

Families of POWs threaten march into LTTE areas. (1999, October 31). *The Island*.

## Families of POWs threaten march into LTTE areas

by Shamindra Ferdinando

The Association of Relatives of Servicemen Missing in Action, Friday blasted both the PA and the UNP for ignoring Prisoners of War [POWs] in LTTE custody while revealing plans to organise a peace march across the army's forward positions in the Wanni to meet with LTTE leaders ahead of the December 21 presidential election.

At least 2000 people would join the march, he said.

"We are determined to cross the line and explore the possibility of securing the release of our sons,"

the association's president E. P. Nanayakkara told *The Sunday Island*.

Nanayakkara's son, Sudarshana disappeared on January 20, 1997 off the east coast when LTTE shot down the aircraft piloted by him. The Chinese built Y 12 16 seater aircraft was on a routine reconnaissance mission to spot LTTE craft engaged in arms smuggling at the time of the tragedy.

He accused both the government and the opposition of ignoring the sufferings of the POWs, their families and parents. Nanayakkara said that the PA and UNP politicians

recently avoided the association's annual general meeting held at the Mahaweli Auditorium. "They probably cannot face parents of the POWs," he said adding that people are angry at the way politicians side step vital issues.

Nanayakkara said that President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ministers Anuruddha Ratwatte, G. L. Peiris and Mangala Samaraweera, the IGP, Service Commanders and Deputy Minister Dilan Perera were among those invited for the meeting held last Tuesday [26]. No one bothered to come, he

said saying that some of them later claimed that they were unable to attend due to an important meeting with the president.

He said that the UNP and the Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was also invited. Nanayakkara had met the UNP and the opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe in Parliament to invite him for the meeting. He said that Wickremesinghe promised to attend the meeting or at least send a senior party representative. However, he failed to keep his promise,

Nanayakkara said.

He said that there was evidence to suggest that a large number of POWs were in LTTE's custody. Quoting a civilian released by the LTTE, he claimed that his son and aircraft's co-pilot were among dozens if not hundreds of POWs in LTTE's custody.

The LTTE continues to claim that it has less than 30 POWs in its custody. These persons have been shown to representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] on a regular basis.

The association receives support from Ethnic Affairs

Ministry. The association's invitations for the October 26 meeting were faxed from the ministry.

Nanayakkara said that already 20 groups involved in promoting a peaceful solution to the North East crisis had indicated their desire to participate in the proposed peace march across the army's forward defence lines. A meeting has been fixed for November 3 to discuss the proposed peace march. Nanayakkara said that they would go ahead with it even without government approval.

Asked whether the LTTE has agreed to permit a peace march within the area under its control, he said that

the LTTE's political head Thamilselvam had sent him a letter welcoming the association to so called uncleared part of the Wanni. He declined to reveal how he got in touch with the LTTE but said that the LTTE would not oppose a peace march across the frontlines.

The association said that politicians are only interested in power. The UNP in June 1990 ordered well over 600 policemen to surrender to the LTTE and upto now no mention has been made of them. Power hungry politicians would not make any genuine effort to win the war or solve it by peaceful means, the association said.