

# The Sri Lanka Monitor

No 111

April 1997

Produced by the British Refugee Council

## UK brokers peace breakthrough

In a surprise move, Britain's Foreign Office minister Liam Fox has brokered an agreement between Sri Lanka's ruling People's Alliance (PA) and the main opposition United National Party (UNP) reportedly paving the way for peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The agreement says that discussions or decisions between the government and any other party, including the LTTE, undertaken in concurrence will not be undermined by the opposition. Either party will also fully honour such decisions on election to government.

Based on the bipartisan approach developed by the British in the Northern Ireland conflict the deal was developed during a series of diplomatic exchanges set up after British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind's visit to Sri Lanka in September last year. President Chandrika Kumaratunge and UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe finally exchanged letters on 3 April agreeing that the government in power will seek advice from the opposition leader on significant developments relating to the ethnic conflict.

Since independence in 1948, a number of agreements between governments and Tamil leaders on autonomy for Sri Lanka's Tamil regions have failed, following violent demonstrations by the respective opposition party - usually the UNP or PA's main constituent the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

The historic significance of the April accord was not lost on other political parties and foreign governments who have warmly welcomed the agreement. Sri Lanka's NGO-based National Peace Council says that the specific mention of negotiations with the LTTE in the agreement is encouraging.

Denying contacts with the LTTE were already underway, the British High Commission in Colombo said Mr Fox's discussions were confined to the two political parties and that a secret visit to Mullaitivu in March by LTTE International representative Lawrence Thilagar was not linked.

Analysts claim Mr Thilagar obtained the consent of Tiger leader V

Prabhakaran to seek a negotiated settlement through third party mediation. Hardliners say however that the Tigers have not changed their stripes and the six months of peace signals from the jungle are an elaborate ruse.

*Since independence in 1948, a number of agreements between governments and Tamil leaders on autonomy for Sri Lanka's Tamil regions have failed, following violent demonstrations by the respective opposition party - usually the UNP or PA's main constituent the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.*

Sri Lanka's Foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was adamant that his government was not contemplating foreign mediation and reiterated the conditions for peace talks with the LTTE - substantial laying down of arms and completion of peace talks within an agreed time frame. Despite the denials, observers believe, the British government would not have become involved without some kind of signal from the LTTE.

*Sunday Times* columnist *Taraki* says a Tiger source confirmed that Mr Thilagar's visit to the Vanni was initiated by a Western government. The Colombo press claims LTTE deputy leader *Karikalan* who is either in the UK for further discussions or is waiting in an unnamed Latin American country where talks will begin. The LTTE has in recent months been insisting on foreign mediation as a condition for peace talks. Tiger London spokesman Anton Rajah says political negotiations must be preceded by withdrawal of government troops from Jaffna.

Mr Kadirgamar has rushed to India for a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement and brief New Delhi on developments. While Indian High Commissioner in Colombo Nareshwar Dayal welcomed

the agreement, observers say New Delhi may fret over the involvement of Western nations in Sri Lanka. As the regional superpower, any agreement without India's assent is doomed to fail, analysts say, particularly if it grants recognition to the LTTE directly or indirectly.

New Indian Prime Minister IK Gujral appears more willing to resolve regional problems than many of his predecessors and some say London has already negotiated safe passage through India to the talks for LTTE leaders.

The agreement may also rescue the devolution package, the PA's much maligned solution to the ethnic conflict. In late March, Justice minister GL Peiris released 18 chapters of the proposed new constitution. By late April the Parliamentary Select Committee on Constitutional Reform had still not reached agreement on devolution of powers to the regions. Some members of the Select Committee say there was no consensus even on the 18 chapters released. A sub-committee of the Select Committee is debating whether the government peace proposals should be officially sent to the LTTE.

A month on, and the main brokers of the PA-UNP agreement, Malcolm Rifkind and Liam Fox are historical footnotes as the ruling Conservative Party was swept from power at the British general elections on 1 May. Whether the new Labour government will adopt the same policy towards Sri Lanka is unclear. Reports that Sri Lankan general elections may precede a national referendum on the devolution may also sink the agreement from within after unprecedented violence during the local government elections in March.

Meanwhile, the government and the LTTE prepare for a showdown in the Vanni. Arriving refugees say troops are being massed in Vavuniya and Kilinochchi, for an Army push to retake the main road between the two towns and open a land route to Jaffna. *Taraki* says over 1,000 LTTE cadre have been moved to the Vanni from Batticaloa and Amparai districts.

## THE NORTH

# Jaffna's war economy

THE Jaffna Consumer Protection Society (JCPS) says prices in Jaffna, particularly of rice, sugar and petrol, are much higher than in Colombo. Cement, essential for reconstruction, is sold at Rs 530 a bag at the government-controlled Building Materials Corporation, which is double the price in Colombo.

Senior government officer in Jaffna, Government Agent (GA) S Pathmanathan, told visiting journalists in mid-April that repairs to school buildings are carried out with NGO involvement and the government has not provided any assistance to rebuild houses and shops. Many returning families find that their houses are either damaged or occupied by other families or soldiers.

Over 40,000 have returned to Jaffna by ships from the mainland Vanni through the eastern Trincomalee port. A further 3,000 have arrived in small boats from Nachchikudah in Vanni, as conditions there deteriorate. According to the JCPS, resettlement assistance of Rs 5,000 promised by the government has been paid only to a very few people.

After the 12-hour daily curfew in the Jaffna peninsula was reduced by three hours from 18 April the military had agreed to resettle 1,500 families in Valikamam North which has remained a security zone. The Punnalai bridge linking the peninsula to Karainagar Island will be opened for food lorries but remain closed to the public.

Many problems in Jaffna remain and

observers say people fear over personal security. There is still no information on the 656 people disappeared in Jaffna last year which is one of the highest in the world. Amnesty International says such large disappearances in a year while the government claims to address the problem, is outrageous. Over 600 Jaffna parents have formed an Association of the Parents of the Disappeared.

In a letter to Batticaloa MP P Joseph Defence Ministry's Additional Secretary Mahinda Bandusena says that the Army's involvement in the murder of six Tamils, including a student, whose bodies were recovered from shallow graves in Thenmaratchy last November, would be investigated.

Four civilian women were injured in a Tiger grenade attack at Thirunelveli on 4 April. Three Tigers were killed in an Army ambush at Alaveddy, five miles south-west of Palaly airbase, three days later. Ten soldiers died in a landmine attack at Nagarkovil in Vadammaratchy. The Tigers shot dead an Army officer on 1 May at Ariyalai, east of Jaffna town.

Visiting German Deputy Foreign minister Werner Hoyer pledged Rs 330 million (\$6.6 million) for reconstruction. Reports say that following recommendations of a UN assessment team to Jaffna last September, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) has provided funds for the supply of seed paddy and equipment to 35,000 Jaffna families.

## Talks

A cross-party group of 23 Sri Lankan MPs who participated in an April conference arranged by London-based NGO International Alert in Philippines, have called on the Sri Lankan government for talks with the LTTE.

## Released

The LTTE released on 25 April three crew members abducted from the passenger ferry *Iris Moana* in August 1995 off Mullaitivu coast. Another five sailors remain in Tiger custody.

## Bribe

Norway's newspaper *Verdens Gang* says in a 20 April article that a former Norwegian diplomat to Sri Lanka received Rs 500,000 (\$10,000) from each asylum-seeker to confirm information given in asylum applications.

## Bombed

The Sri Lankan Airforce bombed Nachchikudah, 25 miles north of Mannar, on 10 April killing 14 year-old Ramalingam Thayakaran and two other civilians. Six people were seriously injured. A church and many houses were damaged.

## Identified

An 18 year-old survivor identified in the Trincomalee court on 11 April, two of the eight soldiers accused of carrying out the massacre of 25 Tamil civilians in Kumarapuram in February 1996, following a LTTE attack on a government entourage in Jaffna.

# Relief slashed for refugees

THE Sri Lankan government decision to stop relief payments to refugees in the north from 22 April, will affect many of the 400,000 refugees in the LTTE-controlled Vanni and 16,000 other camp refugees in Army-held Vavuniya District.

The payment of Rs 50 for each refugee per day will be replaced by dry rations worth Rs 336 per month. A family of five or more will receive Rs 1,260 worth rations. Aid workers say the new measure is designed to force refugees to leave the Vanni and will lead to further deterioration of refugee conditions.

Over 68,000 people have crossed into Vavuniya from Vanni after Army restrictions were lifted in October. According to refugees, the LTTE is allowing people

to leave but levying Rs 200 each for permit application forms. Army Commander Rohan Daluwatte says some LTTE cadre among the refugees have been arrested.

Thirty six people died of disease in Mallavi hospital in March. The hospital is struggling to treat over 1,000 patients admitted and 10,000 out-patients in a month without adequate supply of medicines. In March another 22 patients died in Kilinochchi hospital. Doctors say they could have been saved if facilities to preserve blood were available. Reports say many people in Mullaitivu hospital have also died of typhoid, septicaemia, malaria and diarrhoea. ICRC's medical coordinator Claude Felix told Colombo newspaper *Sunday Times* that approval for medicines is a tortuous process and every sin-

gle tablet has to be authorised by the Health and Defence ministries.

The Navy says a *Sea Tiger* base and 40 boats were destroyed at Chalai, 14 miles north of Mullaitivu in early April. Army shelling killed student P Pradeep in Vaddakachchi, east of Kilinochchi. Two others were seriously wounded. The Army shot dead five refugees including 17 year-old Thayalan, when they returned to their homes at Uruthirapuram.

In Vavuniya, the 16,000 refugees in camps complain that after the government decision to end payments, no relief has been provided to them after 15 April. Tamil group EPRLF's relief coordinator T Sritharan says sanitary conditions in the camps have deteriorated and has urged immediate government action.

## ■ The East's war of shadows

# Counter attack

TWENTY ONE soldiers were killed in a LTTE ambush at Pulmoddai, 18 miles north of Trincomalee town on 27 April. The Tigers say the attack was carried out in retaliation for the death of a senior LTTE cadre on 8 April. On the same day the Tigers attacked an Army post in Pallikudyiruppu, four miles south-east of Muthur, killing six more soldiers. Four soldiers died in a LTTE attack two days earlier in Seruwila.

In early April the Army launched *Operation Golden Bow* in the jungle areas of Thiriyai and Kallarawa, 26 miles north of Trincomalee, killing over 20 Tigers and wounding 40. Another seven died and 10 were injured in an Army ambush at Morawewa on 30 April.

Security in Trincomalee was intensified in April following several LTTE attacks. Special Army identity cards have been issued to people in Trincomalee town to prevent LTTE infiltrators. Currently identity cards are being issued to others in rural areas.

Without the special identity cards, observers believe, the large number of people awaiting military clearance in Trincomalee may have difficulties. Apart from them, there remain only 250 refugees in camps from Vavuniya scheduled to leave for Jaffna, according to Regional Secretary Velum Mayilum.

In Batticaloa District, the Valaichchenai area is increasingly becoming a major battle ground as the

Tigers attempt to divert military's attention from the north. The LTTE ambushed and killed 12 soldiers at Kumburumoolai on 21 April. Since the incident three youths in the village have gone missing. An Army shell killed three refugees at Kalmadhu.

The LTTE shelled Army camps at Paithalai and Kiran on 12 April from Nasivantivu jungles. The Army retaliated and the Airforce attacked LTTE-controlled Vaharai area north of Batticaloa. A number of Army restrictions on Vaharai, particularly on food, fertiliser, fuel and transport continues.

The Tigers injured a military intelligence officer at Chenkalady on 12 April. Police returned fire injuring civilians Hanifa and Sundaradevi. After a policeman died in Valaichchenai town in a LTTE ambush on 16 April, three civilians were killed and seven others wounded in police shooting.

Amnesty International says firewood sellers K Sivakumar and K Ravichandran arrested in Chenkalady on 20 April have disappeared. The Army shot dead V Sutharsan and P Shankar on 26 April. Relatives deny they had LTTE links.

In Amparai District, Sundaram Shanthi, 28, was shot and injured in late April. Shanthi had been living in the Thirukovil refugee camp for the last six years. After a major search operation in Alayadivembu, all men in several villages in the area have been ordered by the Special Task Force to report at the Akkaraipatru military camp every week.

# impunity

**HUMAN RIGHTS agencies are increasingly convinced that the courts' inability to convict security force personnel of serious crimes is encouraging impunity.**

The four accused in the murder of six youths in 1990 at Wawulkelle were acquitted by the Gampaha High Court on 5 April on the ground that the evidence was insufficient. A day earlier a Colombo magistrate released two police officers accused of mass murder at Hokandara in 1989, after the Attorney General informed the court that he would not be pursuing action. The ruling People's Alliance (PA) promised in its election campaign in 1994 to investigate mass murders committed during the People's Liberation Front (JVP) insurrection between 1988 and 1990. After the PA was elected a number of bodies were unearthed from mass graves and court actions were filed. So far no one has been punished for murders committed before, during or after that period. Observers suspect official collusion in ensuring that offenders will go free. In March, the Colombo Bolgoda Lake death squad case in which 22 Special Task Force members stood accused of the killing of 21 Tamils in custody, was taken off the court roll because the accused and the Attorney General failed to appear for two hearings. Colombo lawyers say despite Supreme Court ruling in December that officials including the Defence Secretary have breached the Emergency regulations, thus far no action has been taken.

At the recent sessions of the UN Human Rights Commission, the Sri Lankan government pledged that full rigours of the law will be brought to bear on the perpetrators of human rights violations. Amnesty International has urged that those responsible be brought to justice without exception.

## Food crisis in Mannar

MANNAR Government Agent (GA) SM Croos rushed to Colombo twice in late April for talks with the Essential Services Commissioner, after the Army imposed a ban on food lorries into LTTE-controlled areas in Mannar District from 24 April. The GA fears over 70,000 people may face starvation.

Vanni military coordinator Col Wijeratne has ordered that refugees in the Madhu Church area must come to centres at Uyilankulam or Madhu road junction, 30 miles south, to obtain food relief. There are over 15,000 refugees in Madhu. Only 400 of the 7,000 people displaced around Mannar-Vavuniya road following military operation *Edibala* in February have returned. Mr Croos says the plan is impractical and travelling

would cost the refugees more than the food relief they would receive.

Press reports say the Army has also ordered international refugee agency UNHCR to close the refugee camp at Pesalai on Mannar Island. There are 778 refugees in the camp. UNHCR is said to be negotiating with the government to keep the camp open for another six months.

*Sea Tigers* attacked Naval patrol boats near Pesalai on 10 April killing five sailors and three policemen. The Navy says *Sea Tiger* attempt to attack the Talaimannar naval base on 21 April using Indian trawlers as a shield was repulsed. The Navy intercepted a boat carrying 29 refugees to India in the Palk Strait on 2 May.

## Tension and arrests in the capital

# Happy New Year Colombo

AS the 14 April Sinhala-Tamil New Year approached, security in Colombo was tightened. The LTTE suicide bomber threat to the capital remains and arrests of Tamils continue. In early April a Colombo magistrate ordered the release of ten Tamils held for a week by the Dematagoda police. Arumaithurai Maheswaran, among them had been arrested for the sixth time.

Deputy Inspector General of Police DMPB Dissanayake says police carried out a major search operation in the capital on 17 April on information that many Tigers had entered Colombo. Some 900 lodges, many providing cheap accommodation, were checked. Police detained 114 LTTE suspects. According to Colombo newspaper *The Island*, earlier, 8,000 were arrested and released. Police say there are Tiger suspects among the 75 people detained in Wellampitiya and Welikada suburbs on 26 April.

Over 100 Tamils arrested in Jaffna last year and detained for several months

were released in April after the Attorney General decided that there was lack of evidence of LTTE links. In late April another 50 young men and women detained for the last four months at the Kankesanthurai Army camp in Jaffna were brought to the Anuradhapura prison. Many arrested in Jaffna are still held in the Colombo Magazine prison.

The authorities continue to breach Emergency regulations in arrest and detention of suspects. Trader Velupillai Yugarajah, 45, arrested on 26 March, has neither been informed of the reasons for his arrest nor a receipt issued to his relatives as required by the Presidential directives under Emergency regulations.

Many held in custody allege torture. In a fundamental rights application to the Supreme Court, S Ganesh, 18, currently held in Colombo Magazine prison says he was tortured at a police station. The Court has ordered a medical examination. Egamparam Nirmalanathan, 18, arrested in Batticaloa on 27 October also

alleges that he was subject to severe torture at the Kurumanveli STF camp.

Navaratnam Rajakumar in Kalutara prison alleges that he underwent severe torture at the Vavuniya Counter Subversive Unit (CSU) after his arrest on 31 October. His head was covered with a plastic bag dipped in petrol as he was punched and kicked. Kumaru Selvaratnam who runs a tutoring in Colombo arrested on 28 March underwent three operations as a result of torture at the Slave Island police station.

Sinnathamby Theivanai and her husband were arrested on 6 September by the Polonnaruwa police. Theivanai was produced before courts only on 21 November and is currently held under a detention order at the Welikada prison. She says that officers of the Crime Detection Bureau (CDB) threatened her with torture and hung her husband by his feet and tortured him in her presence. Theivanai's two year-old daughter is also in prison with her.

## Forgotten in exile

SRI LANKAN refugees in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu continue to face many problems, reports say. Currently 67,000 refugees are in 123 government camps throughout the state. Another 100,000 live outside depending on money from relatives abroad. A further 8,000 have arrived in small boats from western Sri Lanka since August 1996.

Camp refugees say relief dole paid to them based on prices several years ago is hardly sufficient as the cost of living rises rapidly and employment to supplement income is not easy to find. Water supply to camps is limited and refugees must buy or travel to other areas to obtain water. Many camp buildings are dilapidated and no repairs have been undertaken for several years.

Sanitary conditions remain basic and due to downgrading of earlier medical facilities in camps, refugees must spend money and travel to hospitals for treatment. Refugees also complain that money provided for funerals is totally inadequate and are forced to beg from residents in the vicinity. Refugees say they also suffer from police harassment

as they come under suspicion for any crime committed in the area.

New refugees arriving in Tamil Nadu are thoroughly checked and those suspected of LTTE links are dispatched to

special detention camps. In April two Tiger suspects who arrived with refugees were arrested.

Speaking on 24 April in Tamil Nadu's Legislative Assembly, Chief Minister M Karunanidhi vowed to root out LTTE activities in the state. According to Indian coastguard chief Dinesh, security in coastal areas has been strengthened and aerial surveillance intensified to prevent smuggling to Sri Lanka.

The Indian government is facing a dilemma over nine LTTE members who were released by the Supreme Court on 27 March. The nine Tigers who travelled in the Honduras registered LTTE ship *MV Ahat* were taken into custody near Madras in January 1993. LTTE's International Representative *Kittu* committed suicide by blowing up the ship after it was intercepted by the Indian Navy. The Supreme Court ruled that there is no evidence that the ship posed a threat to Indian security.

The nine Tigers were arrested again after the release and are currently held under passport laws. A debate whether to deport them to Sri Lanka or to Honduras is in progress.

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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British Refugee Council: Charity No. 1014576  
Company No. 2727514

ISSN 0955-5943

Funded by voluntary agencies worldwide.

Technology by RnR DTP

Printed by Printco, 374 Willesden High Rd,  
London NW10