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Tiger bomb rocks Colombo

SUICIDE bombers caused mayhem in the heart of Colombo on 31 January killing over 80 people and wounding 1,200. Suspected Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas crashed a lorry with explosives into the Central Bank building in Fort, the financial and commercial centre of the capital, at 10.50am when the area was packed with people. Eye-witnesses say a man triggered a second bomb.

The explosions devastated a number of buildings including the Bank of Ceylon and Ceylinco House. Sri Lankan newspapers say tourist hotels nearby were damaged injuring a number of foreigners. Over 400 vehicles were destroyed. Firefighters fought the whole day amidst the wreckage as helicopters sprayed water to douse raging fires. While people in the top floors were rescued attempts were made to reach those trapped in lower floors.

Hospitals were filled with the injured and following a call by the government, thousands of people queued outside Colombo's blood bank to donate blood. Over 270 emergency operations were performed at the General Hospital. The ICRC and voluntary agencies rushed medical supplies to the hospital.

Following the explosion, search operations intensified and over 200 suspects were arrested. Police say two Tamil Kilinochchi residents Sivasamy Dharmaruban and Subramaniam Vigneshwaran arrested in Pettah have confessed to assisting the bombers.

Observers have no doubt that LTTE was responsible for the carnage which came just eight weeks after the capture of the Tiger stronghold of Jaffna by Sri Lankan troops. The LTTE has kept the pressure on Colombo and in mid-January LTTE's deputy leader *Karikalan* warned of future attacks on the capital.

Colombo was placed on red alert in early January after police discovered 500kg of explosives at Udappu beach in Puttalam District. Police say the explosives were destined for 22 simultaneous attacks in the capital. Authorities asked hotels and lodges to be vigilant with

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newcomers from the north-east.

Observers say Colombo's 400,000 Tamil population will come under pressure as the LTTE continues to target the capital. Four serving soldiers and an Army deserter were arrested accused of a Rs 580,000 (\$11,600) robbery at four Tamil houses in Kotahena on 8 January. The presidential secretariat says Colombo Tamil newspaper *Virakesari*'s contention that the Kotahena incident is an example of the general oppression of Tamils is misleading and intended to discredit the government. In a letter to the newspaper the secretariat assures that the government is exercising vigilance to protect all people. *Virakesari* has denied the allegation and Tamil MPs say a number of robberies of Tamil homes and people remain uninvestigated. Over 400 Tamils were arrested in a 24-hour search operation in Colombo in early February.

There is speculation on how a lorry-load of explosives got through to the high-security Fort area. Acting Inspector General of Police Mithra Ariyasinghe says there is rigid checking everywhere in the city and several precautions are in place to prevent LTTE infiltration. Soldiers fired on a car which failed to stop at a checkpoint in Bambalapitiya on 14 January killing 29 year-old T Samsudeen. Police say the truck used in

the attack came from Vavuniya and explosives could have been smuggled in boats across the western sea.

The loss of Jaffna town has not dented LTTE's ability to strike at will. A Sri Lankan Airforce helicopter was shot down by the Tigers near Point Pedro on 22 January. Sources say two among the 39 military personnel on board were foreign mercenaries. There is also speculation that some may have been taken prisoner by the LTTE.

It is clear that the LTTE has targeted Sri Lanka's economy. The Tigers blasted the country's major oil refinery on the outskirts of Colombo in October. Suspected Tiger front the *Ellalan Force* warned investors in a letter to Colombo newspaper *The Island* not to help the government. Sri Lanka *Rupavahini* Television's former chairman M Vasantharajah told British Channel 4 television on 31 January that the Fort bomb was LTTE's way of putting pressure on the business community.

The blast will also affect tourism, the third largest foreign exchange earner, at least in the short term. The London *Guardian* newspaper says tour operators are diverting holidaymakers and the Australian government has warned citizens to avoid Sri Lanka. World Bank's South Asia Vice President Joseph Wood does not believe that the bomb attack will fundamentally influence the decisions of investors but warned that the diversion of resources into the war is a problem for the economy's long-term development.

The explosion has also affected Sri Lanka in the sports field. Australia and West Indies have refused to play their opening matches in Sri Lanka in the 1996 World Cup cricket competition, despite government assurance that foreign teams will receive the level of protection afforded to a visiting head of state.

In her address to the nation on 1 February President Chandrika Kumaratunge said that the government will not be diverted from pursuing peace through the devolution proposals. But after the Colombo bomb the prospects for peace seem even more remote.

THE NORTH

Closing the door

COLOMBO Tamil newspaper *Virakesari* says 47 refugees in Kilinochchi died of disease in early January because of lack of medicines and medical equipment.

From January medicines can only go north through the Health Ministry. The ICRC has been denied permission to operate mobile health teams in the Vanni where over 320,000 people from Jaffna have taken refuge. Water supply remains a major problem and shelter has become a political poker game between the LTTE and the government.

After visiting Vavuniya in early January a Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) delegation urged the government that at least 50 lorry loads of food must be sent daily to the north instead of the current 35. International refugee agency UNHCR briefly suspended its operation of transporting food supplies to the north on 8 January after government permission was denied to take radio equipment to Kilinochchi. Reports say food supplies are irregular and distribution of dry rations has fallen several weeks behind.

Mass displacement has shut all the schools and special assistance provided to widows with children, students and the disabled have come to a standstill.

The ICRC says that it has been denied permission to assist people in Army-controlled western areas of the Jaffna peninsula. Estimates indicate there are around 2,000 civilians in Jaffna town and 2,000 in Valikámam. Another 150,000 refugees have fled to Thenmaratchy and Vadammaratchy. Reports say there is resis-

tance to LTTE attempts to move more people into the Vanni. Those in camps in Army-controlled areas have been allowed to return to homes. They will be provided rations, but must stay indoors from 6pm to 6am and report the presence of suspected Tigers. The LTTE alleges that the military fired on over 100 people who returned to the Puthur area in December. Some were killed and others imprisoned.

President Chandrika advised government officers to expedite reconstruction and called on doctors to cooperate in reopening Jaffna hospital. Foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar has urged the ICRC to instal medical equipment to encourage people to return. Reports claim the government has made a \$500 million appeal to the US for reconstruction, while denying that heavy destruction has taken place.

LTTE assaults on Jaffna continue. Two soldiers were killed by a grenade on 3 January in Erlalai. In another grenade attack the following day at Periyavilan three more soldiers were killed. In a clash at Pandatharippu on 11 January two LTTE were killed. *Sea Tigers* launched an attack on EPDP-controlled Delft Island south-west of the peninsula on 13 January killing an EPDP cadre.

K Selvarajah was killed by an Army shell in Urikadu in mid-January. Three others in Kerudavil were injured. The Jaffna Agriculture Department has estimated that 8,250 acres of land in Army-held areas remain uncultivated.

Refugees

The Sri Lankan government now admits that there are over one million people displaced islandwide including over 424,000 in the Vanni. The Rehabilitation Ministry claims that Rs 340 million (\$6.8 million) is spent monthly on dry rations to refugees.

Tax

A new Save the Nation monthly tax has been introduced from 1 January. The rate is 2% for earnings between Rs 15,000 and Rs 30,000 and 3% above. The defence levy of 4.5% has been extended for another year.

Released

Catholic priests Rev. S Jebanesan and Rev. E Pius held by police since early December have been released without charge, reports say. The priests were accused of carrying money and banned articles for the LTTE from the south.

Acquittal

A Madras court has acquitted the nine LTTE crew members of the ship *MV Tongnova* charged with illegally transporting arms in to India. The judge said there was no evidence that the ship was in Indian territorial waters.

Suicide

A rejected Tamil asylum-seeker facing deportation committed suicide on 23 January in a Vienna detention centre. Another Tamil was deported from Austria in December at gun-point to pre-empt asylum appeal, reports say.

Murder in Vavuniya

SITHAMPARAPURAM refugee camp officer Thiyagarajah Sritharan, 36, was murdered in Vavuniya town in early January. His body was found on 6 January near the Sinthamany Pillaiyar temple, with his throat slit.

There are currently around 4,000 families in the Sithamparapuram camp managed by UN refugee agency UNHCR. Sritharan's killing has heightened fear in Vavuniya town. Human rights groups blamed Tamil group PLOTE, who control Vavuniya with armed militia, for a series of mystery killings last year.

Over 200 people arriving in Vavuniya from the south were arrested by police following reports that the Colombo bomb lorry came from the north. Many people arriving from the north were told

to return. Passengers at the Vavuniya railway station and Vepamkulam camps complained to a TULF delegation in early January that they were being treated like foreigners and asked to produce "sponsor letters" to visit Colombo. A 12 year-old boy travelling to the capital for leukaemia treatment was held in Vavuniya for several days.

Posts minister Mangala Samaraweera told local officers on a visit to Vavuniya on 15 January that he came to observe the plight of the refugees. Sources say Mr Samaraweera's visit was intended to promote the *Sudum Nelum* (White Lotus) movement launched by the government to assist soldiers. Security forces were put on alert after a Tiger buildup at Pooarasankulam on the Mannar-

Vavuniya road.

Over 500 people in Mannar town and Pallimunai were paraded before masked informers on 10 January and five held for further questioning were released later.

Sources say there is increased Sea Tiger movement in the north-west sea, threatening military supply routes to the north. The Army-controlled Mannar Island is vulnerable to LTTE attacks. The civilian boat service from Mannar Island to Vidaltivu on the mainland was suspended by the military on 16 January. Reports say the MSF team at the Madhu refugee camp is running out of drugs because of bureaucratic delays. Airforce planes bombed a refugee settlement Iranaimadu Nagar on 21 January killing five and injuring 19 others.

■ Killings and disappearances convulse the east

Vanishing point

LONDON-BASED human rights organisation Amnesty International says that 11 Tamils disappeared in Batticaloa District between 17 December and 1 January after being taken away by Home Guards and TELO cadre. Amnesty also says that it has recorded 18 other disappearances since fighting between LTTE and the Army resumed in April 1995.

Tamil group PLOTE told Deputy Defence minister Anuruddha Ratwatte that PLOTE member S Sithiravel was saved by an Army officer when he was about to be shot in a Urani cemetery on 1 January. PLOTE and TELO are currently fighting the LTTE on the side of the Army.

In a letter to Mr Ratwatte local MP K

Thuraijasingham says that the Army attacked people and looted shops in Kinnayady on 2 January. The following day, ten houses were damaged at a Kaluvankerni housing scheme in shelling. Three people in a family including 10 year-old K Devaki were injured when a shell hit their house in Kalkudah in mid-January. The Vaharai hospital and two houses were damaged in Airforce bombing. Recent estimates say 88,000 houses have been damaged in Batticaloa District.

Over 3,000 troops were involved in *Operation Sun Eclipse* in Thoppigala jungles south of Batticaloa in mid-January in an effort to dislodge the LTTE. The Army says the Tigers had

withdrawn, but 25 LTTE camps were smashed. A soldier was killed and 11 injured in the operation. MP K Rasamanickam has written to President Kumaratunge urging her to allow harvest of crops in the area in early February.

While troops continued operations in jungles the LTTE targeted urban centres. In an attack on Pillaiyady police station in Valaichenai on 4 January the Tigers injured a policeman. The following day eight soldiers were killed and nine others injured in an ambush at Meeyakulam. A policeman and five civilians were injured in a LTTE suicide bomb attack on 8 January near Batticaloa market.

Following a landmine attack on 10 January in which a soldier lost his legs, the Army shot and injured 62 year-old Sithamparapillai in Kinnayady. The LTTE attacked Eravur police station at midnight on 24 January, killing three policemen and a civilian. The Army shot dead two civilians and injured two others on the same day.

The Defence Ministry has ordered that no food should be sent to the Vaharai area which is now under the control of the LTTE. Reports say French medical agency Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) has been denied permission to treat those injured in military operations in Vaharai. The fighting has adversely affected the fishing industry. Fish production in Batticaloa fell from 7,000 tonnes in 1994 to 6,200 in 1995. Reports say a mysterious disease has killed at least 10 people in Oddamavady and Valaichenai areas.

too little....

UNITY among Tamil political parties is a rare phenomenon these days. But all the parties have expressed dissatisfaction over government devolution proposals. EPRLF, EROS, PLOTE and TELO say the proposals fall short of Tamil aspirations. The Tamil parties have long demanded that the north-east should remain merged and are concerned that the peace package is silent on the unit of devolution. They point out that the previous Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) decided to recommend the division of the north-east. The four parties say the central government retains powers relating to many subjects in the regional list such as law and order and the regional public service which will erode meaningful devolution. They oppose provisions giving power to the President to take over regional administration or dissolve the regional councils. The Tamil parties demand that the special protection given to Buddhism strengthened under the new proposals should be extended to other religions. The TULF is also worried about the unit of devolution but has indicated that it will make representations to the PSC. EPDP's Douglas

Devananda has revived his old demand that there should be provisions to address the special problems of the Tamils which Justice minister Peiris refutes. Sri Lanka Muslim Congress General Secretary Rauf Hakeem has welcomed government announcement that the number of regions to be created will be decided by the PSC. In an interview with Reuters on 18 January LTTE deputy leader Karikalan said that the government must ultimately talk to the Tigers and suggested that the proposals submitted directly or through intermediaries would be examined. Mr Karikalan also declared that the LTTE was prepared to accept "something equal to Tamil Eelam". Whether this refers to less than a separate state is unclear and in practice, unlikely.

Ambush

THE LTTE launched a dawn attack on an Airforce unit at Pankulam in Trincomalee District on 3 January killing one and injuring 12. Around 100 Tigers ambushed an Army patrol at Velivarikulam on Trincomalee-Anuradhapura road on 11 January. Two soldiers died in the attack.

An Army informant in Alles Gardens refugee camp at Uppuveli was gunned down and another seriously wounded by the Tigers on 4 January. Kinniya Village Headman S Alagurasa was shot dead by unidentified gunmen on 16 January.

Security was intensified in Trincomalee in mid-January. At Anbuvalipuram when soldiers attempted to stop three youths on 18 January one of them committed suicide by taking

cyanide. The other two escaped. The following day residents of Sivankovilady were interrogated and some detained. Three LTTE suspects were arrested at Thambalakamam on 22 January. Trincomalee MP Sunil Shantha speaking in Parliament on 11 January accused officers of failing to provide amenities for refugees and of threatening to withdraw rations to camps to force them to leave.

Further west at Veli Oya in Mullaitivu, the LTTE killed five security personnel and injured six others on 22 January. The Defence Ministry says 15 Tigers were killed in counter-attacks. According to LTTE reports several fishermen have been killed by the Navy off Mullaitivu. The body of S Sivasangaran washed ashore with gunshot wounds.

Two provincial councils dissolved

Doubts over devolution

NORTH-CENTRAL and Sabaragamuwa Provincial Councils controlled by the main opposition United National Party (UNP) were dissolved on 3 January charged with corruption and irregularities by the respective governors.

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe accused the governors of acting unconstitutionally on a directive from President Kumaratunge. Two petitions were filed immediately in the Court of Appeal by the chief ministers of the councils challenging the dissolution.

Nominations for new elections were fixed for 18-25 January. But the Court of Appeal issued an order on 16 January restraining the Commissioner of Elections from receiving nominations until the chief ministers' applications are decided. Sources say the councils were dissolved without consultation with Justice minister GL Peiris and against the advice of the Attorney-General's Department. Attempts to topple other UNP-controlled councils show that there

would be no hesitation to resort to extra-legal means say party officials.

The revised government devolution proposals to the Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) were released in the form of a draft constitution on the day of the Appeal Court order. The proposals first published in August 1995, have generated widespread debate. The PSC is expected to begin sittings in late February. The architect of the devolution package GL Peiris again appealed to all political parties to treat the ethnic issue as a national problem and cooperate in finding a solution.

The draft describes Sri Lanka as a plural society and an indissoluble union of regions. Mr Peiris says 11th hour insertion of the word "indissoluble" will prevent secession. The President will now have the power to dissolve any regional council promoting armed rebellion or poses danger to the unity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka.

The proposal does not define the unit

of devolution. Mr Peiris says that the unit will be decided by the PSC. The government has begun consulting political parties and a campaign has swung into action. The Justice Ministry has issued a directive to all ministry secretaries to conduct seminars and produce publicity material.

Reports say some government ministers are annoyed that the campaign has begun before PSC approval. The new constitution must receive a two-thirds majority in Parliament and approval in a national referendum.

UNP support is crucial for the two-thirds majority. But the dissolution of the two UNP-controlled provincial councils and attempts to destabilise other councils may make it difficult for the government to gain the opposition party's votes. Tamil parties debating the devolution proposals view the fate of the provincial councils with apprehension saying it casts doubt on the government's commitment to devolution.

France prepares to return Tamils

REPORTS say France may launch a programme to repatriate over 35,000 Sri Lankan refugees.

Unlike in other European countries where the refugee recognition rate is below 3%, France has granted refugee status to around 50% of Sri Lankans. In the last 12 years over 300,000 Sri Lankan Tamils have sought asylum in the West. The most favoured destination is Canada where there are over 80,000 Sri Lankan refugees.

The agreement between Sri Lanka and Switzerland in January 1994 for the repatriation of 600 Tamil refugees in two years is likely to be renewed. There are almost 40,000 Sri Lankan refugees in Switzerland. In Europe attitudes are hardening and governments are determined to stem the flow of refugees. Recognition rates for Tamils in France last year dropped to 10%.

A number of Colombo travel agencies are involved in the human cargo trade, some said to be controlled by militant groups. The current charge for a destination in Europe is around Rs 600,000 (\$12,000). A Colombo agent who had received money from many people was

arrested by police in mid-January. Refugees take circuitous routes before arriving in Western Europe and many become stranded on the way. Many of the stranded are said to be living in

appalling conditions. Reports in January say 39 Sri Lankan refugees were found in a lorry at Dormagen in Germany. They told police that they had paid DM15,000 each and had travelled through Russia, Ukraine, Romania and Hungary.

The Sri Lankan government has begun a campaign to stifle worldwide fundraising by LTTE among Tamil expatriates. Millions of dollars collected are said to go into arms purchases by the Tigers and smuggled by ships to Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Navy was put on alert after two mystery ships were seen off the coast off Mullaitivu on 19 and 20 January. Foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar urged several governments in January to prevent the LTTE raising funds in the West.

British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind is reported to have assured Mr Kadirgamar on a visit to Britain that firm action would be taken against those who breaking British law. Mr Kadirgamar also summoned a meeting of foreign envoys in Colombo in early February and urged international action against LTTE extortion, illicit arms-dealing and propaganda.

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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