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A tale of two deadlines

THE political poker game between Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunge and the insurgent Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) took an ominous twist when Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran issued two successive deadlines in late March, threatening to pull out of the faltering peace process.

In a 7 March letter, President Chandrika rejected four LTTE preconditions for peace talks - total lifting of the economic embargo; restrictions on north-east fishing to be rescinded; Pooneryn Army camp removed; free movement for armed LTTE cadre in the east - claiming they "could have serious military repercussions if granted outside the framework of an established and durable peace".

Prabhakaran's reply in turn condemned the continuing economic and military coercion of the Tamils as "bargaining cards to seek political gains at the negotiating table" - and gave the government ten days until 28 March to meet the LTTE's demands.

The Tigers also released 16 prisoners, 15 policemen and one soldier, after a ten-day hunger strike. An NGO delegation led by Colombo Bishop Kenneth Fernando made two flying visits to Jaffna, appealing to LTTE to consider simultaneous talks on three problem areas, rehabilitation, devolution and disarmament.

President Kumaratunge, newly returned from the UN Social Development Conference in Copenhagen and an unscheduled meeting with LTTE International representative Lawrence Thilagar, went into high-level conference with the military. The Army fully backed the peace process but was ready for war said com-

mander Lt. Gen. Gerry de Silva. The *Far Eastern Economic Review's* mid-March edition was promptly impounded as local correspondent Manik de Silva reported "rumblings in the military".

Security forces were on red alert as deadline day dawned with an undisclosed number of Tamils arrested across Colombo. President Chandrika had already told the press a day earlier from New Delhi on her first official visit to India, that she was willing to lift the economic embargo and the fishing ban.

There were no discussions with Indian officials maintained Chandrika, on the extradition of LTTE leader Prabhakaran indicted in Madras for involvement in the murder of Rajiv Gandhi, but Mrs Kumaratunge spent an hour with the former premier's widow, Sonia.

Prabhakaran's next communique, dated 28 March deadline day, acknowledged Chandrika's two concessions, formalised in a letter four days earlier. The LTTE leader set the government a further three-week ultimatum to comply with the Tigers' two remaining demands - the removal of Pooneryn Army camp to allow a safe north-west passage for civilians to Jaffna and the free movement of armed LTTE cadre in the east.

Trincomalee was tense in early March after a boatload of armed Tigers was intercepted offshore as President Kumaratunge was scheduled to open a model resettlement village for refugees at Kappalthurai, a few miles away. The suicide of a leading LTTE cadre, questioned by police outside Batticaloa in late March, sparked new fears of major Tiger reprisals.

Back in Colombo, a defiant President Kumaratunge brushed aside the LTTE's brinkmanship saying nobody could dictate deadlines to the government but doubts are growing even among her supporters.

The President's dilemma is that she loses ground whichever stand she takes. Sniping from the sidelines, one of LTTE's women's leaders, A d e l e B a l a s i n g h a m

described Chandrika in an article picked up by the Colombo press as unrealistic and unskilled in complex negotiations.

The sense of stalemate remains palpable. The Tigers refuse to open political negotiations until "the day-to-day problems of the Tamil people" - shorthand for the four current preconditions - are resolved.

The government refuses to send more than minor bureaucrats north until the Tigers are ready to talk politics. Events suggest the government will have to concede ground in both directions to stave off the 19 April deadline.

Only the peace dividend can return Sri Lanka to economic and social stability, Chandrika told world leaders at the UN Copenhagen conference. But the immediate payoff, the money to rebuild Jaffna will not be pledged at the next World Bank meeting on Sri Lanka on 27 April, because of lack of progress in the peace talks, insiders warn.

A separate meeting will be scheduled when both sides agree modalities. The Tigers reaffirmed their demand for a joint Development Committee and a Development Bank to oversee the process when diplomats from the Colombo embassies of 12 donor countries visited Jaffna in early March.

What Chandrika has to offer the Tigers as a peace package remains shrouded in speculation. Pundits believe the administration is sitting on its proposals until a July referendum to prevent the opposition United National Party whipping up a campaign accusing the government of "giving too much to the Tamils".

The reality may be even more explosive. The government plans to bypass the necessary two-thirds parliamentary majority through a carefully worded referendum question giving it *carte blanche* to rewrite the Constitution, rather than seeking a mandate on contentious details like a formula for devolution.

Minister GL Peiris assured senior Buddhist prelates in late March that Buddhism will retain pre-eminence in the new constitutional formula. Tamil political parties in Colombo are restive and the cry is growing in the south for the government to spell out its proposals.

■ Sri Lanka's previous UNP administration spent only 10% of foreign aid through inefficiency and cronyism President Chandrika Kumaratunge told public servants at a briefing on the government's economic strategy in late March. Over Rs 50 billion (\$1 billion) for public service projects remained unutilised through bureaucratic delay and a notoriously corrupt tendering system. Last July the World Bank withdrew \$25 million of unutilised credit including \$10 million for emergency reconstruction in the north-east.

THE DISAPPEARED

"Unwanted elements"

"I know my husband is still alive somewhere" sobbed Yogamangalam Francis as the Presidential Commission of Enquiry investigating disappearances in the North-East Province opened in Trincomalee in early March.

Anthony Francis, a clerk in the Road Development Authority, was one of hundreds rounded up by the military after the Tigers fled Trincomalee at the outbreak of the June war of 1990. His wife and children hid in the jungle for 15 days before a local priest informed the ICRC who approached the military.

Army officers said Mr Francis would be released after enquiries but refused to let his wife see him on a series of fruitless visits to the notorious Plantain Point Army camp, where human rights workers say many detainees were tortured and killed.

Over 12,000 petitions regarding disappeared persons in the North-East are before the Commission, one of the three regional bodies set up by the People's Alliance government to investigate the death squad years. Over 1,000 are from Trincomalee.

The hearings focused on two major incidents. Over 40 people were arrested during a joint Army and police raid on the Trincomalee Base hospital in June 1990 and subsequently disappeared. Another 26 are still missing after the military rounded up hundreds of suspects in the McHeyzer Stadium a month later and took away 50 blindfolded for questioning.

Brigadier TMSD Tennakoon told the Commission he could not confirm Army involvement in the Trincomalee hospital incident as the records of the year 1990 had

vanished. Col.SA Kulatunge described the McHeyzer stadium roundup and a subsequent house-to-house search for "unwanted elements" but blamed senior police officials for the arrests.

Amnesty International in a letter to President Kumaratunge in mid-March urged the government to suspend officers implicated in atrocities and to offer protection to Commission witnesses to prevent intimidation.

In Kandy where another regional Commission opened proceedings on 13 March members of the Police Counter Subversive Unit accused of many disappearances are still operating.

In the North-East it is doubly urgent says Amnesty where those accused range from Army and police personnel to Home Guards and Tamil groups working with the military.

Mrs Thurairatnam Vasanthakumari's 23 year-old husband was one of hundreds arrested and paraded in front of masked informers in the blazing afternoon sun in the McHeyzer Stadium on that fateful July day four years ago. They had been married only a month. He is still missing she told the Commission.

Black smoke no longer billows above the Seven Islands hotel at Plantain Point where local residents say they burned the bodies on rubber tyres of those who died under interrogation. The military has closed ranks and there is little sign that those responsible will be brought to justice say a growing number of human rights agencies.

Censorship

A new report from *Article 19*, the International Centre Against Censorship, says interference with and intimidation of Sri Lanka's media has continued despite the People's Alliance (PA) government's electoral promises.

Market Forces

Singapore wants over 30,000 housemaids from Sri Lanka next year says Colombo's *Sunday Observer* after a growing diplomatic rift with the Philippines over the hanging of a housemaid found guilty of murder.

Suspended

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has suspended financial support to Sri Lanka's Red Cross, citing the need for higher standards of programme management and financial accountability.

Comeback

A Rs 7 million bank robbery in late March and a membership drive by the Sri Lanka Progressive Front (SLPF) party, means the Sinhalese Marxist insurgent People's Liberation Front (JVP) is orchestrating a comeback, says Colombo's *Sunday Times*.

Peacemakers

Concerned over reports that peace talks between the government and the LTTE have stalled, Australian Foreign minister Gareth Evans will visit Colombo on 22 May to explore a role for Commonwealth mediation. Mr Evans described the current truce as the best opportunity in a decade for a lasting political solution.

Governor raps relief effort

NORTH-EAST Governor Gamini Fonseka urged the government in late March to take immediate steps to ensure that relief supplies to the north reached the "correct person at the correct time". Observers interpret the remarks as continuing concern over corrupt government officials and profiteering military officers.

Distribution of food and other essential goods is slowed down by the 60% shortage of government officers in the north-east. Earlier in the month Mr Fonseka assured Tamil and Muslim political party leaders that urgent action will be taken to fill vacancies for 6,000 teachers and 2,000 government officers.

Jaffna schools are struggling without basic facilities. An eight-member student delegation told Higher Education minister Richard Pathirana that Jaffna students were being discriminated against by high cut-off marks fixed for university admissions. Mr Pathirana has promised that a report will be submitted to the cabinet. Meanwhile 60 students displaced from Jaffna and studying at Peradeniya University near Kandy, have threatened to fast demanding a commission of enquiry into a ten-month delay in releasing results.

Army restrictions in the north continue despite the lifting of the economic blockade. Shortages of medicine and

medical equipment in all northern hospitals are reported. UNICEF says tuberculosis is on the increase in Jaffna. Medicines are ineffective due to lack of electricity for refrigeration. Reports say the LTTE shadow civil administration plans to take over the running of refugee camps but will continue to use NGOs to deliver services. Despite the ceasefire the military continues to harass fishermen. The Navy attacked fishermen in the Savukkady sea off Sulipuram on 13 March and damaged fishing nets. Two fishermen were arrested and taken to the Karainagar naval base along with their boats. On 24 March soldiers fired on fishermen at sea from Mandaitivu.

■ Rumours of war in the east

Batticaloa...the battleground to come

THE main threat to the faltering peace process is emerging in the east where the death of Mandur Tiger leader Thambirasa Navaneethan or *Lt.Srinivasan* in late March and forcible conscriptions by the LTTE have raised tension to a new peak.

LTTE political leader *Thamilchelvan*, alleges in a letter to Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte that *Lt.Srinivasan* was repeatedly assaulted at a police checkpoint in Kurumanveli, despite identifying himself as a Tiger, forcing him to commit suicide. The police say several Tiger cadre harassed them and they had to defend themselves. Tension was defused after the policemen

involved were transferred out of Batticaloa. Free movement for armed Tiger cadre in the east is a key LTTE demand. Pundits predict that the Tigers have already chosen the ethnically divided east as their favoured battleground in the next phase of the conflict. Why? Because in an area with a population of one-third Tamil, one-third Muslim and one-third Sinhalese, they know that the government cannot afford to cede them control in any political settlement. The only alternative is to take it by force.

Army commander Gerry de Silva flew to Batticaloa on 26 March for discussions with local commanders, after reports that LTTE political leader *Karikalan* and mil-

itary leader *Karuna* had returned to the east to prepare a new offensive. Ten days earlier, security forces resumed search operations in and around Batticaloa, suspended since the January ceasefire.

Military camps are being strengthened and new checkpoints established. Local people complain that soldiers are cutting down valuable coconut and palmyra trees to build bunkers. Security sources say they will not be taken by surprise as in June 1990.

Colombo press reports also claim that around 1,000 Tamil youths recruited by the LTTE in the east are receiving training in the Kanjikudichcharu and Thoppigala jungles. According to security sources 360 youths are reported missing in the east since the January ceasefire and over 45 have escaped from Tiger custody. A woman was abducted by the LTTE on 8 March in Pottuvil. Reports say four boys abducted by the LTTE in Kottaikallar south of Batticaloa on 15 March were rescued by STF police commandos on the request of their parents.

Three days later Nagalingam Ravindran, 12, and Dharmapalan, 14, abducted from Vinayagapuram were released after their mothers threatened to commit suicide. Army officers say that six youths who escaped from Tiger training camps in Vaharai were handed over to their parents on 21 March. Local Vaharai LTTE leader *Thilagar* has denied stockpiling large quantities of food and fuel saying they are for the daily needs of LTTE cadre.

Another country

COLOMBO'S leading Tamil columnist, *Taraki* took a nostalgic trip to Jaffna this month to see for himself the parallel state that the LTTE is forging in the north. For a former PLOTE militant it was a trip not without trepidation or insight.

Colombo Tamil politicians cut off from the north since 1986 are trapped in a time warp in their assessment of the Tigers says *Taraki*. Leaders like *Baby Subramaniam* and *Appiah Annai* have become elder statesman and administrators while the LTTE hierarchy fills up with battle-hardened young cadre who have successfully countered the might of the Indian and Sri Lankan armies in the last eight years of fighting. The LTTE cadre sees himself as a soldier rather than a guerrilla because the Tigers have translated their military hegemony into a state bureaucracy with its own revenue system, police force and law courts. *Dominique* who heads a staff of 200 at the Tamil Eelam Administration Service's Jaffna secretariat has a three-phase rehabilitation plan to rebuild roads, irrigation and restore electricity to the north which compares favourably with the government's reconstruction plans. But there are civilian rumblings against the Tigers' state-within-a-state over three current controls - the pass system for travel to the south, the confiscation of houses of families who leave the peninsula and the monopoly of consumer essentials like food and fuel.

The Tigers have thrown a ring of steel round the north carefully controlling who goes in or out through a tightly monitored pass system. Forgery is almost unknown and punishable under Section 17-375 of the Tamil Eelam Penal Code by five years in LTTE prison. Jaffna's middle classes, says *Taraki*, bitterly resent the Tigers as usurpers. The money-order economy built up by three generations of expatriate Jaffna doctors and lawyers has become a closed society ruled by a military elite.

Rivals

UPCOUNTRY PEOPLE'S FRONT (UPF) leader and Plantation Housing minister P Chandrasekaran has proposed a new regional council for Plantation Tamils with powers over education, health and employment. Critics say the proposal excludes a substantial number of Plantation Tamils in other areas.

The UPF has also submitted a six-point demand to the government, including proposals to bring estate housing under the local authorities. Mr Chandrasekaran has declared that the UPF will quit the government if the demands are not met. Rival Hill Country trade union the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) says that the government has accepted its six-point demand and a cabinet sub-committee is currently

examining plantation problems. The PA government, unlike the UNP is keeping the CWC at arm's length and there is growing friction between Plantation minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake and his cabinet colleague CWC boss S Thondaman.

The government has promised 50-year leases to the 22 plantation managing companies, which some unions oppose. In some areas workers are given only 12-14 days work a month. In Ratnapura 22 estate factories remain closed and half wages paid for full day's work. When newspaper journalists asked about the non-payment of Rs 8 budgetary wage increase to plantation workers a senior government minister said "Let them fly a kite".

10,000 refugees return from India

Coming home

OVER 10,000 Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees were repatriated from south India in March, in the latest phase of a controversial inter-governmental programme monitored by UN refugee agency UNHCR.

Almost 5,000 have returned to three camps on Mannar Island in the isolated north-west, still under unofficial LTTE blockade. Logistics are poor with serious housing and water shortages at Talaimannar Railway Station camp and Kathaspathri Welfare Centre. Over 18 families were evicted from UNHCR-run Pesalai camp and returned to nearby Thullukuttikudiyiruppu to make way for the newcomers. Dry rations were not distributed to many returnees until seven days after arrival.

The Tigers are increasingly active on the island after dark with tractors commandeered and traders forced to provision LTTE supply bases deep in the jungle. Local Government Agent (GA) SM Croos is increasingly frustrated that the government's Jaffna-oriented relief effort is sucking up resources meant for elsewhere. Local NGOs say many of the returnees have simply moved from one camp to another with no homes or jobs to go back to.

Some have moved to the UNHCR camp at Palampiddy on the LTTE-controlled Mannar mainland in an effort to reach Vavuniya and the north, after careful Tiger screening. Further south at Navy-controlled Kalpitiya, armed LTTE cadre are extorting money from people in remote villages say local reports.

Over 50,000 refugees have been repatriated from India since January 1992 into uncertain or openly hostile conditions. India says the programme is voluntary but persistent reports link many returns with deteriorating conditions in Tamil Nadu refugee camps or coercion by local officials. India refuses UNHCR access to the camps.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha is convinced that LTTE infiltration of the southern state will only recede when all the 50,000 Sri Lankans in government refugee camps are packed off home. Tamil Nadu remains the Tigers' prized "rear base" filtering arms and fuel into blockaded Jaffna via any of the 30,000 Indian fishermen who put to sea south of Rameshwaram every day.

Jayalalitha's government would be

For the returnees and another 400,000 civilians internally displaced by the war, there is little hope of finding their homes or farms intact. Most have been systematically stripped by those who remain or by the combatants.

happy to deport 32 LTTE suspects released from Vellore jail in late March through the intercession of India's Human Rights Commission but Sri Lankan officials have refused to accept them.

Sri Lankan refugees from the EPRLF group who fled into exile with Indian troops in 1990, launched a hunger strike at Puzhal camp in north Madras in early March, demanding their repatriation.

Returnees say UNHCR monitoring of this phase of the repatriation has been good, but there is visible disillusionment among many on return.

THE SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas.

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Officials have impounded most of the luggage of another 5,000 returnees arriving at the eastern port of Trincomalee this month. Some refugees exploit generous baggage allowances to bring back Indian goods in bulk for a quick profit from local traders. Many of the impounded goods have not been registered and will quietly disappear despite a promise from minister GL Peiris that each returnee can bring in goods worth Rs 75,000 tax free.

For the returnees and another 400,000 civilians internally displaced by the war, there is little hope of finding their homes or farms intact. Most have been systematically stripped by those who remain or by the combatants.

Rehabilitation minister MHM Ashraff wants the refugees to go home and start a new life. he has plans to spend Rs 200 million (\$4 million) building 23 model resettlement villages in the Trincomalee area, primarily for Tamils. Drinking water, electricity, cooperative stores and a school will be provided said the minister with cash grants of Rs 25,000 to convert temporary shelters into permanent housing.

President Chandrika Kumaratunge, opening the first model village scheme on 5 March at Kappalthurai a few miles from Trincomalee, told assembled foreign diplomats that the Army would embrace a new role, rebuilding the east's shattered housing stocks. Over 600 Tamils agreed to return to Kappalthurai from the notorious Clappenberg refugee camp in Trincomalee town only after the government made good its promises to provide water, schools and infrastructure. Other refugees remembering past governments' promises may do the same.

Further south in Batticaloa District, 59 families from the Ollikulam area refused to return home this month without proper security and permanent housing. Over 30,000 people are displaced in the district with 24,000 in camps.

Opposition UNP MP Ali Zahir Maulana says few of Batticaloa's Muslims have been resettled or have access to their fields, often west of the lagoon. Muslim refugees from Oddamavady have refused to return home until an Army camp is removed from the village and a permanent peace established. They may have a long wait on both counts.