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PM held in high esteem in Jaffna : *Karikalan*

From William de Alwis in Jaffna

The government and LTTE delegations yesterday expressed the hope that the peace process they started on Thursday would lead to permanent peace in Sri Lanka.

This hope was expressed at the joint press conference the two delegations gave to the Colombo and Jaffna journalists who were present in Jaffna during the two days of talks.

LTTE delegation chief Karikalan said that his leader Velupillai Prabhakaran had instructed him to tell the press that the LTTE would participate in the peace talks with an open mind and would make every effort to co-operate with the government.

Mr. Karikalan also said the Jaffna people hold Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga in high regard as she was educated and is concerned about the sufferings of the common people.

Government delegation's head Mr. Kusumsiri Balapatabendi responded: "Our presence here is to be seen as the obvious manifestation of the government's goodwill and concern for the people of Jaffna".

The government and LTTE delegations said they had identified a few areas for immediate action: electricity, irrigation, school, health and roads.

The LTTE delegates said the LTTE had wanted the opening of the Sangupiddy road and the cessation of hostilities leading to a ceasefire.

They also said the people of Jaffna wanted a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the events leading to the burning of the Jaffna public library.

Mr. Balapatabendi said the delegation had visited the Jaffna library premises and would inform the

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government of the request for a commission of inquiry.

Journalists from Colombo were impressed by the desire for peace among the people of Jaffna and their anxiety to return to normal life.

The joint statement of the government and LTTE delegations was read at the news conference by Mr. Balapatabendi. It reiterated the desire of both sides to end the 11-year-war.

"We are happy to note that the new government has taken steps to bring about peace. It seems genuinely committed to finding a peaceful solution", the statement said.

The government side said that the joint statement will be issued in Colombo on Saturday.