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**Troubled
Neighbourhood:
Sri Lanka
Bangladesh**

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Sri Lanka



Mr H K Dua, Editor in Chief of The Tribune was in Colombo early March for an exclusive interview with the Sri Lankan President. His two articles give valuable insight into the situation in this important southern neighbour.

Excerpts from the Interview are also reproduced.

CEASEFIRE IS ONLY ON PAPER, SAYS RAJAPAKSA

President Mahendra Mahinda Rajapaksa is a hard-boiled southern politician who has fought his way through Sri Lanka's politics dominated for years by the Colombo elite. In his hands now lies a crucial decision on which will depend whether peace can be restored to the nation caught in an unending strife.

Essentially, the question being debated in Colombo, perhaps the entire South Asia, is: will President Rajapaksa go in for a military solution of the divisive issue of Tamil separatism or opt for negotiations with V. Prabhakaran's LTTE?

A military solution could involve a full-scale offensive against Prabhakaran in the North and retaliatory terror attacks by his men. The search for a political settlement would involve the resumption of meaningful talks for working out a political set-up for Sri Lanka acceptable to all ethnic groups, communities and regions.

It is indeed a tall order, given the continuing hard positions of the politicians and attitudes of the people of the South – mostly the Sinhalas and the Tamils.

Just a four-day visit to Colombo strengthens the fear that Sri Lanka's continuing crisis is headed for worse during the next few months.

President Rajapaksa spoke to me for 70 minutes at his Temple Trees office in central Colombo – just a day after the fifth anniversary of the ceasefire agreement was observed by the JVP, with a rally in the capital to oppose the continuance of the ceasefire or any resumption of the stalled peace process.

"Nobody is celebrating the fifth anniversary of the ceasefire", Mr Rajapaksa said pumping the air with his hand a bit assertively. "The ceasefire is only on paper."

He said: "Prabhakaran has violated the ceasefire 8,000 times in five years – as many as 8,000 times! The LTTE has assassinated our Foreign Minister

Lakshman Kadirgamar and attacked the Army Commander, and recently there was an attack on the Defence Secretary, who happens to be my brother." It was a narrow escape for him.

Actually, few people could even think of President Rajapaksa striking a deal with the LTTE. His political rise has been mainly because of his hard-line Sinhala majority politics and life-long grassroots work.

When his attention was drawn to the widespread impression in Sri Lanka and South Asia that Mr Rajapaksa was a hardliner who was actually looking for a military solution to the LTTE question, he said: "I am not a hardliner and there is no military solution... But what to do? I have to defend the country; defend the sovereignty of the country. We have to take a strong action against the terrorists who want to disrupt the country. They are terrorists. Any other country would have done this."

He said he needed a political



some of his recent statements!"

He was asked about the attempts made a few months ago to work out a consensus with the opposition UNP and the Memorandum of Understanding he had signed with the Opposition leader, Ranil Wickramasinghe. "Where does the MoU stand? Is it still alive and being respected?"

"I will say it is dead, because some of the founders and leaders of UNP have shown little interest in it and some of them say they have already torn the document." As for himself, Mr Rajapaksa said, he was ready to negotiate with them, discuss with them. He said he had already spoken to some of the senior members of the UNP, "but they have a different approach".

He bristled when his attention was drawn to the criticism voiced last week by some of his critics that despite his stated hard line he might have struck a secret deal with the LTTE.

"Deal? (laughter) Where is the question of a deal? Where is it? Obviously, there are people behind this criticism – actually some former ministers." He was clearly referring to a couple of ministers he had recently sacked, including a former foreign minister.

President Rajapaksa brushed aside the charges by NGOs and several western countries that his security forces were violating human rights at a vast scale.

"I ask them to give me concrete evidence of human rights violations so that I can take a suitable action. In a country, like this, Prabhakaran is fighting a war, it is his men who abduct people," he claimed.

"Our police, our army cannot go in those areas. It is difficult for the police to find out whether there is truth in the allegations. Some of the affected people may actually be fighting the Army."

Courtesy: The Tribune, Chandigarh

solution, but it was difficult to find one. "We need a political solution. We can produce a document for a solution. But what if the South is not accepting it? At present I am trying to take the South along so that a political solution becomes acceptable to the people." The people of the East will also have to be involved.

"I am trying to bring all political parties together to find a solution. I want to find a solution but it is indeed

difficult. Maybe, it will take some time, but it all depends on the people. It is indeed a slow process."

What kind of a political and peaceful settlement he had in mind to resolve the LTTE question and how did he intend to pursue its search?

"My personal view is that Prabhakaran should come forward to express readiness for a peaceful and a negotiated settlement. But he does not want to come forward. Look at

NOT BY QUICK-FIX SRI LANKA NEEDS HEALING TOUCH

By H K Dua

NOT many people outside Sri Lanka know that as Mr Mahinda Rajapaksa went ahead building his political career, he acted in a Sinhala film, "Men who die". Years later, he laughs about his brief appearance as a general in the film.

I do not know whether the 'general' tried to resolve any emotional or political situation in the film. But as President and as Supreme Commander, he is now called upon to resolve the crisis facing his country and restore peace in the troubled island.

President Rajapaksa does not suffer from the intellectual ambiguities of the Colombo elite, which has ruled Sri Lanka for years. His reflexes are those

of a grassroots politician who has tenaciously fought his way through politics to challenge the hold of the Colombo set of the Bandaranaikes and the big business lobby of Ranil Wickramasinghe. That he is from the South and is a Sinhala defines his politics and the hard-line policy he is prone to following.

Mr Rajapaksa's concern for keeping his country united is genuine, but he is not the kind of political leader who would like to fritter away his southern Sinhala base just for winning applause from the international community for agreeing to sign a political settlement with V. Prabhakaran and his LTTE.

Having interviewed him for more than an hour (The Tribune, March 4,

2007) and others who have some idea of the Sri Lankan crisis, I get the impression that President Rajapaksa has come to the conclusion that only a military victory will create conditions for a political settlement.

He says that he is not opposed to a political settlement per se, but maintains that Prabhakaran would not come forward and talk peace. Prabhakaran, in his view, does not want a settlement short of a separate Eelam for the Tamils which no Sri Lankan President can accept.

The President does not think highly of the Norwegian facilitator's role, nor of the ceasefire, which has been there on paper for the last five years and which has been violated often by both the LTTE and the security

forces. The President, however, would not ask the Norwegians to pack their bags, or abrogate the ceasefire.

In any case, the Norwegian peace-making as well as the ceasefire have turned out to be innocuous and neither of them is being taken seriously. Doing away with, or, retaining both of them hardly makes a difference.

Certainly, neither the Norwegian effort nor the existence of the ceasefire agreement has deterred Prabhakaran's men from killing Sri Lankan foreign minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, and launching attacks on the Army Commander and Defence Secretary. Luckily, both escaped. Nor has the ceasefire agreement prevented the Sri Lankan Army from scoring a military advantage over the LTTE in the East.

This and the defection of Karuna from Prabhakaran's company appear to have convinced President Rajapaksa that having lost the crucial eastern sector, Prabhakaran is in a weakened position and the Army can afford a crackdown on the LTTE.

It is possible President Rajapaksa will aim at negotiating a deal with non-Prabhakaran Tamil leaders like Douglas Devananda, one of the ministers in the central government, or with Mr V. Anandasangaree, leader of the moderate Tamil party – TULF. If President Rajapaksa succeeds in tackling Prabhakaran in the north, he might think of striking a deal with Karuna – the man who broke away from Prabhakaran.

Any deal with moderate Tamil parties, or with Karuna, is going to be anathema for Prabhakaran, who has always claimed – unconvincingly – that he is the sole representative of the Tamil people.

Next few months might unfold President Rajapaksa's hard-line policy further, perhaps escalating into a military onslaught on the LTTE in the

north, pushing back chances of a political settlement for quite some time.

Mr Rajapaksa is not just a nominal President. For help he has given two of his brothers considerable power in running the government. Mr Basil Rajapaksa has the modest designation of an adviser but he has powers, perhaps, more than that of the Prime Minister; Mr Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, as Defence Secretary, along with the Army Chief Sarat Fonseka, decides army strategy and ground operations.

All of them are eager to push through the hard-line policy on the ethnic question. And it cannot be without reason that the President says the ceasefire is only on paper and scoffs at the peacekeeping boy-scouts.

Sri Lanka, indeed, needs peace without which it cannot live as a united and harmonious nation. This also demands the melting of frozen attitudes, statesmanship among the leaders of various political parties, an understanding and accommodating disposition and search for a peaceful solution that can reconcile the varied interests of the majority Sinhala, the Tamils of different vintage and the Muslims and devolution of authority to provinces or regional units, and a sense of participation in a sort of governance of the country by sharing power with the minorities.

Essentially, survival of Sri Lanka as a united country ultimately depends on how it evolves as a democratic polity with values sacred to a plural society. Once this basic truth dawns on the majority of the people of the country, the politicians, Sinhala or Tamil, keen on pursuing divisive politics, will find that there is another route available for them to serve Sri Lanka.

All this will not need just the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between President Rajapaksa and the

UNP's Ranil Wickramasinghe; the MoU has already been consigned to a limbo. A spirit of national awakening and reconciliation is necessary so that Sri Lanka's unity is ensured and, at the same time, the just aspirations of the Tamil people are met. There are a few people in Sri Lanka who understand the logic of winning hearts and minds, but they are in an abject minority, given the present hardened Sinhala and the LTTE positions.

Though in a minority, it is necessary for the enlightened sections to begin walking on this track.

India has always, and rightly so, stood for a united Sri Lanka and opposed the creation of a separatist Tamil Eelam. But a military operation can lead to more killings and displacement of Tamil people and the consequent influx of refugees into India from across the Palk Strait.

The presence of refugees in Tamil Nadu causes local complications, although no one in India can think of supporting Prabhakaran and the banned organisations like the LTTE. Not only India, the United States and the European nations all seem to be advising President Rajapaksa these days not to go in for a military option that will push back a political settlement.

Mr Rajapaksa values Indian commitment to a united Sri Lanka and, perhaps, is sure that it will never let any help reach across to the LTTE. Also, he can remain indifferent for some time towards any slow-down in the flow of the EU's aid to Colombo in case hostilities resume, but not for too long.

Possibly, President Rajapaksa can achieve more by giving up the military option and leading the search for a wider consensus, followed by talks aimed at a durable political settlement. There, perhaps, is no quick-fix solution for a prolonged ethnic strife. ■

'I want the refugees to come back'



Mahinda Rajapaksa, President of Sri Lanka, tells Editor-in-Chief H K Dua

The following are the extracts from the interview H K Dua, Editor-in-Chief of The Tribune, had with Mr Mahinda Rajapaksa, President of Sri Lanka in Colombo.

Dua: Your critics have been attacking you. There are two types of criticism I have come across in Colombo – one, I saw in Colombo papers only yesterday a statement saying that you have struck a secret deal with the LTTE....

Rajapaksa: Deal? (laughter) Where is the question of a deal? Where is it? Obviously, there are people behind this criticism—actually some former ministers.

Dua: The sacked ministers?

Rajapaksa: Yes, sacked Ministers.

Dua: But you have not cared to deny this. Only a spokesman has denied it.

Rajapaksa: Why should I take it so seriously? These people just say this. Essentially they are angry, because they are no longer in the government.

Dua: The second point of criticism is that you are a hardliner and that

you are looking for a military solution to the LTTE problem.

Rajapaksa: I am not a hardliner and there is no military solution...But what to do? I have to defend the country; defend the sovereignty of the country. We have to take a strong action against the terrorists who want to disrupt the country. They are terrorists. Any other country would have done this. I need a political solution. We need a political solution. We can produce the document for a solution. But what if the South is not accepting it? I am now trying to take the South along so that a political solution becomes acceptable to the people.

Dua: Southern consensus, as it is being described lately? How long do you think it will take to evolve one?

Rajapaksa: I am trying to bring all political parties together to find a solution. I want to find a solution

but it is indeed difficult. Maybe, it will take sometime, but it all depends on the people. It is a slow process.

I believe in a political solution. I have been trying to find a negotiated settlement. But what if the South and the East are not accepting it? We are indeed trying to reach a consensus first.

Also, we may have to change the constitution and the Supreme Court is there to ensure that we follow the constitution.

Dua: Recently you signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the opposition party, UNP. Where does it stand? Is it still alive and being respected?

Rajapaksa: I will say it is dead, because some of the founders and leaders of the UNP have shown little interest in it and some of them say they have already torn the document. But we accepted it. We have said we are ready to negotiate with them, discuss with them. I have told them to just forget about other things – funding problems, economic issues and other matters. But they must come, sit and attend an all-party meeting to work out the proposals for finding a solution. I have spoken to some of the most senior members of the UNP, but they have a different approach.

Dua: Mr President, don't you believe in a military solution, if I may ask again for getting it a bit clear?

Rajapaksa: I do not believe in a military solution. I believe in a negotiated settlement, I must say.

Dua: What kind of a political and peaceful settlement you have in mind to resolve the LTTE question?

Rajapaksa: My personal view is that Prabhakaran should come

forward to express readiness for a peaceful and negotiated settlement. But he does not want to come forward. You may look at some of his recent statements!

Dua: Can you go in for a peaceful, negotiated settlement with Prabhakaran?

Rajapaksa: I am a moderate and I believe in negotiations and people will also like this. And I am ready to talk to him. But earlier it was he who walked out of the talks.

Dua: There have been serious doubts about the effectiveness of the ceasefire. Yesterday, there was the fifth anniversary of the ceasefire.

Rajapaksa: I find nobody is celebrating the fifth anniversary. The ceasefire is just on paper.

Prabhakaran has violated it 8,000 times — as many as 8,000 times. The LTTE has assassinated our Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar and the LTTE's men attacked the Army Commander, and recently there was an attack on the Defence Secretary who happens to be my brother.

Dua: Is there pressure on you from different countries in the West for a political settlement of the LTTE question?

Rajapaksa: All right-thinking people are saying that. Even I say it. There is nothing to hide. From the start, I feel that we need a political solution. And why not? Not only other countries want a political settlement, I myself want it. They are just stealing my language.

There is no pressure as such on us. They are only cautioning tourists against visiting Sri Lanka. Sending just travel advisories.

Dua: You have been voicing reservations about Norway's role.

Are you asking Norway to wind up its mission?

Rajapaksa: No. I am not. They have not achieved much, but I can see that they tried their best.

Dua: Your comment on today's statement of Norway's ambassador in Colombo that the Norwegian facilitator intends to carry on.

Rajapaksa: I cannot say that they should wind up their mission.

Dua: What about development aid which was coming from EU and some other countries? Is there threat that it will be stopped?

Rajapaksa: They have not stopped it.

Dua: Serious questions of human rights violations in Sri Lanka are being raised in Europe.

Rajapaksa: I too have heard about it.

Dua: Actually two voices are being heard from the western countries and some NGOs. One, Sri Lanka should go in for a political settlement, and the other is about human rights violations.

Rajapaksa: I ask them to give me concrete evidence of human rights violations to take a suitable action. In a country like this, where Prabhakaran is fighting a war, his men abduct people. We have managed to control the situation.

Our police, our army cannot go to these areas. It is difficult for the police to find out whether they are telling the truth. Some of the affected people may actually be fighting the Army.

Dua: Do the armed forces and the police have clear instructions from you that human rights should not be violated?

Rajapaksa: Very clear. Every

Wednesday I meet army commanders to know the situation and impress upon them that they should respect human rights. When I was in London, Amnesty people came. I told them why don't they appoint an international commission? Then I found out that nowhere in the world they have appointed a commission like this.

Dua: The Indian government is in touch with you; you are in touch with the government of India about the situation in Sri Lanka. There seems to be a lot of trust between you. What is the message you are getting from New Delhi lately?

Rajapaksa: India wants a political solution. The Indian government has always helped us and they are continuing to do so.

Dua: No government of India can be with the LTTE. India has suffered because of the LTTE. But the message is for a political settlement and not a military solution, I suppose.

Rajapaksa: Whether it is India, the United States or the West, they all want a political settlement. We also want a political solution.

Dua: Besides New Delhi favouring a political settlement, Mr President, India may have another worry in case the military situation gets escalated in Sri Lanka. Eruption of a military conflict can lead to influx of refugees from Sri Lanka into India and this, in turn, can cause extra complications for India.

Rajapaksa: I don't know about it. We are good neighbours. Many Indians come here and some of the people go from Sri Lanka to India.

Dua: Besides, the earlier refugees, there are about 17,000 new

refugees who have reached India. Are you prepared to take them back?

Rajapaksa: Oh, yes. I want them back here but Prabhakaran will not allow these people to come. Most of them have gone because of Prabhakaran and not because of our government.

Dua: But if they come back, where will you put them up?

Rajapaksa: They must come; they have no threat in the government area. They have actually fled from areas which are being controlled by the LTTE.

Dua: What exact steps are being taken to get these 17,000 people back?

Rajapaksa: The only way is that they must be allowed to go to their homes, but with Prabhakaran around I don't think these people will come back.

Dua: But your assurance is there that you would like to have them back?

Rajapaksa: Yes.

Dua: What about the other IDP (Indigenous Displaced People) – nearly two lakh of them?

Rajapaksa: They can be between 1.5 to two lakh. The figures may not be exact.

Dua: Is there a plan to settle these two lakh people?

Rajapaksa: We will settle them soon. We have now necessary quarters, infrastructure and are busy clearing landmines for their safety. And after that we will send them back to their homes.

Dua: But clearing landmines is going to take a very long time, Mr President.

Rajapaksa: Yes, it would take some time.

Dua: I would also like to know about the economic position of your country. Inflation is high at 21.9 per cent.

Rajapaksa: No, it is 13 or 14 per cent.

Dua: What is the price situation? What is the solution to price rise?

Rajapaksa: We have to increase production. If production is high, prices will naturally come down. We will give subsidy for essential commodities to make them affordable for the common man.

Dua: Do you believe in a strong presidential system of government in Sri Lanka?

Rajapaksa: I would like an elected Prime Minister.

Dua: Would you like to bring constitutional amendments in this connection?

Rajapaksa: I will have to consult other parties.

Dua: But would you like two terms as President?

Rajapaksa: I don't mind that.

Dua: The Constitution provides for two terms of President — two consecutive terms of President. And after that?

Rajapaksa: Actually, I would like to be in Parliament because I have been in Parliament since the 1970s.

Dua: You are missing Parliament, it seems?

Rajapaksa: Yes, I am missing Parliament.

Dua: Thank you, Mr President. You have been very patient with my questions. ■