

Pull off your cowardly cloak, says Kumar. (1994, May 1). *The Sunday times.*

ACTC Chief's rejoinder to Deshamamaka

Pull off your cowardly cloak, says Kumar

I refer to Deshamamaka's (D) reply to me appearing on the page 8 of 'The Sunday Times'.

In my reply to D which appeared on page 5 of 'The Sunday Times' of April 17, I taunted that if articles in defence of a President are to be taken seriously, they should not come from "anonymous donors". As an answer to this taunt, perhaps, 'The Sunday Times' describes D, this time, as "a political commentator and Presidential confidante". At a time when the whole country is reeling as a result of the ill considered statements made by the President, that he also has 'confidantes' makes confusion worse confounded! Why an all-powerful executive President's 'confidante' should be ashamed of himself as not to want to disclose his identity is surely a matter of regret.

D says that what the President has stated is that what is happening in the North at present is not an ethnic conflict but a terrorist problem. This is illogical. What the President has said, time and again, is simply this: "there is no ethnic problem, but only a terrorist problem". The President has been saying there is no ethnic problem in this country. What D has tried to do is to give his own words to limit it to the North. This is dishonesty at its highest. Who is, once again, guilty of deliberate falsehoods and half truths?

D laboriously quotes the President from his interview to 'The Sunday Times' of January 20 1994. What is the use of D going to such extents? Does he not know that after the President started on his hobby-horse of there being no ethnic problem in Sri Lanka, his own Prime Minister has gone out of his way to negate the impact by conceding, on as many occasions, that there is an ethnic problem in this country? Does D not know that the whole world is laughing at the fact that in the President's speeches which are off-

the-cuff, he comes out in his true colours, whilst in his speeches which are written down, he is more sober and conciliatory? Has not D seen that the sentiments expressed in the President's speeches off-the-cuff are diametrically opposed to the sentiments in his speeches which are written down?

Let us, for a moment, analyse the words D puts into the mouth of the President - "What is happening in the North at present is not an ethnic conflict but a terrorist problem". Of course, what is happening in the North is not an ethnic conflict to the extent that there are no Muslims and Sinhalese in numbers there to fight but only Tamils. Equally, what is happening in the North is not a terrorist problem either, because there is a war going on there, call it a confrontational or conventional war or a guerrilla war, there is no galsay that there is a war - not only in the North but also in the East. What is the "terrorism" that is going on in the North? Will D elaborate? Is war, 'terrorism'? Are they synonymous?

Clearcut answer

Let us not beat about the bush, D says. What, finally is the position of the President - is there, or is there not, an ethnic problem in Sri Lanka? Let the world have a clear-cut answer to this question, now that D is described as a 'Presidential confidante'. What is the position of the Prime Minister, the Government and the UNP - is there, or is there not, an ethnic problem in Sri Lanka? Let D answer. There are Tamil card-carrying members of the UNP - Pulendran, Ganeshalingam, Nehru. Let anyone of them say that there is no ethnic problem in Sri Lanka today. There are Tamil public servants, whom the Government hold out as propaganda gimmicks. Let even anyone of them say that there is no ethnic problem. That would be the acid test. Will D or the UNP take up my challenge?

D quotes the President from his interview, "It could be termed an ethnic conflict, if the Tamil people were persecuted in the rest of the country and are driven out". If the President thinks that there can be an ethnic conflict only if Tamils are physically driven from pillar to post, then I feel sorry for the President and more sorry for his confidante who upholds that point of view.

D quotes the President who talks of "the terrorist groups which do not want to allow them (Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims) to live in harmony". Who are these terrorist groups? when the PLOTE, TELO, EPPD, EROS and the ENDLF are all in the pay of the Government, have their protection and work as mercenaries for them? Does the President refer to these groups or to some other groups? Name them.

D quotes the President saying that "more than half the Tamil speaking people now live in the seven provinces outside the Northern and Eastern Provinces. How many Sinhalese people are there in the Northern Province. At the moment not even one". Even this statement is blatantly false. From where does the President get his statistics about more than half? When the President speaks about Tamil speaking people he must be taken to mean the Tamils and Muslims. I have said in my reply on April 17 that there are no Tamils of Sri Lankan origin outside the North and East except in the District of Colombo.

As regards the Sinhala people in the Northern Province, I personally know of so many Sinhalese people who are still living in the Jaffna peninsula. (I do not mean the hostages being held by the LTTE). There are Sinhala villages in the Vavuniya District and there are Sinhala A. G. A. Divisions created by the Government in the Vavuniya District. Sinhalese are living here in their thousands. The

Vavuniya District is in the Northern Province. Then, what comes of the President's statement that "not even one Sinhalese lives in the Northern Province at the moment? See who is propagating deliberate falsehoods and half-truths?"

D quotes the President saying, "we are for the solution of minority problems". Can we know what are the "minority problems" the President sees?

Minority problems

D says that I have gone on a flight of fancy giving a distorted picture by stating didn't the President say this or that. Yes, let not D beat about the bush. Will D, or will he not, admit that the President said all the various statements I have categorised in paragraph 5 of my reply on April 17? Let us have a clearcut answer to that.

Yes, "it is a fact that any solution to minority problems could only be solved with the co-operation of the majority in a democratic system of Government. It is also a fact that if the majority political parties are disintegrated, no constitutional changes can be brought about". It is also a fact that "no solution that is worked out can hold if the majority parties remain divided". I have conceded all this.

Now, does the President, the Government or the UNP concede that there are minority problems? If there are minority problems, was not the President dishonest in repeatedly chanting that there was no ethnic problem? Or, do we still want to quibble in words and say ethnic problems are different from minority problems?

If there are minority problems, what does the President see as the solution? Let us forget about the Government and the UNP for the moment.

To me, there is only a Tamil problem. Others might choose to call the same thing as an ethnic problem. It is one and the

same thing. Let us not quibble with words. Now, another terminology has cropped up - 'minority problems'. May the world know what are the "minority problems" faced by the Tamils, as understood by the President, which has to be solved. Then we will know whether we are dealing with a sensitive or an in-sensitive President.

D taunts me by asking the question why I cannot go about, in the North as freely as I get about in Colombo: This is now the only argument my adversaries have! I will face it fairly and squarely.

It is a tragedy, of the Tamil community that, at various times, in our history, various parties have held the view that they are the sole representatives of the Tamil people and nobody else has any say. Since 1983 it is the LTTE's turn to say that they are the sole representatives of the Tamils. So, if the LTTE feels that some others may be challenging that position, they will not take kindly to such people.

D makes the point that the LTTE is present in full force in the North but the Tamils there are undergoing untold hardship. In my reply I admitted that the LTTE has made things difficult for the Tamils in Jaffna but I also referred to what the Government was doing which D, in characteristic fashion, has chosen to ignore. I referred to the carpet bombing and the economic embargo.

If the LTTE is a terrorist organisation, the UNP Government is a good foil to it. Do we Sri Lankans not know of the terror the Government is capable of? Do we Sri Lankans not know how this Government is still continuing to feed, clothe and house the PLOTE, TELO, EPPD, EROS and ENDLF? Let D talk with clean hands. Is it not D's position that the Government will cringe, crawl and creep and talk to the LTTE at any moment? So let us not show too much bravado in



Kumar: let Tamils decide criticising the LTTE.

D persists in his assertion that communal flare-ups that have occurred in the past were done by mischief-makers who wanted to discredit the Government and the opportunity given to them to cause trouble in the South was provided by the Northern terrorists by their atrocities. (This is an honest statement coming from a Presidential confidante?)

Terrorists?

Let us take the Satyagraha on Galle Face Green in June 1956 over the Sinhala only Bill. A small group of Tamil politicians with their supporters sat down the Green watched by about a 100 policemen. When hoodlums hammered the Tamils, police officers, were any arrests made by the police? Were Messrs. Suntharalingam, A. Chelvanayagam, E. M. V. Naganthan, A. Amirthalingam and G. G. Ponnambalam northern terrorists? What were the atrocities they committed? Will D answer?

When the anti-Sri campaign in the North and East led to Tamils being mauled in areas outside the North and East, will D name the Northern terrorists who gave the provocation with their atrocities?

When the Jaffna library, Jaffna public market place, the TULF headquarters, the home of the MP for Jaffna were burnt down in June 1981, who were the Northern terrorists who gave the provocation and what were the atrocities they committed? Will D answer? Will D deny that President Jayewardene in the momentous meeting

at Hotel Oberoi in August 1992 came out with the stunning statement that the high-ranking police officer who set fire to the Jaffna Public Library is now working as senior executive at Lake House. What does D have to say to this?

When 53 Tamil political prisoners were brutally killed in the Welikada Jail in July 1983 and it is now common knowledge that orders had gone out from the prison officials, were any officials put on the mat? Will D answer? Why talk of Northern terrorists and the provocation they gave? You can get atrocities instigated by the Government.

In respect of Tamil public servants, D says that I have given an excellent certificate (presumably to the Government) and shown that the Tamils are not discriminated against and that their efficiency is recognised. I also said that if any of these public servants is discriminated against, the Tamils will rise up. The Tamil public servants under consideration are old recruits. Has there been any Tamil new recruits or promotions in proportion to their numbers or merit? Why does D not publish the statistics that Dr. Ramanujam was asked to collect?

Yes, if the LTTE resorts to terrorise people, like the Government and the other Tamil groups do, it can be accused of particular terrorist acts. But when it is waging a war, the LTTE cannot be said to be engaged in terrorist activities, surely? When the JVP was terrorising the countryside, D or his ilk dared not refer to its members as terrorists. No 'fufu' was started for the victims of JVP activity. What is sauce for the goose must be sauce for the gander.

What is of urgent necessity is to have some proposals from the UNP and the SLFP to resolve the Tamil problem/ethnic problem/minority problem. If that is done and we strike a solution, the war

and 'terrorism' will wither away. Then we need not talk of 'talks' or of 'ceasefire' or of 'cessation of hostilities' or any such thing.

D is correct about major political parties being more receptive to recognising minority rights. I agree with the instances given by D, who must agree that all this is due to the sustained agitation of the Tamils.

D asks the question why the LTTE agreed to surrender arms after the Indo-Lanka Accord. If there was no agreement or understanding between it and Rajiv Gandhi, there is no room for speculation. Either there was an agreement or there was no agreement. If D says there was an agreement, let him say so and prove it without beating about the bush.

As to why the LTTE made even a token surrender, I remember reading a report of the Subhimalay meeting of August 4, 1987 where the LTTE leader said that because India had taken over the protection of the Tamils, that they were surrendering the arms.

I was amused to read D's argument about 'concessions' the LTTE received from President Premadasa.

5-star facility

D lists them as giving arms and keeping them at five-star hotels while negotiating. This reminds me of D's argument if the president was anti-Tamil would he undergo all the trouble to send food to the North? The LTTE members were invited to Colombo for talks by President Premadasa. J. was his duty to put them up. They could not have been expected to camp out on the Army grounds where they slept from the helicopters? Did the LTTE ask that it be put up in 5-star hotels? Anyway, these are not the type of 'concessions' I understand. I understand only political concessions and rights. D only proves my point which I have been saying all this while, that

President Premadasa and the LTTE did not, during those 14 months of talks anything about political issues. If President Premadasa gave arms to the LTTE, this President, the Government and the UNP are now precluded from referring to them as terrorists. All that I would say is that you asked for it!

As regards the LTTE agreeing to contest the North-East Provincial Council, the LTTE formed its political wing and became a recognised political party to enter the democratic process. If LTTE had agreed to contest the North-East Provincial Council and was urging the dissolution of the EPRLF-dominated Council, as D tried to make out, why did not President Premadasa give the LTTE this 'concession' also by dissolving the Council? Why had Premadasa waited for the opportunity on a platter to dissolve the Council when the EPRLF unilaterally declared independence? The EPRLF's unilateral declaration of independence was in March 1990. The council was dissolved in July 1990, the 'Elam War II' started on the 11th of June 1990. The talks started in April 1989. If D's statement is honest, the Council should have been dissolved well before June 1990.

D argues that because LTTE is belligerent there is no use in working out a solution because it cannot be implemented. If this is D's argument, why were all the conferences held and why did all the committees set?

D quotes the President as saying "we should know, in advance, what they (LTTE) want to talk about". I think the LTTE had indicated that they, too, would like to know in advance, what the President the Government and the UNP propose as a political solution to the Tamil Problem. Indeed, the whole world wants to know just this - and not only from the UNP but also from the SLFP.

The debate is on whether this President is anti-Tamil and anti-minority. The statement that there is no ethnic problem but only a terrorist one, even though repeated umpteen times, does not make the President anti-Tamil or anti-minority. It only shows he does not know what he is talking about. There are other statements the President has made, and which were referred to by me on April 17 which shows the President as clearly anti-Tamil and anti-minority. D has chosen not to face the accusation fairly and squarely in his reply on the 24th of April, 1994. Therefore, the President has indeed proved as being anti-Tamil and anti-minority.

In D's original defence of the President and in his reply to me of April 24 much fire has been directed at the LTTE. In the President's statements which were blatantly anti-Tamil and anti-minority which (had categorised) there was no reference to the LTTE. Why did D have to spend all this powder and shot on the LTTE? Is it not because D could not present his brief competently and adequately and had to look for distractions? As to D's point that I have always proved to be a poor advocate of the Tamil cause, whilst D is recognising himself and his role as an advocate in others, all I wish to say is, let the Tamils decide that matter. I will only take their decision, not D's.

I do not expect a political commentator and Presidential confidante to be a coward. The Tamils are prepared to critic the President for his boldness in showing his true colours and convictions. Let the Tamils credit the Presidential confidante for his boldness in spite of the hopeless cause he is espousing. Will D show his true colours or will he still hide behind the cowardly title of Deshamamaka?

G. G. Ponnambalam Jr.