

GETTING AGENDA READY FOR PEACE TALKS

The main, if not fatal, flaw in the Pr em a d a s a - LTTE 'dialogue' was that it had no known substance and agenda. This time however, the Tigers appear to have prepared a clear basis for holding talks with the PA Government.

It is therefore, imperative that the delegation which is scheduled to leave for Jaffna in a few weeks time to begin the first round of talks with the Tigers on behalf of the Government should carefully examine the LTTE's attitude and concerns in order to get a basic idea about how best it (the delegation) can meaningfully respond. In short, there should be a brief — going with an open mind, though important, is not enough.

Confidants

There is already criticism that members of the Government delegation, with the exception of Mr. Lionel Fernando, are in no way fit for the task entrusted to them. The critics, however, fail to take note of an important fact about the composition of the delegation. It is in itself a clear signal to the Tigers and the Tamils the north that the PM is taking a very great interest in the matter by sending her close personal confidants and her professional political associates in the PA — who if sent on such a mission, would naturally be inhibited by the real or imagined reactions in

their predominantly Sinhala constituencies. The Tigers I think, are also prepared to proceed with the first round of talks on the basis that Chandrika will not be in a position to take any firm action to resolve the problem until she wins the Presidential election in November.

It is very important for them at this juncture that there should be someone in full power in the south who would recognise their central role in resolving the conflict and thereby rebuild their political legitimacy which had been very much damaged due to India's hostility, internationally. A prolonged friendship with Chandrika is essential for them if one were to view their approach to the Government's peace initiative in this context.

The LTTE has always thought of and portrayed her opponent in the Presidential race, Mr. Gamini Dissanayake as a lackey of the Indian Government. Therefore, the Tigers consider it to be in their interests to see that Chandrika stabilises herself politically. Having said this, I must mention the fact that they still seem to harbour the notion that she may ultimately submit to the dictates of a Sinhala-Buddhist oriented military. (Attention was drawn to this in these columns just before the

elections). The LTTE's attitude towards the P.A. leadership can be a hitch in developing a conducive atmosphere for carrying on the peace talks usefully. One of the cornerstones of the Tiger case for the sovereign state of Eelam is that the fundamental Sinhala-Buddhist attitude which no Sinhala leader can afford to ignore is basically tainted with incorrigible war-mongering. The results of the general elections which have convinced many that there has occurred a most radical transformation of the Sinhala-Buddhist psyche has however, not done much to deter the LTTE from raising doubts among the people of Jaffna whether the change is real. Here I must quote from the LTTE's English publication 'Inside Report' (20.9.94).

“Who is dictating the peace agenda? Is it the military top brass who are in the driving seat or the elected Prime Minister? Or is it that Chandrika merely appears to be the chauffeur and the back-seat driving is done by the top brass of the armed forces? These are the questions uppermost in the minds of political observers here who have been keenly observing political developments since the new Government took power. They note that the new Government started off on the right note by reiterating its

determination to find a political solution to the ethnic question and lifting the ban on 28 items, as an earnest of its goodwill. On the face of it, everything seemed smooth and the Tigers were asked to name their representatives for the preliminary talks, which they did. But something seems to have gone wrong and political observers suspect the military had something to do with it. The newspapers of 11th September carried a BBC report that the Armed Forces had made preparations for a massive military onslaught the previous week! In this context, it should be noted that the State Minister for Defence, Col. Anuruddha Ratwatte, had visited the Army camps in the North, including Palaly, a few days earlier and had told the troops that the Government would not move even an inch outside the framework of the unitary constitution to find a solution to the ethnic question.

Political observers point out that it is curious that the State Minister for Defence should have preempted the outcome of the negotiations in this preemptory manner. This, they feel, is due to the pressure the military seems to be exerting on the Government. The LTTE leader Mr. Prabhakaran has stressed that a ceasefire is essential to create conditions conducive for peace talks. At the same time he has been careful to point out that he is not stipulating a ceasefire as a precondition for talks. The reasonableness of what Mr. Prabhakaran has said is borne out by former Air Force Chief Harry Goonetilleke's stand. The ex-SLAF chief has pointed out that

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The military seems to be divided on the question of a political solution to the ethnic problem. One section seems to be of the view that it is incumbent on the military to go along with the Government's decision to seek a political solution to the problem. The military hawks, on the other hand,

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unless a ceasefire is declared and the Poonery-Sangupiddy Cause way is demilitarised and opened to traffic, clashes between the Tigers and the Armed Forces will continue and the atmosphere necessary for mutual trust and successful negotiations cannot be built up. As it is, in the absence of a ceasefire, clashes continue and there are frequent attacks on fishermen especially in the sea off Vadamarechchy, taking a toll of lives.

seem to be insisting that the military's interests should not be compromised in any way during this search for a political solution. They insist that they should not pull back from its present position nor should army camps be closed down. Viewed from this angle some of the State Defence Minister's pronouncements may be interpreted as sops to these military Cerberuses. His repeated announcement that the military has

assured him of their whole hearted cooperation is sound, according to political observers, like protesting too much. 'The Island' of 17th September has reported that the army top brass is strongly opposed to the closing down of the army camp at Pooneryn.

So the question natural arises: who is dictating the peace agenda? If the Government has genuinely set its heart on a political solution, it should declare a ceasefire so that negotiations can become meaningful and it should open the peninsula so that the goods on which the embargo has been lifted can flow freely into the peninsula. Insisting the passage through Elephant Pass as the State Defence Minister, prompted perhaps by the military, is not only most unhelpful, it also shows that the new Government is following in the UNP's path. And that old path will certainly not get the government anywhere, if peace is its goal.

One of the first priorities of the Government delegation therefore should be to find an appropriate manner in which to conduct the talks without unwittingly contributing towards strengthening the doubts stirred in the minds of northern citizens by the LTTE's argument. The Tigers say that in the south politics is

not in control. The members of the delegation can ill-afford to ignore this if they are serious about the task entrusted to them.

Agenda

Then there is the LTTE's agenda. It is a clear indication that on both sides this time the concern is not with narrow political or military objectives but is primarily with the condition of the people whom both parties consider their citizens (*de jure* for one and *de facto* for the other). Last time the common goal was to kick the Indian army out of the country — it was a military exigency for the Tigers and a political priority for Premadasa. And hence when the Indian army left there was no actual common cause to keep both parties together for long.

The chances for a prolonged peace may be better this time because the problem which both sides want to tackle first is a very sensitive and fundamental issue from which they derive their political legitimacy — the people. Despite its oft declared militarism, the LTTE is not in a position to be insensitive to the predicament of a people whose sovereignty it now assumes, is vested in it. In fact this is what distinguishes the Tigers from other armed groups in post-Cold War conflicts. Unlike a purely militarist organization, the LTTE is also

concerned about deriving legitimacy from the public sphere for which it has staked its claim.

The negotiators must comprehensively grasp this in examining and responding to the LTTE's agenda. Firstly the Tigers say that they will not raise any of the fundamental issues concerning the political aspirations of the Tamils (in the LTTE's view) such as the right of recognising the right of self-determination, the integrity of the Tamil homeland, a federal or confederal structure of regional autonomy etc.

Issues

The LTTE's discussions with the delegation will concern the following issues (in what seems to me to be the order of importance):

- a) the day to day problems faced by the Tamils in the north
- b) lifting the ban on other items
- c) travelling through prohibited zones
- d) reconstruction, rehabilitation and the supply of electricity and
- e) modalities for a ceasefire

Although Prabhakaran has stressed the importance of a ceasefire in his interview with Mrs. Anandi Suriyaparakasam of the BBC, and also the need for the army to pull out from Valigamam north and the islands to enable refugees resettle, I do not think that the LTTE will insist on

these issues in the initial stages of the talks. The intention in the LTTE agenda is further confirmed by the composition of the LTTE delegation.

All its members are people who handle the day-to-day running of the civil and political administration of the areas in the north under Tiger control. Karikalan is the deputy head of the political section of the LTTE. Elamparithy (formerly Anjeyar) is the political organiser for the district of Jaffna. Ravi is the head of the department of economic research and development. And Dominic (who was demoted from his military post in '92) is the head of the department of public administration. They will discuss specific issues concerning getting life back to normal in the north. The problem that the Government delegation has to foresee is that the LTTE is bound to insist on doing everything through its own administrative set-up and development programs.

The LTTE's point is that it cannot compromise its security at this juncture by allowing the Government to undertake reconstruction and rehabilitation, restoring electricity and telecommunication etc. How best the Government can reach an understanding on the crucial matter would depend on the groundwork of the Govt. delegation.