent they would start a death fast if they were not released. LTTE's Anton Balasingham says the Tigers will exchange them for cadre in Colombo jails or a lifting of the blockade.

### Aid boost

Japanese aid agreements worth \$400 million for six major development projects were signed in Colombo on 23 June. Japan recently criticised Sri Lanka's development strategy and offered to host talks between the government and LTTE say Colombo newspapers.

## the Jaffna vote

AFTER an unproductive meeting with Elections Commissioner Chandrananda de Silva in late June, Tamil moderate party Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) will go to court seeking a postponement of elections in Jaffna and LTTE-controlled areas of the north.

The government plans to "cluster" polling booths in Tellipalai and the islands west of Jaffna where less than 6,000 of the registered 600,000 voters will be able to vote. A range of Tamil parties have told Mr de Silva that the poll will be a farce but most will participate rather than lose out.

The exclusion of any area from the poll means National List MPs could not be finalised and the current caretaker

cabinet would remain in control says Constitutional Affairs minister KN Choksy but it would also signal admission of loss of sovereignty in the north.

There are 32 parliamentary seats to be contested in the north-east and the Tamil groups currently working with the Army will seek to consolidate their regional dominance. PLOTE, TELO and EROS have formed a new Tamil National United Front (TNUF) contesting under the PLOTE symbol in the Vanni, TELO in the east and EROS in Jaffna. But Douglas Devananda's EPDP group who controls the Jaffna islands is more likely to return all 11 MPs for Jaffna and Kilinochchi districts on the strength of a few thousand votes cast, complains

EPRLF leader Suresh Premachandran.

EPRLF, marginalised after their Indian-backed provincial government foundered in 1990, will contest four electoral districts in the north-east supporting the opposition People's Alliance (PA) along with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). TULF nominally has nine seats to defend but they were won by EPRLF, ENDLF and TELO candidates in uneasy alliance in 1989.

The Elections Commissioner says northern voters can cast their vote elsewhere but has given them only ten days to apply. Another 600,000 refugees across the country are virtually disenfranchised. The potential for fraud is great, the possibility of farce even greater.

## ■ The undeclared war in the east

# Children and victims

OVER 100 police have been transferred out of the Valaichenai area of Batticaloa District after officers chasing a suspect fired on Muslims at Friday prayers in a local mosque on 17 June, killing a schoolboy and injuring three others. Seven policemen are under arrest.

A few miles south, two girls, Karunanidhi, 7, and Jayakanthini, 3, playing outside their house at Sithandy were killed by shelling from an Eravur Army camp in late June. Defence sources cited reports of a LTTE buildup nearby. No NGOs have been allowed west of Batticaloa lagoon for the last month as cordon-and-search operations continue. Sundaralingam of Tamil group PLOTE was shot dead by security forces at Ayithiyamalai in mid-June. PLOTE says

he was a rehabilitation worker. In remote Amparai, five Tigers were killed as troops attacked a jungle base at Palkudai in early June.

Batticaloa's Mayor S Perinpanayagam says over 40,000 youth are unemployed in the district with 8,000 widows and 17,000 orphans. The military plans to screen the district's 250,000 population again by introducing a "Security Identity Card" obtainable only by registering with the police. Lagoon fishing is permitted between 7am and 6pm. Towards Polonnaruwa at Vahaneri Army camp, soldiers are accused of raping local women during operations.

New Polonnaruwa LTTE leader *Pradeepan* is increasingly active. Four policemen were killed patrolling the rail-

way line near Mannampitiya on 9 June and two police killed and three injured in an attack at Madura Oya two weeks earlier. Two Home Guards were abducted in Gal Ella in mid-June.

Further north in Trincomalee District, rural areas remain fiercely contested. A local LTTE leader was shot dead by troops at Selvanagar in early June and another Tiger suspect killed at Thannaparichchan. Three policemen died in a LTTE ambush at Kantalewewa and four soldiers killed on patrol near Muthur in early June. In the flashpoint Morawewa region further north, two Airforce personnel and two LTTE were killed in a clash on 29 June.

At the coastal outpost of Kuchchaveli in the north of the district, where resettled communities of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim fishermen are carefully segregated and guarded, there are new fears after LTTE ambushed a fishing party stealing three outboard motors. The military are impatient to resettle another 9,000 refugee families in the east by the end of this year, defence sources say.

Rehabilitation Secretary Christie Silva told NGOs at a crisis meeting in Trincomalee last month that almost 30,000 families had been resettled in the district with government help. But only a handful have received the housing and occupational rehabilitation grants they were promised say community workers. The money to rebuild their homes and lives has gone in the pockets of corrupt officials.

# Impunity

A new report from Colombo's Law and Society Trust (LST) entitled "The State of Human Rights in Sri Lanka 1993" says security forces retain virtual impunity to violate human rights despite undertakings given by the government to the international community. Constitutional and legal safeguards against arbitrary arrests, secret detention, torture and disappearances are eroded by Sri Lanka's draconian Emergency Regulations. Although more fundamental rights cases are going through the courts there is no real accountability and hence no deterrent factor says the report. The few soldiers and police indicted, meet with no more than a derisory fine, often paid by their superiors. Over 20,000 Tamils have been arrested in Colombo since the assassination of Mr Premadasa in May 1993. Around 1,200 remain in custody. Hundreds more held under Emergency Regulations since the June war have been in prison for over two years without charge or trial. Over 2,000 young Sinhalese held in the aftermath of the JVP revolt are in the same position. During the JVP insurrection, 40,000 people died or disappeared in the south in three years.

On 19 June, Presidential Secretary KHJ Wijedasa launched a review of Emergency Regulations following an undertaking made to the UN Commission on Human Rights by Attorney General Tilak Marapana in March. Observers say parliament will be reconvened in late July to renew the Emergency.

LST's report also points to growing disparity between rich and poor. A World Bank study puts almost 4 million or 22% of Sri Lankans below the poverty line. Literacy is falling with a high rate of high school dropouts. Over 400,000 children are affected by the war and 10,000 street children increasingly involved in prostitution. The Veddas, Sri Lanka's indigenous tribal population are on the verge of cultural extinction concludes LST.

# Sideshow

MR WIJETUNGE has set up a one-man Commission of Enquiry into the spate of farmers' suicides in Polonnaruwa District but critics say its restricted mandate reveals its cynicism. Agriculture Secretary HCL Kapilaratna is asked to establish whether there is a link between the suicide of 16 farmers and failing harvests and bad debts instead of addressing a growing agrarian crisis.

Many farmers cannot get a fair price for their food crops. Production costs now exceed the selling price since the government slashed subsidies at World Bank insistence. Hundreds of farmers marched through Polonnaruwa on 6 June carrying coffins and banners reading "The farmer king has died of hunger". The latest victim G Wimalasena, 24, of

Mederigiriya killed himself a few days earlier because bad debt prevented him from planting crops for the next *Yala* season.

Mr Wijetunge also established this month a Presidential Commission of Enquiry into what he calls "the cancer in the tea industry" as tea prices tumble and smallholders are driven to bankruptcy by a price-fixing cartel at the Colombo tea auctions. Police ringed the auction rooms in early June fearing a demonstration by smallholders.

Large estates have incurred staggering losses since their management was privatised in June 1992. Sri Lanka's tea production costs are the highest in the world, 70% being labour charges claims Plantations Secretary RS Jayaratne.

UN passive monitoring model inadequate for a country at war

## NGOs condemn Swiss deportation programme

NGOs condemned the launching of a controversial bilateral government programme to deport Sri Lankans refused asylum in Switzerland in the latest of a series of meetings with United Nations refugee agency UNHCR in Geneva on 22 June. UNHCR proposals for "passive monitoring" of those sent back are inadequate say NGOs who now plan to mount a parallel operation.

Some 11 Sri Lankans were deported to Colombo in June as the programme got underway. NGOs believe that while the island's volatile and unpredictable civil war continues, asylum-seekers should not be forcibly returned. Swiss government officials say only 600 will be sent back in the next two years on a "last-in-first-out basis" and the programme's real function is to deter future asylum-seekers from Sri Lanka.

Almost 40,000 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers, mostly Tamils, have fled to Switzerland and another 160,000 across Europe since 1983. Most are refused refugee status but are allowed temporary residence. Faced with economic recession and racism, Europe is determined to stem the flow of 550,000 refugee arrivals last year. Switzerland will spend almost \$400 million on asylum-seekers in 1994.

If the Swiss repatriation programme is a success, states will broker a Europe-wide agreement with Sri Lanka, sources said after a high-level inter-governmental meeting in Zurich on 2 June. Denmark will push ahead with its own programme soon. Another 91 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers were dumped on the Danish island of Bornholm by a Russian ship on 29 June. The former Soviet Union with its new criminal mafias is fast becoming an important entry point to Europe for asylum-seekers as airport controls and border crossings tighten.

The tough new stance on deportation is endorsed by UNHCR who describe Sri Lankans refused asylum as "not in need of international protection". UNHCR's "passive monitoring" of those deported to Colombo means the UN agency will intervene only if returnees or their families contact them with security problems. NGOs say returnees taken into custody will have no way to contact UNHCR and a more active monitoring mechanism is required.

The report of a Swiss Refugee Council (OSAR) fact-finding mission to Sri Lanka in March says returnees without National Identity Cards (NIC) are vulnerable as the LTTE threat to Colombo generates regular large-scale

**OSAR urges that Tamils from the war-torn north should not be returned unless they have a functioning network of contacts in Colombo but NGOs believe that this key recommendation will be widely ignored.**

police roundups. The report also says those arrested suffer routine financial extortion by police and the Rs 10,000 (\$250) rehabilitation payment given to returnees makes them a target. OSAR urges that Tamils from the war-torn north should not be returned unless they have a functioning network of contacts in Colombo but NGOs believe that this key recommendation will be widely ignored.

Following the OSAR report, Switzerland has posted a refugee attache

at its embassy in Colombo to oversee the arrivals. The Sri Lankan Red Cross has agreed to provide transport from the airport and a house at Nugegoda to help returnees find their feet but so far few returnees have taken advantage of reception facilities relying on family networks. The present pattern suggests NGO fears are misplaced but the passive monitoring formula may also offer a convenient escape clause for governments.

Human rights agencies say Switzerland has already deported hundreds of Tamils to Sri Lanka in the last four years and there are no records of their present whereabouts or condition. UNHCR says returnees on the new programme are not forced to "register" on arrival and their whereabouts are their own business.

NGOs say that there are larger issues at stake. The Swiss programme is clearly the blueprint for closing down the First World to Third World refugees in the decades to come. If it becomes international practice to deport people to a country at war then there must be sustained and responsible monitoring of what happens to them in volatile and unpredictable circumstances. The present formula for Sri Lanka allows UNHCR and both governments to opt out of follow-up responsibilities while creating the necessary precedents for other governments - power without responsibility.

The key precedent for the Swiss programme was UNHCR's monitoring of the supposedly voluntary repatriation of 40,000 Sri Lankan Tamils from south India since July 1992. Two years later UNHCR still has no regular access to any of the 132 Sri Lankan refugee camps in Tamil Nadu where south Indian NGOs say coercion to return is endemic. UNHCR says it is protecting the individual refugee's right to return but concedes that conditions in north-east Sri Lanka are not appropriate or safe for such returns - a position seen by many NGOs as contradictory and self-serving.

Sri Lankan Rehabilitation minister P Dayaratne says another 5,500 of the 70,000 Sri Lankans in refugee camps in south India have agreed to return in August, 4,000 to Trincomalee and 1,500 to Mannar Island but election plans may push back the timetable.

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

The Sri Lanka Project  
The British Refugee Council  
3/9 Bondway  
London SW8 1SJ  
Tel: (071) 582 6922  
Fax: (071) 582 9929

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