

'We are still a merged province'

Tamil United Liberation Front Leader M. Sivasithamparam is interviewed on the FIRING LINE this week

Q: What are the chances of Mangala Moonasinghe Commission's new proposal breaking the deadlock on the North and East problem? Can you also tell us something more about this compromise formula of a Higher Chamber linking the two provinces?

A: As to the question of the chances of success, the only thing I can say is Mr. Mangala Moonasinghe himself is very keen and sincere about finding a solution. Now this is a new proposal that he has put forward, which all parties are studying and we also are studying. However he has not yet spelled out full details of the scheme; he has merely given the skeleton, which he says is two provincial councils and an Apex Body, even the name of the Apex body has not yet been finalised. He says this apex body will absorb executive and legislative power and the membership of the apex body will be the members of the two councils. These two councils will have some sort of veto power over any legislation passed by the apex body. As I told you the details and so on have not been worked out. It is difficult to say whether it can succeed under those circumstances. But as far as the TULF is concerned we told him (Mr. Mangala Moonasinghe) that day that we are still for a merged province with one provincial council and a board of ministers, but making some arrangements for Muslims and Sinhalese in the Eastern Province, that is our stand. But we are still studying the proposals of Mr. Moonasinghe and once we know more details we can decide.

Q: You all say permanent merger is only the starting point to any settlement, then what about the aspirations of Sinhalese and Muslims? Even if we set aside fears of Sinhalese in the East they could always look upon the Sinhalese dominated Central Government how can Muslims have any trust in Tamil in the future, going by the past record of Tigers and other Tamil groups?

A: I quite agree that Muslims have legitimate grounds to be wary about the future of the province. That is why we are trying to see whether we can reassure them, particularly on the question of their safety and security if there is a merged council.

Q: In our interview with Muslim Congress Leader A. H. M. Ashraff, he made us understand that even though he continued to have discussions with Tamil groups, he was personally all for a referendum. So why not test the opinion of the people of the East with a referendum?

A: How can you have a referendum when a large sections of Tamil people are not in the Eastern Province. They are either in India or in other parts of Sri Lanka and so on. And the further point is this, we the TULF feel that the people who had come into the Eastern Province since independence and in the teeth of the opposition of all the Tamil parties, we say they have no legitimate right to decide the future of the Eastern Province, it is our own feeling is that if there is a referendum today it will result in bloodshed.

Q: That is because the gun is ruling over the will of the people?

A: That's what I'm saying we can't have a referendum today. I want to once again assure Muslims that we are certainly prepared to consider any mechanism — constitutional, political and so on.

Q: What about the Sinhalese?

A: Even the Sinhalese, to ensure their equality and their safety.

Q: Going by recent records you will have to give more than such assurances?

A: Why don't you go further back when they lived in amity, in happiness. Why can't we once again restore that. This bloodshed has not been only confined to North and East. I think more Sinhalese people have died in the last three years than Tamils or Muslims, both in the hands of the armed services and the militants.

Q: How are you going to allay the fears of the Muslims and provide for their aspirations?

A: At the moment we are thinking of the three electorates where they are in a majority, that is Kalmunai, Pothuvil and Sammantural, where they are in a very big majority, will form a separate autonomous council with in the regional council or the provincial council of the North and East. Now this council (autonomous) will have certain powers, particularly law and order, land alienation and so on. So we think that this council should satisfy the aspirations and also meet the fears of the Muslims.

Q: What about the Sinhalese?

A: Sinhalese also would get equality.

Q: What are the areas you are willing to demarcate for them?

A: That of course is a matter for discussion. You mean what are the areas to be excised? We have not come to any decision on that matter. We still want the Sinhalese to be with us. Surely if so many lakhs of Tamil people can be in the south with the Sinhalese, then why can't the Sinhalese be with us. But we assure this that whatever rights you give to the Tamil and Muslim minorities in the rest of the country, we will give the Sinhalese in the North and East. Whatever rights, whether it is language or any other rights.

Q: But you are willing to offer something more to the Muslims?

A: Yes, because as far as the Sinhalese are concerned the centre will be the Sinhalese.

Q: Sinhalese are so divided even now?

A: I don't think so. They will be divided on other matters, but when it comes to a national question or a racial question they are never divided.

Q: Who are the Tamil VIPs at the Hilton even guarded by army commandos?

A: I don't know.

Q: Many Tamils are reportedly saying privately that none of the other groups matter and it is only the Tigers which are the problem anything?

A: That's not our assessment of the situation. Certainly there is a very good section of the Tamil people who still have faith in the TULF. Because of the present position of the world political situation being brutalised, we are unable to function openly and to get the opinion of the Tamils and others for any solution that we have. But once a solution is found and if there is one again free and fair elections, I'm personally confident that the TULF will do very well.

Q: You yourself were a victim of the LTTE barbarous attack, yet upto now none of you have publicly condemned them?

A: I condemn them for what?

Q: What about the killing of Mr. Amirthalingam?

A: We have condemned the killing of Mr. Amirthalingam. I have stated publicly the sequence of events which resulted in his death. I have condemned it at meetings and so on. It is not correct to say that we have not condemned the killings of Mr. Amirthalingam and Mr. Yogeswararan. I have told police that it was the people who claimed to be the LTTE who shot.

Q: Even the Federal solution that you all are espousing is far more than what is available in the Indian set up in the sense, for example, you all insist that the Central Government should not have the power to dissolve the

Provincial Government. Are you all not asking once again for too much?

A: We are talking from past experience. We have found that unless we have that type of autonomy, the centre which is a permanent racial majority here, unlike in India you can never hope to change the centre, therefore we have to have sufficient safeguards. The experience in India has also been rather sad. The dissolution of state government has been politically motivated not because it became necessary. Non-Congress state administrations were dissolved. So we don't want to repeat what happened in India.



M. Sivasithamparam

FIRING LINE

by Rohan Abeywardene

Q: You have been quoted as saying that only in the case of complete mismanagement of finance, the Central Government should dissolve the Provincial Government. What about things like racial riots?

A: We have said that internal civil war, external aggression and financial mismanagement. Certainly we will not wait a strike by nurses to affect the functioning of the regional body. How long have we had emergency in this country? You want the centre to dissolve our provincial councils for such a long period of time? That is why.

Q: Mr. Kumar Ponnambalam has said that the Tamils must bring to an end this process of having talks, whether there is a solution or not, within this generation?

A: Certainly, we are with him that this problem must be solved and solved very quickly. This emergency cannot go on, as that doesn't mean we must abruptly stop. We must go on talking till such time we think a solution will emerge. Otherwise what is the alternative. The alternative is continue the fight and a Lebanon situation may occur.

Q: Even TELCO has called on Tamil MPs to resign their seats if the Select Committee fails to find a solution to the North East problem by December?

A: In a complex and complicated issue like the

ethnic problem I don't like to set deadlines. Certainly we will make every endeavour to try and come to a reasonable settlement as early as possible even before December if we can come to a settlement yes. This question of members resigning is not going to resolve anything.

Q: How is it that capable people like you are not accommodated in Parliament?

A: Personally I was rejected at the 1989 February election. I don't like to enter Parliament through the back door by the death of somebody or by resignation of somebody or anything like that.

Q: No one has offered to resign?

A: Even if they do I won't accept it at all I'm waiting for a chance to get in there with the votes of the people and that is the only legitimacy that I want.

Q: You are missing from your other favourite arena as a result of your not taking the oath. So how much do you miss court appearances?

A: It is my profession, I have always enjoyed my profession, not for the money but for the work I was doing. I would like to get back as soon as possible, whether my age will permit it I don't know.

Q: You will not get back till this problem is resolved.

A: Actually we have already taken the oath, when I filed our nominations in February 1989. Under the new set up you had to take your oaths to file your nominations. I don't like to be seen that while this problem is so serious and so complicated, I'm busy making money. The other reason is all my books have been burnt along with all my notes of cases and so on, which I labouriously wrote down for the last so many years. I don't have a single legal book today. I may be able to practice without books still the main reason is I don't want to be seen to be making money, while the tragedy is going on. But apparently there is an urgent need for somebody to do these human rights cases like detentions and so on. So if that becomes necessary I may go to courts. I did appear just before the assassination of Mr. Amirthalingam, there was an Indian chap who had been detained under the PTA Act and he wanted me to appear for him so I obliged.

Q: How strong is the TULF now?

A: If you are speaking in terms of the strength of membership, no we don't have a large membership. We are not functioning that way. But if you are speaking of support I think we have a large amount of support. At the meeting to commemorate the deaths of Mr. Amirthalingam and Mr. Yogeswararan there was a quite a big crowd.

Q: What are your views on other militant groups?

A: We are now trying to work with them I don't want to make difficult our working with other groups. I don't wish to say anything. We are a non-violent group that does not believe in arms struggle to solve problems.

Q: If you all find a solution with the Sinhalese and Muslims and Tigers, continue to have other designs, how are you going to settle it then?

A: My assessment of the situation is this; if there is a reasonable settlement which is acceptable to the Tamil people, then the Tamil people will also tell the Tigers enough is enough; now try and work this. It may be the Tigers will work it. If they don't, I anticipate the Tamil people will sideline them.

Q: What about the continuing rumblings in Tamil Nadu? There is now a party, which considers Prabhakaran as its leader?

A: Tamil Nadu should not use our problem for their political ends, that is my view. They can help us, that is a different matter. But they should not use our problem for their political ends.

Q: In the event of a settlement what sort of a democracy do you envisage with Tigers? They would expect others to step aside?

A: If there is a reasonable settlement which is acceptable to our people and there are fair and free elections we will certainly contest and contest alone.

Q: So who can guarantee you free and fair elections? The Government might just be in-

terested in settling the civil war.

A: If there is a reasonable settlement, they also can contest. We have no objection to them contesting provided they contest in a way democratic elections can be held.

Q: In other words there has to be a complete laying down of arms?

A: Yes.

Q: Who will lead the TULF?

A: After the February '89 elections, when the question of who should be on the National List should be on the National List. But there was also a demand for an Eastern Province Tamil. Then Mr. Amirthalingam was assassinated and there was no senior man to do the work. So most of my friends and colleagues asked me why don't you continue till such time we can have a general council meeting of our party and elect president. So you might call me the officiating President.

Q: If you all get another chance to do this all over again will you do things any differently? Don't you think you all unnecessarily fanned racial feelings and this antagonised the Sinhalese to harden their own stand?

A: Myself we have already had asked for a separate state before independence. Then very Federal solution before independence. Our very could have avoided a large number of these mistakes. At that time our leaders were only worried about representation in Parliament. We were not worried about our land. If we have looked at this question from that angle, that is to save our land, then I think most of the problems could have been avoided. I like to ask my Sinhalese friends whether they would repeat the same mistake they made? If the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam pact had been implemented, we would have avoided all this. If the District Development Councils in 1981 had been implemented, probably we would have avoided all this. I don't blame anybody, but the fact is there. So at least let us not repeat the mistake.

Q: What is the biggest mistake you all made?

A: The main mistake was we were divided for individual leadership. If we had put up a united demand at the time of independence and put forward a solution in the interest of our people, not in the interest of few members of Parliament, we would have probably saved the situation.

Q: In '77 if you all instead of putting a demand for a separate state had stuck to the earlier call for a Federal status, the Sinhalese wouldn't have been so alarmed?

A: We were desperate. You look at the cord of the last 16 years. We had a long and hard tried.

Q: That is the fault of the Tamil politicians themselves, because they always compromised in their own portfolios?

A: That is exactly the reason I must say this, when we asked for a separate state, on the very first occasion Mr. Amirthalingam had said in Parliament we have asked for a separate state because there is no alternative, but if you offer an alternative proposal, a reasonable proposal we are prepared to take it to our people and get them to accept it. So there was no question of our being cursed.

Q: Despite there being so many experienced politicians in the TULF, don't you think you all have been grossly miscalculated?

A: We never got the youth involved in an arms struggle. We never asked the youth to take to arms. Of course like any other political party we have our youth wing, but we never asked them to take to arms. They took to arms because they lost faith in the negotiating process. For two years we tried. Therefore they lost faith in us. I like to appeal to Sinhalese people particularly. Have we not lost enough lives, have we not sustained enough damage, have we not lost so much money that could have been used for the development of this country. It is not now time to come to a reasonable settlement on this problem. I can swear on anything that a federal solution mean absolutely no harm to Sinhalese people.