

'Delhi has hardened'

The Thimpu talks are a farce, says Sri Sabaratnam



THERE is hardly any hardness of the terrorist (to use Jayewardene's term) on the boyish face of 32-year-old Sri Sabaratnam, leader of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) which is one of the big militant Tamil groups. But when this correspondent met him at his office in Madras soon after the deportation of his Thimpu delegate, Satyendra, the usual smile was gone. Talking to him, one felt he hardly had any hope of a solution without a total armed revolution that would fetch them Eelam. Sabaratnam was, however, willing to compromise on this separatist demand if any good alternative was made available. But on condition that such an agreement would be implemented in letter and spirit by the Sri Lankan government. The interview was interrupted many a time by frantic calls from different government agencies pleading with him to go to Delhi and honour Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's invitation. He always gave the same patient reply—that he was willing to go but would have to wait for the other leaders of the ENLF also and that the Liberation Tigers' leader V. Prabhakaran was out of Madras and he had to return before a decision could be taken. Excerpts:

Question: *You were one of the two 'unavailable' Tamil militant leaders when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's call came from Delhi. There is a general feeling that both Prabhakaran of LTTE and you had deliberately gone underground.*

Answer: We had already decided to meet the Indian Prime Minister. The termination of Thimpu phase-II was unfortunate. The Sri Lankan government had brought proposals aimed at only duping and insulting us. Massacre of Tamils even as the Sri Lankan government was placing its proposals at Thimpu, only proved that it was biding for time while continuing with the anti-Tamil policies.

It was in such a situation that the Indian PM had called us. We did not



want to go to Delhi and face an embarrassing situation where we might be forced to say 'no' to an inconvenient suggestion. However, we leaders of ENLF plan to consult and evolve a common plea to be placed before Rajiv Gandhi.

Q: *The impression created by some recent events has been that ENLF is hardening its stance and becoming more and more difficult to be managed by the Indian government.*

A: The Indian PM has been striving to find a solution to the Tamils' problems and we truly appreciate that. The very fact that we agreed to go to Thimpu for talks, stopping our attacks in the meantime, only shows we have not hardened and are quite willing to extend all cooperation to Indian initiatives. But ENLF has some special problems. The four groups in ENLF are the ones directly involved in protecting the Tamils from the attack of Sri Lankan forces. As such, we need some special solutions to our problems arising at every stage of this farcical exercise going on at Thimpu. We must convince our people we are not letting down their interests, nor throwing them to the Sinhala racist wolves. Some other groups and people like Amirthalingam have no such issue to settle. Besides,

we cannot be dishonest like the others.

Q: *Two of the three deported Tamils were linked to TELO, directly or indirectly. Do you think you are being singled out for harsh treatment?*

A: All the three deported leaders belong to Tamil Eelam. This deportation order meant that the Indian attitude towards our problem has hardened. It does not hurt us alone but hurts the entire movement.

Q: *There is a complaint heard in a few of the other Tamil militant camps that your representative at the Thimpu talks, Satyendra, proved to be rather difficult at times.*

A: Other organisations which had attended the Thimpu talks have told me that Satyendra reflected quite eloquently the Tamil aspirations. If these very groups are now desisting from making public their true assessment of our representatives, then it shows their two-timing nature.

Q: *Did you receive any specific complaint about Satyendra's conduct during the talks?*

A: No. None at all.

Q: *What do you think should be done now by India, Sri Lanka and the Tamils?*

A: I do concede that any path towards a settlement cannot be easy and straight like a line, but will undergo some turns and twists, some changes as it makes progress. But such a change in the Indian strategy, when it takes place, should ensure it does not hurt the Tamils further. Already we are a much troubled people.

Q: *Can you elaborate?*

A: Let us turn to the past experience. The late Indian Prime Minister had signed an agreement with the then Sri Lankan government about the affected Tamils who were not consulted. What resulted from that injudicious settlement was that even today 2,00,000 plantation Tamils continue to live in substandard conditions without even citizenship rights. So, we hope any settlement evolving now on the Indian initiative should take into account all our ideas also. Another point, why can't the Indian government pressure the Sri Lankan