

SPECIAL EDITION ON SRI LANKA

Every Fortnight

DA

Published simultaneously from New Delhi & Kolkata

USD 1/Rs. 15

Business Economics

Estd. 1995

Member: INS

November 30, 2006

Why was Rajiv Gandhi Killed?

**LTTE
unyielding!**

**What
next?**

President Mahinda Rajapaksa

**Mission:
Peace, Progress & Prosperity**

Contents

6 Opinion

Sri Lanka

- 8 Isle of Delight
- 10 Sri Lanka today
- 13 President Mahinda Rajapaksa's interview
- 27 A political framework can reduce impetus to war
- 29 An Insight into LTTE
- 32 Priority areas: Peace and economic development
- 36 A new road map to sustain the boom
- 41 India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement: An analysis
- 42 Colombo National Museum
- 43 'Mahinda Chinatana' is to re-engineer economy: Rahitha Bogollagama
- 47 IT industry
- 50 A dynamic base
- 52 Ceramics Industry
- 54 An integral part of Sri Lankan economy
- 57 An orphanage for the elephants
- 60 Incredible Sri Lanka
- 62 Yapahuwa
- 64 Meemure
- 65 The divine scent of Cinnamon
- 66 Sri Lanka highlights

68 India Calling

Suzlon Energy to invest Rs 750 cr in Udipi unit
Buddha's relics in India

70 India Abroad

1500 immigrants to UK every day: from South Asia
France to triple investments in India

72 World

Russia
Indo-Russian space cooperation

74 Off the Cuff

Science debunks myths about ghosts and vampires

76 States

Haryana
Hooda expects Rs. 2 lakh cr FDI by 2008
Gujarat
The success story of Gujaratis

77 Espionage

Mission Impossible: Beating Pak in the spy game

78 India Corporate

SREI Surges into the Global Infrastructure Arena

82 Lifestyle

A woman's battle against all odds
The world's most expensive island

83 Business

BBC to outsource work to India
Kuwait
Oil prices stable on OPEC cut plan

84 Environment

Half of the world's coral reefs
could die within 25 years

86 Spiritualism

Oneness University for Spiritual and Social

President Mahinda Rajapaksa

Cover Story



13

President Mahinda Rajapaksa retains his rural charm. He is 61 but looks much younger to his age. That typical rural innocence, warmth and open heartedness is too obvious on his face to need any probing. His approach is devoid of any political clichés and machinations. That perhaps is true to his rural upbringing. He knows no enemy.

An Insight into LTTE



29

LTTE, a rebel militia in the Northern province of Sri Lanka has an estimated strength of 10,000-armed guerrillas under the commandership of Prabhakaran.

'Mahinda Chinatana' is to re-engineer economy: Rahitha Bogollagama



43

Suave and soft-spoken, Sri Lankan Minister of Enterprise Development and Investment Promotion, Mr. Rahitha Bogollagama is a man of action. Nation's economic development rests delicately on his shoulders, given the fact that he has been entrusted with the most important task of seeking foreign direct investments.

SREI Surges into the Global Infrastructure Arena



78

Still in its teens, SREI Infrastructure Finance Ltd, has transformed itself into a multinational.

Sri Lanka

PRESIDENTIAL SECRETARIAT
LIBRARY

**The
man
with
a
vision
and
a
mission**

President Mahinda Rajapaksa

Photo by Chaminda



Photo by Chaminda

President Mahinda Rajapaksa retains his rural charm. He is 61 but looks much younger to his age. That typical rural innocence, warmth and open heartedness is too obvious on his face to need any probing. His approach is devoid of any political clichés and machinations. That perhaps is true to his rural upbringing. He knows no enemy. A staunch Buddhist, Rajapaksa doesn't believe in religious compartmentalisation. His very often visits to Hindu temples bears testimony to his sense of religious tolerance.

As head of the Island State, he is keen to transform Sri Lanka into a heaven on earth that it used to be some centuries ago. He wants to bring back the past glories. "I don't want my country to be called a tear-drop mass of land at the bottom of India but a shining diamond that is constantly washed by Bay of Bengal on one side and the Arabian Sea on the other.

He is a man with a vision. Who knows he could change the course of history with his sincerity of purpose, dedication, commitment to the nation and the people of Sri Lanka. He remains a man to be watched.

The two-day Peace talks between Colombo and LTTE, brokered by Norwegians in Geneva on October 28 and 29 failed to yield any result. Tamils in Sri Lanka were hopeful that the talks would succeed but sources close to

LTTE knew the fate of the talks well in advance.

The LTTE has been at war with Colombo since 1983 causing immense death and destruction. President Mahinda Rajapaksa who has now been in office for almost one year has emerged as the last hope for peace with LTTE. He is of the firm belief that dialogue and not destruction can redress the situation. He is out to meet all the demands of the Tamil-speaking people of Sri Lanka. He has initiated steps to amend Constitution for the devolution of power, both political and financial, a major demand of the Tamil-speaking populace of the island nation.

Business Economics Editor Bhushan Raina flew down to Colombo for an exclusive interview with President Mahinda Rajapaksa at his Temple Tree residence. Here are the excerpts:



Photo by Chaminda

Q: The Peace talks in Geneva have derailed as was expected. Do you still want to keep talking to LTTE?

A: We are committed to peace talks. I think a dialogue can always lead to better results. We have either to talk to them or fight our own men. I am not in favour of fighting with our own people. The problem that we are faced with, cannot be resolved militarily. We have to find a political solution that should meet the aspirations of all involved. I was very hopeful of Geneva talks. Ironically, just as the talks began in Geneva; the LTTE launched military operations in three areas. Two of our soldiers were killed and one was injured in this operation. That speaks for them. We did not retaliate. That speaks for us.

Q: The talks got bogged down on their single demand of opening of A9 highway. What holds you from opening that highway?

A: Firstly A9 highway was not on the agenda of talks. The items that were on the agenda were never taken up. I am not at all averse to opening the A9 highway. Let them guarantee safety to all vehicular traffic without extorting money from them in the name of taxes. Let me have their guarantee and I shall open the highway. That is my word.

Q: The LTTE delegation did attend the talks. Then why do you think, they sought to derail it?

A: Firstly, I would say it is for them to explain. Secondly, one has to analyse if at all they are interested in resolving the crisis. To my mind, I think, they only want to internationalise the issue.

Q: I am told that LTTE leader Prabhakaran has said that he is not bothered about food supplies coming from Colombo. What does it mean?

A: He is not interested in the welfare of the people of the area controlled by him. It is not for the sake of food supplies that they raised the demand of opening A9 highway. They want

Sri Lanka-India relations

Q: How are your relations with New Delhi?

A: Very good. As of now there may be some misunderstanding. As far as possible, I keep them informed about all developments.

Q: Are you getting any aid from India?

A: India had given us the first credit line of US\$ 100 million. Second is yet to come. But we have not utilised the first tranche of



credit line fully. This was for development of infrastructure and Jaffna airport.

Q: What help do you expect from India?

A: India is a very special country as far as we are concerned. Economically, culturally and spiritually we are very close to each other. So has it been throughout the long history of our two countries. I understand India, perhaps more than any other political leader in our country today. I have had the closest ties with Indian leaders ever since I was a Minister in Chandrika Kumaratunga's cabinet, way back in the 90s.

A close understanding between Sri Lanka and India is basic to

South Asian Region. The security of India and that of Sri Lanka are like two sides of the same coin. Our economic destiny too is closely tied to that of India. These basics will guide our relations. No question.

We always look to India, therefore, for cooperation and support. We have to work out our futures together. That is why I have been repeatedly requesting the

Indian government to play an active role in helping Sri Lanka solve our crises.

I am very encouraged when Indian business invests in our country. We want a strong partnership with the Indian economy. Sri Lanka is a small country, which has many attractions for Indian tourists. We like to see more and more Indian tourists coming to our country.

There is a lot of trade between our two countries. We have a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India. You must be well aware that Sri Lanka is India's third largest export market. In other words, Sri Lanka is the third largest importer of Indian products. But at the same time the trade balance is very much

the opening of the highway only to ensure effective movement of their cadres. They have been going to other areas and kidnapping small children to recruit them as their cadres and give them weapons' training. Cases of extortions from innocent poor people are being reported almost every day. In fact these were the reasons that we had to decide to close that highway. But nevertheless, we even sent ships to North with food supplies to the very LTTE cadres who are fighting against us. We sent doctors and medicines too. UN had also agreed to send food there but LTTE did not allow the ships there.

Q: The outburst of conflict between Sinhalas and Tamilians dates back to 1983. The pre-1983 period of Sri Lanka was one of peace and harmony. What, according to you, is the background and cause of this conflict?

A: As a matter of fact, there have been ethnic riots of a small scale even prior to 1983 for example, in 1958. You are right when you say that 1983 was the worst we have ever had in our country. But when compared with similar events that occur in other parts of the world, the number of persons who were involved in such violent acts even in 1983 was very small. It is now widely accepted that most of the damage in 1983 was done by criminal elements. They took advantage of the failure of the law enforcement agencies to take immediate steps to control the rioters. We were then in the opposition. True, there were one or two ministers of the then government who are said to have encouraged the rioters for their own narrow political purposes.

The immediate cause that provoked the riots of 1983 was the brutal massacre of 13 soldiers by the LTTE in Jaffna. In our recent history, this was the first time that so many soldiers were lost in a single incident. The rioting began when the bodies of the 13 soldiers were brought to

I want to see peace, prosperity and progress in Sri Lanka. That is my vision. That is my firm resolve.



Photo by Chaminda

As a young democracy involved in the task of nation building, we have to reconcile many different groups who have various grievances. It is not only the Tamils who have grievances.



Photo by Chinminda

Colombo. These soldiers were only doing their duty of maintaining law and order in Jaffna.

As for the cause of the broader conflict, let us go back in history. Anyone studying our history will confirm that the different ethnic groups lived harmoniously in our country before the arrival of the British. In fact, the last dynasty of Sri Lankan kings before the British took over, was from South India. They were Nayakkars. They spoke Tamil. They protected Buddhism and they ruled from Kandy, which was predominantly Sinhala. Many of the officials of the court of the Kandyan kings of the period were fluent in both Tamil and Sinhala. That was the level of ethnic harmony at that time.

Then came the British with their policy of divide and rule. They ruled our country by creating tension between the different ethnic and religious groups. By the time they left in 1948, they had sharpened the tensions and differences between the major communities. Of course this is not to say that various post independence politicians from both sides of the political divide, did not use the ethnic issue to gain certain cheap and short term advantages from it for themselves. The present situation is the result of all this. The British sowed the seeds of discord in our country.

Now our's is a young democracy. As a young democracy involved in the task of nation building, we have to reconcile many different groups who have various grievances. It is not only the Tamils who have grievances. Various groups have various grievances, and we have the difficult task of welding them all together into one nation. Nation building in a young democracy is not by any means easy. Within the last 35 years we have had 2 major insurrections in the South due to poverty and youth unemployment.

I admit that as a young democracy we may not have handled some of the

Sri Lanka-India relations...

against us, and we would like to see a narrowing of this imbalance.

Let me also tell you that way back in 1999, several years before the US recognized India as a nuclear power for world peace, I expressed a similar sentiment at a Human Rights Conference in Dehra Dun and received more brickbats than bouquets from the media at that time. When I was asked by the media what I thought of India's Nuclear Underground Test, I said it was something of which all Asians should be proud, as India had emerged South Asia's first nuclear power and shown the world that South Asians will not succumb to big power pressure any more. I also said that a strong India could play a much bigger role in ensuring long-term peace in our

People in Sri Lanka have lots of hopes in India. A peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka is best suited to India for a variety of reasons.

region. People tell me now that I was then 'ahead of my times'.

Q: How do you think, India can help resolve the crisis?

A: I do understand India's position on the issue. New Delhi could have its own compulsions given the fact that India has a vast population of Tamils. But still I think India should involve actively, not only in the peace process but also in the development of economic and trade relations and investments. After all, we have had long cultural relations. People in Sri Lanka have lots of hopes in India. A peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka is best suited to India for a variety of reasons. I think it is imperative that the two countries move forward together on the path of economic progress. Let me tell you that India can play a signal role in resolving the crisis. That does not entail India getting directly involved but

building a world opinion against LTTE, which could effectively block them funds and weapons. There cannot be any sympathy for terrorism.

Q: There has been a demand that Kutch Island should be returned to India. Would you do so?

A: Where is the need? Both countries are sharing it. People from both the countries attend festivals in that island without any hassles.

Q: The Sri Lankan Navy very often detains Indian fishermen on the high seas. What is the solution to this problem?

A: The issue of genuine fishermen straying into the exclusive maritime zone of another country must be handled in a humane manner. Fishermen chase behind shoals of fish in the sea, and the maritime boundaries of different countries are of little concern to them. But since we have drawn up boundaries in the sea, when fishermen of one country stray across their maritime boundary into the maritime zone of another country, the navy of that other country can detain them. The Sri Lankan Navy detains Indian fishermen in this way and Sri Lankan fishermen get detained likewise by the Indian Navy. It happens both ways and equally frequently too.

I have given strict orders to the Sri Lankan Navy that cases of genuine fishermen should be handled in a very humane manner, while acting according to the International Laws of the Sea. But unfortunately in the kind of situation that exists in the seas north of our country, Sea Tiger Cadres are known to also pose as fishermen while smuggling arms and ammunition for their terrorist activities. This is unfortunate, and so we have to be extra vigilant and that makes the problem that much more difficult. Our Navy does not harass genuine fishermen. But when Sea Tigers are caught in the guise of fishermen, security considerations call for strong action on our part. Sometimes, they even fly Indian flags. **BE**

sensitive aspects of the ethnic issue with the required wisdom and foresight. I should say this was a failure on the part of all post independence governments in our country. Mainstream political parties on both sides of the political divide did not adequately address this issue. As a result, extremist groups among the Tamils have been able to use this as an excuse to unleash a terrorist campaign against a democratic system.

Not only have they brutally attacked government institutions and officials; they have also mercilessly massacred the highly respected democratic leaders of the Tamils themselves, including such esteemed persons as Mr. Amirthalingam, Dr. Neelan Thiruchelvam, Mr. Ketishvarn Loganathan and a host of others. They have also killed thousands of Tamil people in the name of liberations, and forced tens of thousands of Tamilians to run away and take refuge in other parts of our country such as Colombo where they now live. What the Tamils are suffering at the hands of the LTTE is just terrible and unbelievable.

Q: There is a general impression that the majority of the Tamils are only seeking devolution of power. You have a Unitary Constitution and Sri Lanka is a One-Province-One-Nation. What is your objection to having separate States like India has so that Tamils also have some powers for their local development?

A: Let me first tell you that Sri Lanka is divided into 9 Provinces. The 13th amendment to the Constitution devolved a substantial amount of power to the Provincial Councils, which are elected for each province. We are ready to devolve more powers to the Provinces so that they could look after their own development. We are prepared to devolve maximum power to the Provinces within a united and undivided Sri Lanka taking into consideration the



Photo by Chaminda

I am ready for maximum devolution, not only of political and administrative powers but also the very crucial financial powers.

The LTTE has destroyed the stable life-style, which the Tamils of the North and East have enjoyed for centuries in the areas where the LTTE operates today.



Photo by Chaminda



Why was Rajiv

Q: Mr. President, why do you think, LTTE assassinated Rajiv Gandhi?

A: LTTE never wanted a settlement of the crisis. Rajiv Gandhi was for a negotiated settlement within the framework of Sri Lankan Constitution. India initiated efforts in that direction. This perhaps was not to the liking of the LTTE. Then sending IPKF to Sri Lanka was also a reason. The prospect of Rajiv Gandhi coming back to power as Prime Minister possibly unnerved the LTTE. All these situations prompted them to assassinate him.

Q: Did the Government of India raise the issue of the extradition of Prabhakaran and some of his associates to India during your

aspirations of all communities.

I have appointed a high-level expert and political committee with representatives from all Sri Lankan political Parties to further study the whole concept of devolution. They have gone to India to study the Indian model. I have asked them to give me a Sri Lanka specific model. I am ready for maximum devolution, not only of political and administrative powers but also the very crucial financial powers. I have given the Committee a time frame of three months.

But devolution must be done in a realistic manner. Sri Lanka is not a huge country like India. Our's is a very small country of only 65,000 sq km in extent. The ethnic mix in certain parts of the country is quite complex. For instance, in the Eastern Province, the Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala communities do not live in separate contiguous areas. Their villages are all mixed together, a Muslim village, then a Tamil village, then a Sinhala village and so on.

But we are deeply committed to devolving substantial powers to the Provinces, particularly to the North and East. As I said earlier, a large amount of administrative and fiscal powers have already been constitutionally devolved. We are studying various models of devolution including the Indian model, which includes the Indian Panchayati Raj system of devolution to lower levels at the district, the division and the village level. We are ready to negotiate these matters.

You must also bear another important fact in mind. Today, more than 60 per cent of the Tamil people that is the majority of Tamils live outside the North and East. Large numbers live in Colombo and are doing very well here. Similarly, large numbers live in the central hills and the political parties that represent their interest are now a part of our government. Their leaders have accepted ministerial positions.

Some of the richest people in our

Gandhi killed?

visit to New Delhi? You know there is an Interpol Red Corner Notice against Prabhakaran who is an accused in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Are you ready to act on that Interpol Notice?

A: India did not raise this issue with me. The government in New Delhi never asked me to extradite Prabhakaran. I also do not need to depend on Interpol for advice on Prabhakaran. We all know the things he has done. He is a worried man. He wants to fight.

• *Justice Deshamanya P. Ramanathan, a retired judge of the Sri Lankan Supreme Court and now serving as chairman of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, has this to say on why Rajiv Gandhi was killed:*

I wonder if LTTE ever understood the full implications of assassinating Rajiv Gandhi. One human bomb subverted one billion people of India. It is a tribute to India that the country moved on despite such a major tragedy. One human bomb robbed Indian voters of their choice. Rajiv Gandhi was no admirer of LTTE. He blamed them much more than Sri Lanka government for breaking the India-Sri Lanka accord. LTTE feared what India, under Rajiv Gandhi might do to them. Those would have been their concerns. This may have led them to eliminate him giving scant regard to the sentiments of the people of India as also the international community.

country are Tamilians. Some of the biggest corporates, are led by Tamilians. Many of our leading professionals such as doctors, lawyers, accountants and engineers, are Tamils. Our country is very proud of their achievements, as they have made a huge contribution to the country's professional, administrative, economic, cultural and intellectual life.

Q: Devolution of power would entail amending the Constitution. Do you think you can get the requisite majority in Parliament for amending the Constitution?

A: I am confident that all peace loving and patriotic forces will support me. We may even have to go for a referendum. I am sure that we shall carry the day even in a referendum. Let me tell you, Sinhala are not racist. More than 50 per cent Tamils live in Sinhala dominated areas. They live in perfect peace and harmony.

Q: To my mind the fight between Sinhala and Tamils is neither

ethnic nor cultural nor religious. There is seemingly distrust between the two due to some historical facts. On the other hand, Tamils also do not really support Prabhakaran. But they fear that without him they will be defenceless. This sense of insecurity has to be addressed by the government. How best do you think your government can do it?

A: You are indeed correct when you say that there is no real ethnic, cultural or religious aspect to this so-called ethnic issue. The Sinhala and Tamil people have lived for centuries in harmony with each other and shared a common culture and a common way of relating to the world. The Sinhala and Tamil cultures are very close to each other and they share so much in common. There has also been so much inter-marriage between the two communities. I, for example, have many Tamil relatives.

Most Buddhist temples have statues of Vishnu and Muruga and these are



Photo by Chaminda

The Sinhala and Tamil cultures are very close to each other and they share so much in common. There has also been so much inter-marriage between the two communities. I, for example, have many Tamil relatives.

After I was elected President, one of my first acts was to call the LTTE for talks. I said I was even ready to meet Prabhakaran, one to one. What was their response? Bombs and attacks and the killing of our soldiers.



Photo by Chaminda

Gods worshipped by Tamil and Hindus as well. I am myself a devout worshipper of Lord Muruga. In fact, my elder brother's son Shasheenda is the lone custodian of the main Muruga temple in Sri Lanka at Kataragama in the deep South, not far from the village, where I was born. Lots of Buddhists go to Hindu temples and lot of Hindus come to worship in Buddhist temples in our country. The Sinhala and Tamil people are cousins.

As to Prabhakaran providing security to the Tamils, the facts don't support this view. The LTTE on the contrary has been the most destructive force, the Tamils of our country have faced. The LTTE has destroyed the stable life-style, which the Tamils of the North and East have enjoyed for centuries in the areas where the LTTE operates today. I am sorry to say there is absolutely no freedom or democracy in the LTTE controlled areas. There is no respect for human rights. School going children and young girls are snatched away from their parents to be trained as militants.

The LTTE will not tolerate any dissenting views from the Tamil community. Death is the only punishment for dissent. And so many leading Tamils have had to pay the price for holding views different to those of the LTTE. We need to liberate the Tamils of the North and East from this intolerable state of oppression. That is the reality.

Q: The LTTE has reiterated that Tamil Eelam is their basic and ultimate demand. Do you foresee any chance that they would scale down this demand?

A: The simple answer is that they have to scale down this demand. There are no two opinions about it. Let us remember that the LTTE speaks for only a very small group of Tamils. It is a terrorist group and not a democratic organization and it is banned even in India. It is also banned in the US, the UK, the EU and Canada. Having lived

by the gun without any respect for democratic norms and institutions, it is for us to see how far they are ready to walk on the path of peace and negotiation. We, on the other hand, are always ready to negotiate with all Tamil groups on a reasonable devolution of power.

Q: Whenever there is talk of a Peace Process, the armed confrontation escalates and everything gets undone. Why is it so?

A: You are right to say that the LTTE has always responded to the message of peace with an escalation of war. Yes, whenever we reach out to them with the hand of peace, their response has been violence.

After I was elected President, one of my first acts was to call the LTTE for talks. I said I was even ready to meet Prabhakaran, one to one. What was their response? Bombs and attacks and the killing of our soldiers. For a long time we did not retaliate but kept the doors open for Peace. Then the LTTE blocked the waters of the river Mavilaru that irrigates a large track of paddy fields in the Eastern Province. And that is when we embarked on our first military action to re-open the sluice gates and bring the irrigation water to the rice fields. We did not want to see a whole agricultural community, many of whom were poor Tamil farmers, being held to ransom by the LTTE.

Q: Some think the LTTE creates these situations primarily because they really cannot operate in normal peace conditions. Do you agree with this perception?

A: Judge for yourself: Many in this organisation are said to have committed international crimes. In India they have to account for the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The European Union too recently banned them as a terrorist outfit. As each day passes, the LTTE is becoming more and more isolated internationally. Also as each day passes, more and

more Tamils in Sri Lanka get disillusioned with them because of the violence and the disruption caused by them. Would the LTTE be now able to come into the open and operate in a democratic environment, which will follow a negotiated settlement? Your guess is as good as mine.

Q: The LTTE believes that the Sri Lanka government is supporting the rebel group of Karuna. What is the factual position?

A: Who is this man Karuna? I have read about him in the papers. Intelligence sources say he was Prabhakaran's most capable General and strategist. If he has now turned his guns on the LTTE, what does it tell you? Karuna, according to my information, comes from the East. It is alleged that Prabhakaran was using Tamils of Eastern Province to do the fighting while the Northern Province Tamils retained the leadership positions in the LTTE. Karuna, I am told, was the second most powerful person in the LTTE. The fact that he rebelled against Prabhakaran and walked out of the LTTE should give some insight into the inner workings of the organisation.

Our government is not in the business of arming so called renegade rebel groups. The Sri Lankan army has the capability and strength to fight its battles on its own.

Q; There is also a belief that the



Karuna

Jantha Vimukthi Peramuna and Buddhist Monks have greater influence on the government and don't want any negotiations with the LTTE. Is there any truth in it?

A: Many people and many journalists have misrepresented both the JHU and the JVP. Both these organizations participate in the democratic process and like to see peace in the country. But they strongly condemn terrorist methods and do not want a divided Sri Lanka. I do not differ with them on that score. I must also emphasize that they have shown tremendous patience and goodwill even in the face of terror.

I differ sharply from my opponents who say 'Peace at any Price' the price



Photo by Chaminda

Karuna, I am told, was the second most powerful person in the LTTE. The fact that he rebelled against Prabhakaran and walked out of the LTTE should give some insight into the inner workings of the organisation.

JVP in a procession



Sri Lanka is a Sovereign State. We have no territorial demands on any country and we are not a threat to anyone. If for our security and defence we need weapons, of course we will buy them from international sources.



LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran

being a fractured and divided nation? I say peace, yes, but peace with honour and dignity. The only issue that is non negotiable with me is a divided Sri Lanka. I don't think anybody wants that. The world does not want it. India does not want it. The Tamils don't want it. And none of our citizens want it.

Q: What is the position of Tamil parties in Colombo? Are they cooperative in solving the crisis?

A: Yes, they are cooperating with us in the strong possible way. As I said earlier, the majority of Sri Lankan Tamils live outside the North and East, and they are very much a part of the democratic process in the country. In a democracy we have our differences. And we learn to 'give and take'. We learn to compromise. We learn to respect each other and live together.

Despite threats and sometimes acts of violence from the terrorists, the Tamils of Colombo are strongly committed to work towards a peaceful and united Sri Lanka. And why not? This is their country too.

Q: The peace process initiated by the Norwegians has failed to yield any tangible result so far. What next?

A: The success of any peace initiative

depends very much on the LTTE and their sincerity. Our experience with the LTTE so far, has been disappointing. But I always want to look at the situation with optimism and with an open mind. I want to be positive.

Q: Are there any plans to buy arms from Pakistan or any other country to meet the situation arising out of the rebellion by the LTTE?

A: Sri Lanka is a Sovereign State. We have no territorial demands on any country and we are not a threat to anyone. If for our security and defence we need weapons, of course we will buy them from international sources. Throughout the years we have been buying weapons from several countries in the world and not from any one particular country. That has always been our policy as far as the purchase of arms is concerned.

Q: In the wake of a civil war like situation in Sri Lanka, thousands of Tamils came to India as refugees. Couldn't your government have stopped them and rehabilitate them here only? Their escape from Sri Lanka is evidence that they may not have faith in Prabhakaran and therefore did not want to be caught in the crossfire. Their rehabilitation would have gone to your advantage. Isn't it so?

A: One of my top priorities has been to rehabilitate refugees within Sri Lanka. But even the temporary camps that we set up for them, known as 'Open Relief Centres', were attacked by the LTTE. As a result, the refugees living in these camps became victims of violence once again. All this is part of an organized campaign on the part of the LTTE to push Sri Lankan citizens to India as refugees. They want to score international propaganda points, especially in Tamil Nadu and India.

Now, as of October 24th, just about 15,000 refugees have come to Tamil Nadu in the course of this year.



Photo by Chaminda

What is interesting about them is that as much as 27 per cent of them are children under 16 years. What do we understand from this? It is clear that a substantial proportion of refugees consist of parents running away to safety from the LTTE with their children, as they are forcibly abducting children to fight in their militia.

The Sri Lankan government is most concerned about the refugees. We collaborate closely with the State Government of Tamil Nadu to ensure their welfare.

We are most concerned about the child refugees too. 150 of them were expecting to sit for the GCE (O Level) examination in December. We have made all arrangements to send 6 teachers from Sri Lanka to coach them for the examination. We have sent 40 sets of books for their use, and the Examinations Department in Colombo has made arrangements to conduct the examination especially for them in Chennai. Our High Commission in Chennai works very closely with the refugees.

Q: How is your economy doing?

A: It is doing exceedingly well. We have recorded an 8 per cent growth. Yes, I do admit there has not been much development in the North East part of Sri Lanka. That is all because of the disturbed situation there. We have not been able to develop tourism there. That part of Sri Lanka has tremendous tourism potential. We have world's best beaches. Lush green countryside is a major attraction.

Q: What else is on your economic agenda?

A: Our first priority is to develop Infrastructure. Western province has reasonably developed after independence. But development must go to villages. We want to give a big boost to education and IT. Our



Booming economy



Photo by Chaminda

as a young democracy we may not have handled some of the sensitive aspects of the ethnic issue with the required wisdom and foresight. I should say this was a failure on the part of all post independence governments in our country.

literacy rate is over 93 per cent. With this kind of human resource, we have the ability to grow faster. We have

Q: That reminds me of offshore exploration of oil. What efforts are you making to strike oil?

A: We have many plans. We had offered a block to India also for exploration. But till date we have not heard anything from New Delhi. We invited them before the bidding.

enormous natural resources.

Q: Recently you addressed a conference of your country's envoys. You were very right in saying that they should not restrict themselves to evening parties alone but should try to invite investments for the country's growth. All along Colombo seems to have relied too much on the Indian Government. But Indian opinion is formed by multiple sources. Politicians, both in ruling and opposition parties and also journalists are crucial to government opinion on any issue. Ironically, your high commission has never bothered to interact either with politicians or journalists, leave alone the businessmen. Under these circumstances how can your envoys be more effective both in terms of diplomacy and commerce?

A: This is why you are sitting with me today. This is no PR gesture on my part. I want to reach out to the people of India in particular and the world community in general. India is closest to us not only geographically but culturally as well.

I say to you with all sincerity that it is through people like you that the

people of Sri Lanka can reach out to the people of India and the world.

I come from a village in the deep South of the country. We are from a simple rural, God-fearing family. I do not know much about cocktail parties and diplomatic rituals. I may not speak perfect English but I certainly speak what is in my mind.

And speaking to people like you is a great opportunity for me. I wish to assure Tamil speaking people all over the world that the government of Sri Lanka is not against Tamil speaking people. I simply cannot imagine any progress in Sri Lanka without Tamil people. They are all one of us. Tamil speaking people in Sri Lanka belong to Sri Lanka. This is their very own country. I am prepared to meet all their demands. I have been working on whatever demands I have received so far. These demands mainly relate to two issues: one is devolution of power and the second is language. A process has been set into motion to meet both their demands and I would ensure that these stand resolved at the earliest.

Again I would appeal to the Tamil Speaking people all over the world not to be taken in by the propaganda of LTTE. I invite them to Sri Lanka and see for themselves the ground realities. Let them speak to the Tamil speaking traders and businessmen living in Sri Lanka. They are the ones who will give you a real picture. At the same time, let me reiterate that I shall never ever allow division of Sri Lanka under any circumstances. Sri Lanka belongs to Tamils as much as it belongs to Sinhalas or Christians or Muslims because they are all the valued citizens of Sri Lanka.

Q: What is your vision for Sri Lanka?

A: I want to see peace, prosperity and progress in Sri Lanka. That is my vision. That is my firm resolve. ■

A political framework can reduce impetus to war

Jehan Perera

Once again, the situation in Sri Lanka has become uncertain and fluid. There are military attacks taking place between the government forces and the LTTE. The relationship between these two parties remains extremely hostile. On the other hand, after the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding the relationship between the ruling party of President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the main opposition party headed by opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe has improved. The impetus towards a political solution to the ethnic conflict has got stronger.

The conciliatory statements by the government's peace delegation after returning to Sri Lanka regarding the prospects for opening the A9 highway to Jaffna are welcome. But the failure of the peace talks in Geneva between the government and LTTE at the end of October to yield a positive conflict resolving outcome was disappointing. It was a big blow to the expectations of the people, particularly those directly victimised by the conflict in the north east. The sufferings being experienced by displaced persons, the severe shortages of foodstuffs and other essential commodities and the continuous killings and abductions have made life a living hell for citizens in the north east.

LTTE training

At the opening of the Geneva talks, Norway's long standing facilitator Erik Solheim correctly summarised the three main issues facing the parties. He said these were the humanitarian issues concerning the



LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran

people, stopping violence and a political solution. He also said that the talks should be within the framework of the previous six rounds of talks held by the government and LTTE during the period of the UNP government and also within the framework of the last round of Geneva talks in February. The main features of those talks was the

promise to stop all violations of the Ceasefire Agreement and to explore a federal solution to the ethnic conflict.

However, when they sat across the table at Geneva, the government and LTTE insisted on different agenda items. The government delegation took the position that they wished to talk about the core issues relating to the overall political settlement while the LTTE delegation insisted on limiting the talks to the opening of the A9 highway to Jaffna to overcome the humanitarian crisis. The talks broke down on this issue. The government now says that they are prepared to negotiate on opening the A9 highway if the LTTE ceases its violence. This is a welcome change of heart, though late.

ONE PACKAGE

It is puzzling why the two parties could not agree to discuss the three main issues outlined by the Norwegian facilitator as one package when they were meeting for two whole days. For instance, the government and LTTE could have agreed to talk about each of these issues for two hours each. If they could not satisfactorily conclude their discussions, they would have had a strong motivation to meet at an early date to take up the unfinished business. If problem solving was the real need, there was no need to get stuck on insisting on a one item meeting.

Instead of demonstrating flexibility and creativity in the pursuit of a mutually satisfactory outcome to their negotiations, the government and LTTE adopted rigid and confrontational stances that doomed the talks.

The two delegations appeared to follow the model that they had practiced at the last round of Geneva talks in February 2006. Both sides recounted the wrongs they perceived in the other side, while remaining silent about their own side's misdeeds.

Both sides have a great deal of work to do to regain any measure of goodwill





LTTE armed cadres

and trust in one another. In this regard the abiding memory of a successful charting of a new beginning would be the first round of talks that took place in Sattahip, Thailand in September 2002. In their public statements to the media the negotiators at the 2002 peace talks addressed the shared future they hoped to bring about through their meeting, rather than lay emphasis on the bitter and bloody past that divided them. When they faced a barrage of questions by skeptical journalists, they appeared to even defend each other.

FRAMEWORK

There is also no question that talks that are meant to be successful should be within a framework, and not open ended. The LTTE has generally shown itself averse to discussing the framework of a political solution.

They appear to prefer an open-ended negotiation process, in which only humanitarian and military issues are discussed. In this regard the agreement at the Oslo talks in December 2002 to explore a federal solution based on the principle of internal self determination for the north east was an exceptional agreement.

There is no doubt that the Ceasefire Agreement signed in 2002 underpinned the peace process in the past, and it should underpin it in the future as well. Accordingly the government and LTTE need to amend the Ceasefire Agreement wherever necessary and uphold its main clauses, which include a complete cessation of killings and abductions, and the opening of the A9 highway.

However, when talks are open-ended with no agreed destination, the journey can go round in a circle. It is highly unlikely that there will be full adherence to the Ceasefire and Geneva Agreements until the government and LTTE agree on the political framework of the final solution. The political framework agreement, ideally on federal lines, would set out the scope for economic development and political control, and take away the need to jostle for more military control on the ground.

The government's new alliance with the opposition UNP did not seem to have made any significant impact on the negotiating approach or spirit of

the government team. President Mahinda Rajapaksa's decision to invite the UNP to join his government was born out of his recognition for a new approach and new spirit to resolving the ethnic conflict. The rationale for the Presidents invitation to the political opposition to solve the ethnic conflict now needs to be changed into action.

A devolution package that shares power between the centre and regions on a federal basis will do much to address the primary, or root cause of the ethnic conflict. The UNP has been open in affirming its readiness to accept a federal solution, while the government has been talking about a solution based in the Indian model. A political settlement with the LTTE will become more likely in the context of such a power sharing agreement. It is to be hoped that the government-UNP agreement will strengthen the ability of the government to develop such a power sharing solution. It is Sri Lanka's best hope at the present time. ■

(The writer is Executive Director, National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, and is a Political Columnist for the Daily Mirror and Lanka Monthly Digest).

An Insight into LTTE

LTTE, a rebel militia in the Northern province of Sri Lanka has an estimated strength of 10,000-armed guerrillas under the commandership of Prabhakaran.

Those who have interacted with Prabhakaran say that he is neither dependable, nor reliable nor trust worthy. He is a man of his own whims. He has scant regard for his ethnic people, the Tamils, for whom he is supposed to

Sometimes Sri Lankan security forces are blamed for such murders. But the locals know better who the perpetrators of violence are.

The LTTE was launched by a group of Tamils to fight for a separate state of what they called Tamil Ealam (Ealam means State). Initially, those who joined the LTTE were genuinely disgruntled Tamil youth who felt deprived of their language and political rights. Prabhakaran emerged as a leader later. Once the leadership was in his hands, he began calling the shots.

Prabhakaran is considered a gifted man for his strategy planning. He managed to have highly effective propaganda machinery that won him many Tamil hearts around the globe. This helped him to enrol millions of Tamil sympathisers who not only helped him but even financed him. Some of them continue to fund him till date and even arrange shipments of weapons.

Indian Intelligence agencies believe that ISI is not only funding Prabhakaran but is also supplying him arms and ammunition. Some

rebel groups in North East India are also reported to have got training in LTTE camps. Indian critics of LTTE believe that infamous sandalwood smuggle of the South, Veerapan had close contacts with Prabhakaran.

He is also considered to be a very shrewd man, who uses his friends for his benefit and drops them suddenly. He has cashed in on the changing governments in Sri Lanka. According to insiders, Prabhakaran did not support Ranil Wickremasinghe to win presidential elections since he had "used him enough". He wanted a new person for his own advantage. But the new President Mahinda Rajapaksa, seemingly has seen through his game.

According to a top intelligence official of Sri Lanka, it was the democratic system in Colombo that gave him an edge. Security forces had to be withdrawn from Jaffna on several occasions under intense political pressure. That gave Prabhakaran a distinct advantage. "Had it not been so, the LTTE would have been finished long back", asserts the intelligence official.



LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran

have waged a war against the nation. He controls Jaffna in the North and vast tracts thereafter. The entire area is Tamil dominated. On the east, which again is Tamil dominated, his writ doesn't run much. But nevertheless, he has a strong presence in areas like Trincomalee and Batticaloa and has under his control long seashore on the east. He has virtually divided Sri Lanka into two parts. Even Sri Lankan officials invariably term his part of the country as "LTTE controlled areas"

The fear of Prabhakaran looms large on the faces of the people who live in these areas. There have been umpteen numbers of cases where people, including women and small children in the eastern side were butchered at the dead of the night by 'unknown' people. The locals don't know who the assailants are.



A young tiger at training camp



LTTE tiger's training camp

One most curious aspect of the LTTE is that it has made heavy investments around the world in various trades. It has established several companies in foreign countries. It has nine ships, which are used as normal cargo ships. It has a fruit canning company in Thailand. It has developed a vast support base in Bangkok and Indonesia regions. Besides, it has a vast network of fundraising from Tamil expatriates.

LTTE gets all its weapons through sea route. Almost 300 to 400 big ships pass through Sri Lanka every day while there are thousands of small fishing boats in the waters at any given point of time. It becomes most difficult for the Sri Lankan Navy to intercept weapon-carrying ships unless they have very specific information.

Several attempts were made by some senior Tamil people to create a moderate force and persuade Prabhakaran to a middle path. One of them was Sivapasupathi, Sri Lanka's Attorney General, who migrated to Australia and became LTTE

spokesman. He later conceded that he had not joined ranks with LTTE but was only seeking a way out to make Prabhakaran shun violence and come to the mainstream.

LTTE has caused a sharp divide between the Tamils of Batticaloa and Jaffna. Batticaloa Tamils have invariably been used extensively for guerrilla operations, thus risking their lives while the Jaffna Tamils were always kept at the base camps. This forced Prabhakaran's most trusted aide and master war strategist, 32-year-old Karuna to part ways.

Karuna, considered to be his chief strategist and a guerrilla of immense fighting potential belonged to eastern side. He was the second in command of the LTTE. His departure from the LTTE made Prabhakaran extremely apprehensive. Karuna called it quits with Prabhakaran because Tamils in Eastern side were being oppressed and subjected to violence more often than not. Eastern Tamil who had joined the LTTE were the ones who were forced to be the first line of offensive and defensive

with the Sri Lankan security personnel, thus offering them as cannon fodder.

This is what many believe prompted Karuna to part ways. But Karuna is said to have the fear of getting killed by LTTE moles, which are spread over many countries.

Karuna's whereabouts are not known. But some believe that he may be hiding in India. Over the years, Karuna is reported to have built his own contacts amongst Tamils around the world, who are said to be financing him now. He is also said to be in close and constant touch with his supporters in Sri Lanka. Intelligence reports in Sri Lanka suggest the possibility of his returning to the "battlefield" and taking on Prabhakaran. And that is what worries the LTTE supremo.

Prabhakaran now lives with a sense of fear. He keeps changing his bodyguards every second day and never stays at one place for more than a day. He is said to be keeping his hideouts a top secret.

Prabhakaran prefers youngsters, between the age group of 12 to 18, both boys and girls, to be recruited into his outfit. They are the ones who can very easily be brainwashed to toe his line of thinking and ideology and join the guerrilla force. These youngsters are mentally too raw to have developed a sense of reasoning and thus are apt to be moulded according to his wishes.

These youngsters are subjected to physical training exercises or what they call PT for a minimum of one month, which is followed by weapons training that may last for three months or more. Once the weapons training is over, they are asked to prove their killing instinct. In their pursuit to prove themselves, these kids usually sneak into the eastern side, which is not controlled by Prabhakaran, and kill innocent people at the dead of the night. Invariably, Sri Lankan security forces are blamed for such killings. That is how the small kids graduate to become ferocious guerrillas. The cadres live in most inhuman conditions in the dense jungles of Jaffna devoid of any health care system. There is no means of any entertainment or education. Modern technology is Greek to them except Prabhakaran himself and his chosen few who use state of the art weapons system and communication facilities for their own use.

Desertion invites long terms of prison

and even some time executions.

The cadres are given just enough food to sustain themselves and soap and toiletries remain a big luxury. The Sri Lankan security forces caught a young girl, who had not washed her hair for over a year. She was in a bad shape with poor health. She was admitted to a hospital for treatment but died there. Security forces believe that LTTE moles may have killed her for her desertion.

Childcare organisations in Sri Lanka have raised a voice of protest against the recruitment of children by Prabhakaran. But there is very little that either the government in Colombo or any other agency can do. Dr. Hiranthi Wijemanne, who is a practitioner of medicines by profession and also a staunch anti-child abuse activist has documented the plight of child recruits in Jaffna by the LTTE. She knows that no one can do anything about it. But she insists that international agencies should come forward to rescue these tender aged children. "It is for these international agencies to ensure blockade of all funds to LTTE and force them not to recruit children," says Dr. Wijemanne, who has also been associated with UNICEF.

Religious prayers or worshipping Gods is strictly prohibited. The Prabhakaran Controlled area has not seen any religious or cultural function for almost three decades now. Yet

another section of guerrillas is of the army deserters.

The LTTE is comprised of nine groups under the leadership of different people. But Prabhakaran remains supreme and rarely interacts with his men. He keeps shifting his hide out almost once a day. After tsunami hit Sri Lankan coasts, there was a rumour that Prabhakaran had died in that disaster. But the rumour proved wrong, after Prabhakaran met Norwegian foreign minister. Since then no one has seen him.

Prabhakaran, knowledgeable sources say, has taken due care to use people and then dump them. "He used Ranil Wickremsinghe for long and eventually refused to help him in the last year's presidential elections. That is how, Mahinda Rajapaksa emerged as president of the Island nation.

On the other hand, Karuna is reported to be hiding in India but no one knows for sure. He too enjoys a good support base amongst both Sri Lankan Tamils as also Tamil expatriates. Karuna is reported to be trying to get nine groups operating in Jaffna under one umbrella. He has since opened political offices in various countries. Once he is able to bring all the groups under one umbrella, he intends to return to Sri Lanka with his wife and children.

Once talking to a security official, Karuna is reported to have confided that Sri Lankan security forces should operate in small groups to avoid casualties.

Amongst the nations around the globe, no one has any soft corner for LTTE except for Norway, which has a heavy concentration of Tamils, who are supposed to be a highly influential group.

Both civilians and security personnel in Sri Lanka admit that India remained the only country, which could understand the problem and resolve it. West can never understand the crisis. Both Tamils and Sinhalas will also listen to India rather than any one else. This implies that India has a greater credibility amongst the Sri Lankan populace than any one else. ■

Velupillai Prabhakaran with his body guards at a training camp



Priority areas: Peace and economic development

Sri Lanka is at cross roads. The government is caught between development and 23-year-old rebellion in the North by the LTTE. The guerrilla warfare has cost many lives over the years. The economy has been adversely affected. But for the rebellion, Sri Lanka would have emerged as a strong economic force.

the better. The country registered a growth rate of 8 per cent this year, genuinely a great achievement in the backdrop of armed rebellion and a sense of fear amongst the populace, particularly the trading class. The economy is on an upward swing.

The *trimurti* of Sri Lankan economy comprises of the President Mahinda Rajapaksa himself, who is also the finance minister, the all important Minister of Enterprise Development and Investment Promotion, Mr. Rohitha Bogollagama and the Central Bank Governor, Mr. Ajith Nivard Cabraal. The three have put their heads together to usher in an all round economic development, seek long term quality investments, launch a variety of programmes to ensure equitable development in both urban and rural areas.

The upswing in the economy has begun attracting many investors to Sri Lanka from various countries around the globe. All this has been possible by sheer dedication and honesty of purpose of President Rajapaksa.

But while trying to put the economy on a strong footing, President Rajapaksa has not lost sight of resolving the LTTE problem. He took

various initiatives. The first and the foremost were to join hands with all opposition parties to create a national consensus. After signing an MoU with opposition parties, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has emerged much stronger than any of his predecessor.

He is open for a negotiated settlement



Photo by Chaminda

President Mahinda Rajapaksa

The country has vast potentials, in terms of both, natural and human resources. Much of it could not be exploited during the past more than two decades. Whatever was exploited was only a half-hearted attempt.

With a new government under the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa coming to power on November 17, 2005, things seem to be changing for



Ajith Nivard Cabraal



Photo by Chaminda

Rohitha Bogollagama

with LTTE. Geneva talks failed, but he remains unfazed. To take the wind out of the sails of the LTTE, he has initiated steps to address all those grievances, which had given birth to LTTE. Constitution is being amended to provide for devolution of power so that Tamils living in Sri Lanka get an equal share in political power and economic development.



Photo by Chaminda

Justice Deshamanya P. Ramanathan

Tamil language is also being given the status of one of the official languages. These two major initiatives, yet to be in place, have won him the hearts of the Tamils, who are convinced that these steps would isolate LTTE leader and erode his support base.

Mr. Justice Deshamanya P. Ramanathan, Chairman of the Human Rights Commission, with Tamil origins, agrees that the steps taken by President Rajapaksa would certainly erode the support base of Prabhakaran but he is not sure if that would bring him to the mainstream.

According to him, violence is the result of inability of democratic institutions to meet the aspirations of all sections of society. He says that Sri Lanka has witnessed greater polarisation.

Justice Ramanathan is of the opinion that LTTE certainly takes on the character of its leader. In the event Prabhakaran gets eliminated or dies before the crisis is resolved, there is every possibility of a fierce competition emerging within LTTE leadership for the top post. within the organisation. Prabhakaran, he says, has established one of the most efficient guerrilla force. They have

demonstrated ability at fund raising and procurement of arms. Prabhakaran eliminated all his opponents.

Talking about the solution to this problem, Justice Ramanathan feels that LTTE should undergo reforms, change from purely a military

Constitution is being amended to provide for devolution of power so that Tamils living in Sri Lanka get an equal share in political power and economic development. Tamil language is also being given the status of one of the official languages. These two major initiatives, yet to be in place, have won him the hearts of the Tamils, who are convinced that these steps would isolate LTTE leader and erode his support base.

organisation to that of a social political organisation. But Prabhakaran may not agree. He believes in power of bullet rather than power of ballot.

Justice Ramanathan is also for reforms in Sri Lanka State. "Solution should come through inclusive process and dialogue. The State should reflect its full diversity. That would come by devolution of power and amendment to the Official Languages Act.

Ironically, all sections of Tamil Society, be it government or the LTTE, Sinhala or the Tamils, have great faith in India and all want New Delhi to intervene to resolve the problems here. Federalism is quite

emotive. Lots of lessons are to be learnt from India.

Justice Ramanathan credits the Sri Lankan government and the Supreme Court for having ensured that there were no human rights violations. "President wants no violence. That is for sure. Things have changed a lot after Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa took over as President. We have ensured that the police does not indulge in human rights violations during the captivity of any person, whatever the offence may be. This has been possible due to a tough stance taken by the Supreme Court and the government's willingness to abide by the directives.



Harim Peiris

But we have to destroy the roots of the problem. That is possible only when we do a thorough research into the whole issue and come up with viable solutions.

Mr. Harim Peiris, media advisor to the then President, Chandrika

Kumaratunge, a Sinhala, agrees that the steps taken by the President would address the grievances of the Tamil community but is in favour of going deeper into the malaise to find for an everlasting solution. He says that the country cannot be divided. No one wants it, not even the Tamils except Prabhakaran and his brigade. "But we have to destroy the roots of the problem. That is possible only when we do a thorough research into the whole issue and come up with viable solutions", he says.



Photo by Chaminda

Archt. Raju Sivaraman

"If President Rajapaksa cannot resolve the problem, no one else can."

Mr. Archt. Raju Sivaraman, a Tamil and the country's leading architect with a flourishing business, feels that if President Rajapaksa cannot resolve the problem, no one else can. "He is the last hope. He means business. He is not under anyone's pressure. He is a man who wants to take everyone along, even his critics. That is the best

If only, Sri Lanka had adopted the Indian model of quasi federalism, the LTTE would have never been born. If Bengalis, Tamils, Marathas, Punjabis and other scores of communities with diverse language and culture can live in perfect harmony in such a vast country like India, why can't Sinhala and Tamils enjoy the same harmony in Sri Lanka.

quality in him. Tamils in Sri Lanka see a ray of hope in him. He doesn't want war or bloodshed. He wants peace", says Mr. Sivaraman.

Mr. S.M.N.Manickam, Managing Director of Cot Lanka Agro Pvt. Ltd, with roots in Tamil Nadu, is one of the biggest exporters in food items. He too agrees with Mr. Sivaraman. "Tamils have two categories in Sri Lanka. One is Sri Lankan Tamils and the other is Indian Tamils. But both are citizens of Sri Lanka. Both want peace and tranquillity. The official discrimination between the Tamils and Sinhala led to the crisis. President Rajapaksa is out to undo that discrimination. After all we are all citizens of Sri Lanka. If only, Sri Lanka had adopted the Indian model of quasi federalism, the LTTE would have never been born. If Bengalis, Tamils, Marathas, Punjabis and other scores of communities with diverse language and culture can live in perfect harmony in such a vast



Photo by Chaminda

Manickam

country like India, why can't Sinhala and Tamils enjoy the same harmony in Sri Lanka. Vested political interests initiated this discrimination, which has led to the present situation. But with President Rajapaksa adopting a policy of mutual trust and cooperation, all Tamils in Sri Lanka are confident that this island will once again be a land of peace as preached by Lord Buddha", says Mr. Manickam.

Mr. P.Sivarajan, who has been importing sugar from Pakistan, India, Brazil and Colombia for the past 20 years, has an annual turnover of around Rs.600 crore. He says that being a Tamil speaking man, he never had any problem with Sinhala community. There are 7 sugar importers in Colombo of whom 4 are Tamils and 3 are Sinhala. They have no business rivalry even. Sri Lanka has a population of 3.5 million Tamils of whom 80,000 live in Colombo alone, most of whom are flourishing businessmen. He feels sorry for the people, both Tamil and Sinhala, living in the North and the East, who



Photo by Chaminda

Sunimal Fernando: Advisor to the President

he alleges, are literally starving, because of the blockade of A9 highway. He wants India to play a pro-active role to resolve the crisis in this island. He suggests that India should pressurise Sri Lanka, through whatever means, to grant Tamils statehood to end the strife.

Mr. K.Rajendran, of Tamil origin, is an importer of food items mostly chillies, spices and pulses from India, with a turn over of more than Rs. 100 crore annually. He regrets banning imports of pulses, sugar and pepper by India and also refusal to give duty free rebate on FTA. Instead Pakistan does give duty free rebate. Now most of his imports come from Pakistan. He says the blockade of A9 highway had greatly affected his business because his supplies cannot go to the North and the East, which consume almost 20 per cent of his stocks. He has never faced any discrimination in business. He concedes that LTTE has enormous propaganda and weapons' procurement machinery and therefore cannot be easily wished away. He also is of the opinion that India could play a positive role in resolving the crisis. He does not want to return to India. "Sri Lanka is my

country. Sri Lanka is in my blood. Tamil problem is only restricted to the North and some areas in the East", he says.

Out of the 80,000 odd Tamils in Colombo, almost 7,000 had procured 'Overseas Citizens of India' (OCI) status from Indian High Commission till the end of last month. Hundreds of more were in the queue. The OCI status offers the holder to visit India without having to seek any visa or report to the police even, besides having the facility to run a business in India. Most Indian Tamils living in Sri Lanka are clamouring for this facility. But there were also apprehensions among a section of Sri Lankan Tamils who believe that some LTTE cadres too had been able to procure OCI facility. But Indian High Commission officials claim that they have been minutely examining every application and confirming



Photo by Chaminda

Sivarajan

their details before issuing OCI.

The very fact that Tamils living in Sri Lanka are very keen to get the OCI status speaks of the close bondage that they have with their land of origin. All these Tamils, particularly



Photo by Chaminda

K.Rajendran

living in Colombo have emerged as a strong support base of President Rajapaksa.

The President has been inviting Tamil traders very often for consultations, both political and economic. That is what pleases the Tamil traders most. According to Mr. Sunimal Fernando, advisor to the President, Mr. Mohinda Rajapaksa is very keen to have a continued interaction with all sections of the society, be they Sinhala, Tamils, Christians or Muslims. After all they are all Sri Lankans. In a modern day society, one cannot afford to antagonise any one section that had been the malaise with the previous governments in Colombo. He is always out to resolve their problems. Can you believe it, despite being a staunch Buddhist himself, he visits Hindu temples more often than even Hindus. He has a typical cosmopolitan character. And some are very right to say that he can be trusted to bring peace to this tortured island nation. ■