

“I believe in destiny”. (1994, September 30). *India today*.

CHANDRIKA KUMARATUNGA

## “I believe in destiny”

SRI Lanka's Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga, 49, spoke to INDIA TODAY's Tamil Edition Senior Copy Editor VAASANTHI in an exclusive interview on the biggest problem facing her country today: the LTTE and the ethnic strife in the north and east. Excerpts:

**Q. How do you intend to tackle the politics of violence, especially the ethnic problem?**

**A.** I have already decided to lift the embargo on all food items in Jaffna. That will be coming very soon without any conditions.

**Q. Have you had any response from the Tigers yet?**

**A.** Nothing official. But there are various positive unofficial messages, although we are not sure if they are correct. We are establishing contacts. That is all I can say.

**Q. Will the LTTE's claim of being the true representatives of the Tamils affect your links with other groups?**

**A.** We don't believe they are the only representatives. They are the major representatives, because they have the biggest arms power. We cannot also forget that they de-

stroyed some of the equally major representatives like the PLOTE, EPRLF and the TELO.

**Q. Do you plan to go to Jaffna?**

**A.** Well, if something comes out of the initial discussion. I certainly intend to go if they want us to come.

**Q. And if the LTTE doesn't respond?**

**A.** We'll have to see.

**Q. Since the President holds the defence portfolio and belongs to the UNP, will this conflict with your peace plans?**

**A.** At the moment I must say the President has promised to avoid all conflicts. We are trying to have this difficult marriage. We have to live with it at least for some time till there is a change for a different constitutional system. We are persuading him to give it (the portfolio) to us. But he wants to keep it. He has told us he will not object to our policy, but we will have to see.

**Q. What will your policy towards India be?**

**A.** Positive. Our government does not have an India phobia like the previous government had. We are very realistic. We are also aware that we are probably the only neighbour which does not have serious problems with India.

**Q. How does it feel to be prime**



**minister of a country that is desperate for peace?**

**A.** I am very conscious of the responsibility. I don't feel excited at all. It weighs very heavily on me. But I believe in destiny. And I have confidence that we can fulfil the commitment because there is so much goodwill. That is very encouraging.

make some difficult-to-accept demands at the bargaining table. Kumaratunga will then have to balance the defence services and, possibly, resurgent Sinhala sentiments. Also, it may actually provide Pirabhakaran and his Tigers with more clout, at a time when it is still difficult to tell whether he has lost any of his influence in Jaffna. There is a possibility, say government sources, that he could demand all army camps in Jaffna to be shut down. The moment traffic to Jaffna is clear, and the economic em-

bargo completely lifted, Pirabhakaran is likely to strengthen his image as the saviour of the Tamils. Another demand that the Government is expecting is that the LTTE will ask that the army take its permission before moving anywhere in the peninsula.

**T**HESE demands will certainly raise government hackles, especially when the LTTE is already manoeuvring the situation its way. For instance, it has raised the India bogey by pointing at A.N. Verma, principal

secretary to P.V. Narasimha Rao, visiting Colombo as Rao's personal emissary. "If the talks fail", says Balasingham, "we will certainly not be the reason for it." This is the danger—even before talks get going, the prospective participants are already setting up defences in the event of failure.

At the same time, the latest peace moves offer the best chance for peace in Sri Lanka since the ethnic problem blew up in 1983. Moreover, the timing is fortuitous. Pirabhakaran realises that the Tamils are weary of deprivation and war. Militarily, the stalemate continues and in recent months, it is the Sri Lankan Army which has claimed more successes than the LTTE. Finally, Kumaratunga's move in partially lifting the economic embargo in Jaffna within days of her swearing-in has given the indication that she is serious about solving the ethnic problem, unlike her three predecessors. The Tigers' official response calling for unconditional talks has been equally heartening. After what seems like ages, Sri Lanka's most famous tourist slogan—serendipity—could be inching towards reality. ■



**“We are pleading for a cease-fire. If the talks fail, we will certainly not be the reason for the failure.”**

ANTON BALASINGHAM,  
LTTE Spokesman