

THE Tamils in Sri Lanka could not have hoped for a better spokesman at this critical juncture than Varadaraja Perumal. Voluble and blunt, yet temperate, the 40-year-old former lecturer of economics at Jaffna University is the first chief minister of the recently formed North-Eastern Provincial Council. Perumal, who spoke to Senior Correspondent CHIDANAND RAJGHATTA last fortnight in Trincomalee, comes across as a man quite amenable to reason, but at the same time ready for a confrontation if the situation demands it. Excerpts:



V. PERUMAL.

"Eelam is an option"

Q. What is your position regarding the demand by the Sri Lankan Government for the withdrawal of the IPKF?

A. The withdrawal cannot be separated from the safety and security of the Tamils and the devolutionary process. So the demand is both impractical and incorrect. The Tamils have no confidence in the Sri Lankan-armed forces.

Q. What was the idea behind the formation of the Tamil National Council by bringing together three Tamil groups?

A. Just as the Sri Lankan Government has options, the Tamils should also have a choice whether to live in a united Sri Lanka or a separate state.

To decide that, a national consciousness has to be brought about among the Tamil people. That is why the Tamil National Council has been formed.

Q. So the Tamil National Council is seen as the first step towards Eelam?

A. We are not yet fully decided whether we should go in for a separate

state. We will try and find a solution within a united Sri Lanka.

But if there is no proper response from the Sinhalese, then naturally we will be compelled to feel that we need not waste our time and energy on maintaining the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka.

Q. What in your opinion will be the fall-out if the IPKF withdraws right now?

A. Things will be back to square one. We will have a pre-1987 situation.

Q. What are the major problems that are coming in the way of the devolution process?

A. The Sri Lankan Government is just not interested. They just want to have dialogues and dialogues, make promises and promises.

It was in sheer frustration that I approached New Delhi. Rajiv Gandhi promised to get us the devolution. But I think now even India is frustrated. The Sri Lankan Government is intent on treating provincial governments as municipalities.

Q. What are the problem areas in the devolution process?

A. There are a lot of areas. Even to

tackle the devolution-process we first have to sort out three major problems: the state-planned Sinhala colonisation of Tamil areas, the problems of the Tamils in the plantations and the Sinhala domination in the administration and the armed forces.

Q. Are you thinking of setting a deadline for this devolution process?

A. We will reach such a situation. Colombo is compelling us to take such a step.

Q. What about Premadasa's latest move of sending a three-member ministerial team to talk to you?

A. They came because there is some stumbling-block in their talks with the LTTE. They just want to keep all their options open.

Q. You mean Pirabhakaran's reported death?

A. Perhaps.

Q. You are not sure about his death?

A. I am personally sure that he is dead.

Q. How are you sure?

A. A lot of animals are dying in the jungles.... do we get to hear of it? As far as I am concerned Pirabhakaran is dead and gone.

Q. But couldn't this be simply wishful thinking because it suits you politically?

A. Have you seen the film, *Under Fire*? It is about a Nicaraguan revolutionary leader, Carlos Fonseca. This man dies but his supporters hide the news from the world.

It is the same with the LTTE. Pirabhakaran is the morale of the force and Mahattya is the fighting arm. So long as Mahattya can establish control, they will hide the news of Pirabhakaran's death.