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INTERVIEW

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President Kumaratunga on Peace Prospects in Sri Lanka



In an exclusive interview to Editor N. Ram, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, on a significant visit to New Delhi, speaks about the best window of opportunity that is available after the war began, to get the LTTE to agree to agenda- and time-bound talks on substantive issues before actual negotiations to settle the ethnic conflict.....4



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'The best window of opportunity since the war began'

N. Ram interviews President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga's three day visit to India in the last week of February 2001 came at a sensitive and challenging time for Sri Lanka as well as for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The brutal and destructive war raging between the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan armed forces in the North and East of the island nation is a distorted expression of Sri Lanka's principal national question – the Tamil or ethnic question which has awaited resolution for over half a century. The SAARC process has been in a state of suspended animation since, in the wake of General Pervez Musharraf's coup in Pakistan, the Government of India vetoed a summit that should have been held in Kathmandu in November 1999. Sri Lanka, which has been SAARC chairman since 1998, is keen to see an early revival of the SAARC process, and as quickly as possible to make way for Nepal as regional grouping chairman.

There is no doubt about which is the top issue and concern for Sri Lanka's President, the charismatic 55-year-old leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the daughter of two Prime Ministers who has lost a father, a husband and an eye to the system's failure to find a peaceful solution to the ethnic question, an anti-chauvinist visionary who is determined to go down in history as the architect of a just, peaceful and enduring solution to her country's principal national problem. President Kumaratunga's determination to see through a negotiated constitutional settlement, military developments, international pressure, and Norwegian facilitation appear to have brought the LTTE to the threshold of talks with the Sri Lankan Government on substantive issues – with an agreed agenda and time-frame.

But do the momentum gained by the Oslo initiative and the present positive indications presage a real willingness on the part of the extremist and Pol Potist LTTE to enter into serious negotiations with the Sri Lankan state to explore the contours of a peaceful political settlement within the framework of a united, but federally re-structured, Sri Lanka? No one can answer this question with any confidence at this sensitive conjuncture of circumstances. The LTTE's track record presents a strong and unedifying contra-indication. Not once over the past two decades has the organisation headed by Velupillai Prabhakaran shown any inclination so much as to

consider a negotiated political settlement within the framework of Sri Lanka remaining one. Not once has it entered a process of negotiations or substantive talks with such an end in view, even if it has, time and time and for its tactical politico-military ends, signalled a willingness to engage in 'talks about talks' and gone in for ceasefires.

Although she is fully aware of the LTTE's track record and character, President Kumaratunga projects cautious, or guarded, optimism about the prospects of peace in her country this time round. In this exclusive interview given to *Frontline's* Editor, N. Ram, in a suite on a presidential floor of New Delhi's Taj Palace hotel on February 23, 2001, President Kumaratunga speaks about the considerable progress made in getting the LTTE to agree to agenda- and time-bound talks on "substantive issues" ("not dilly-dallying like they did thrice with the UNP and once with us before, but actual, positive negotiation, arriving at a definite solution or settlement") necessary for finding an enduring political settlement within the framework of a united Sri Lanka. She confirms, on the record, that working with Norwegian facilitation, her Government is "in the process of trying to agree on conditions that the LTTE calls 'conductive' (measures) before we begin to talk"; that 'talks about talks' have already begun and made progress; and that "yes, definitely" there has been forward movement in this peace process. And finally: "So what I can tell you is, Ram, that this seems to be the best window of opportunity that has been offered to any Government since the war began."

The interview also covers subjects such as relations between the People's Alliance Government and the main Opposition party, the United National Party; India-Sri Lanka relations ("at the political level... we have arrived at an excellent point in Indo-Sri Lankan relations... they are fully supportive of the peace process that we have started... how to revive the SAARC process; and the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement signed between the two countries in 1998.

Sri Lanka's articulate and highly regarded Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, and High Commissioner in India, Professor Senake Bandaranayake, were with the President during the interview. At one point the former offered a brief factual clarification in response to a question.

N. Ram: President, you have a comprehensive peace package in hand. Ranged against this are two well-known obstacles – LTTE extremism and intransigence, and a non-cooperative and what seems to be an obstructive stance by the main Opposition party, the UNP. Do you see any meeting ground between your P.A. Government and the LTTE? And also, sep-

arately, between the Government and the UNP?

President Chandrika Kumaratunga: Well, we have tried our best to persuade both these groups that you just mentioned to give us the necessary support to carry through the constitutional process – which we believe is the final and durable solution to



Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar with Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee.

the Tamil people's problem. They have both been intransigent, to use your word. In fact, we could have carried it through despite the opposition of these two groups, which were about the only ones opposing it. Now the JVP, but at that time the JVP was not so strong; it had only one MP in Parliament.

If it were not for the very odd Constitution that we have – you know that over these years – even if the UNP opposed it (the constitutional package), we could have carried it through. Because in the last Parliament, we had 80 per cent of electorates. In other words, we had 80 per cent of the voices in Parliament. In this Parliament, we have about 68 to 70 per cent. We have more than two-thirds. In other words, the people have given us this time a two-thirds majority, and last time a four-fifths majority. But given the manner in which it is counted and presented, finally we have only one vote more, or three votes more, in Parliament! So this is the problem, it's a bizarre problem.

This is why we were planning all kinds of ways of circumventing this situation. We think the obstacles that we are faced with have created an undemocratic situation. So that we have all the right in some way to circumvent some of the clauses in this Constitution – it won't be undemocratic.

We have to now re-open the process. The main reason we could not use the other – alternative – methods of bringing in the (new) Constitution is: Number one, I got bombed. When I had very definitely told the people, "If you give me the mandate, I'm going to do it." – and that's why the LTTE wanted to kill me! Then, after that, the UNP showed some kind of flexibility and kept asking me when we were going to invite them to talks. Because soon after I got bombed, at the oath-taking ceremony,

you know I made that speech...

Yes.

... inviting the UNP, the LTTE to come into the process. They (the UNP) seem to have taken it up and kept asking me, "When are you inviting us? We want to come." Not Ranil Wickremasinghe himself, but other leaders of the UNP. So I thought there was some chance of getting them on board. It is much better to get them on board rather than doing it against their will. They pretended they were coming on board for about seven-eight months. The Government and the UNP discussed for five months the draft that I had agreed to with the eight parties in the P.A. Government and supporter parties. The UNP wasted our time for five months and at the end of it, they didn't even say they were not going to vote with it in Parliament. They knew the whole objective was for me to bring it to Parliament. And then on the day I took it to Parliament, there was a huge furore and hooting and insults. It was terrible. They burnt the draft Constitution inside Parliament, in the Chamber. They tore it into bits and threw it all over the place!

Anyway, I carried on nevertheless and tabled the bill. But we didn't go for a vote because we needed six or seven more (votes). Ten people had crossed over to us from the UNP because they were not in support of the UNP leader's decision to do all this. But we needed six or seven more votes. In this Parliament, it's going to be more difficult because we have fewer seats. The SLFP itself has won one MP more. But the Tamil parties have lost out a lot. Therefore, the majority we had with their support is now much less.



V. V. KRISHNAN

President Chandrika Kumaratunga being interviewed by *Frontline* Editor N. Ram.

So we have to now think of new processes of re-starting the whole dialogue. Even while we go into negotiations with the LTTE – which may happen – I believe that we have to have the entire population talking about this, dialoguing about it. The LTTE is just one force, they are not the be-all and end-all of the whole thing! So we are considering various ways and means of re-starting the constitutional process and a dialogue with the entire country on it.

You have also answered my next question, which was going to be: how do you see the end game of putting in place this process? The constitutional process is going to re-start. It's more things than settling the ethnic or Tamil question...

Yes.

... but this is your principal national question, you've said that before.

Quite definitely, yes.

Given the military situation about which we don't have enough information, could you give us an assessment of where the LTTE is in relation to the achievement of its proclaimed goals?

That being 'Eelam'?

Yes, but that is ruled out of court. But where are they on the ground? How strong are they?

They are weaker than they have been for a long time. Last year, they had several successes. At the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000, they were able to gain quite a bit of the Wannai and, as

you know, the entrance into Jaffna Peninsula, the Elephant Pass, which was a big victory for them. But since then we decided to arm the forces much more heavily than we have done ever before. We've spent a lot of money and purchased military hardware, which has caused a lot of damage to the LTTE. They have lost more than half the number of active fighting cadres in the last six months of last year. According to their own declared information, broadcasts and so on, 2,700-odd cadres they have lost – and they don't have more than five to six thousand in the entire Northern Province.

This is one of the reasons why they are seemingly more flexible. And, of course, the international community's coming down on them a little bit, and the possible ban in the U.K., is worrying them a lot. So we have to keep the international pressure on if we want peace in Sri Lanka.

"The LTTE does not believe in peace. The LTTE believes in bloodletting, violence and terror and I don't think they know anything else! They will never be comfortable with any other situation. They don't believe in such a thing as democracy, or there should be!"

The LTTE's Political Adviser, A. Balasingham, made a statement to the effect that if the LTTE got banned under the Terrorism Act, 2000 in the United Kingdom, the whole peace process might be jeopardised. Do you see that as a real threat or something else?

In fact, it is the opposite that is true. If the international community takes the pressure off the LTTE, they will not be interested in peace at all. Because the LTTE does not believe in peace. The LTTE believes in bloodletting, violence and terror and I don't think they know anything else! They will never be comfortable with any other situation. They don't believe there is such a thing as democracy, or there should be!

The only reason why they would agree to a negotiated settlement in a positive manner—not just dilly-dallying like they did three times with the UNP and once with us before, but actual, positive negotiation, arriving at a definite solution or settlement. The only reason why they would come to it is if they are fighting with their backs against the wall. For that purpose, we need the support of the international community and we need to keep the military pressure going.

When the U.K. Terrorism Act came into effect on February 19, there was an expectation that the U.K. Government would issue a list of proscribed organisations. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar has been focussing very strongly on what he expects the Government of the U.K. to do. But it hasn't come up with any list yet. How do you read this and what is your expectation of the U.K. right now?

We clearly expect them to ban the LTTE because it is the most terroristic organisation operating from British soil at the moment. Their new law very clearly gives them the possibility of doing that. We are only surprised they haven't done it yet.

(Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar: They haven't banned anybody yet. Under their law, they are not obliged to put out a list by a particular date. But from now on they are empowered to do so...)

President Kumaratunga: But we are hoping they will do it.

N. Ram: There has been media speculation about a

“So what I can tell you is, Ram, that this seems to be the best window of opportunity that has been offered to any Government since the war began. With the LTTE, one doesn't hope for anything. But for practical reasons, maybe reasons of opportunism, the chances seem better than before. That's all I can say.”

Yes, definitely.

Would you like to re-state, for the information of our readers, the framework or mind-set in which you are approaching these talks. I suppose there will be, first, talks about talks?

That has already begun. We have said very clearly – because we have gone through this process once before, it's not new to us, we know all the pitfalls and the procedures that need to be followed – we have made our position very clear. Because we noted that with us for eight months, with the UNP Government several times, they just kept talking about marginal matters, without ever engaging in the substantive issues – even in Thimphu. They were told what the substantive issues should be, but they never discussed those. And then they just play for time and prepare themselves for a further attack and come and attack. And that is the end of the round of talks.

REUTERS/NORWEGIAN EMBASSY HO



Norwegian peace envoy Erik Solheim (left) with LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran in the Wannin in October 2000.

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka, worked out by Norwegian facilitation, as part of the preparatory business. Does such an MoU exist and, if so, could you give us an idea of its content and purpose?

No, there is no such MoU. But we are in the process of trying to agree on conditions that the LTTE calls “conductive” (measures) before we begin to talk. So once those conditions are worked out – they won't be any MoUs – we will put it down for both sides to see.

There has been some forward movement in this respect?

Therefore, we have told them that from Day One of the talks, there has to be a clear agenda. The agenda will include... one, two, three, four, all the substantive issues. Such as nature of the state, that kind of thing. ‘Eelam’ is out of the question, we are willing to discuss on anything else. So, in short, from Day One we start on the substantive issues. If they want to talk on marginal issues on how much more food is going to be sent and all that, thereafter we will talk. We said that on the same day, every day, two-thirds or something like that, 75 per cent of the time should be spent on substantive issues, but one-fourth, one-third of the time we can discuss whatever else they want... you know, practical matters. They have agreed to that.

We have also said that we want dates. Before we start rendering the atmosphere “conductive,” we want to know for how long they want

that before we actually start proper talks. That also has been indicated to us. Now we are talking of what those conducive conditions should be.

So what I can tell you is, Ram, that this seems to be the best window of opportunity that has been offered to any Government since the war began.

Really? I really hope so...

With the LTTE, one doesn't hope for anything. But for practical reasons, maybe reasons of opportunism, the chances seem better than before. That's all I can say.

Your constitutional package, insofar as it addresses your principal national question, the ethnic conflict, seems to have gone – I think it's widely recognised – much further than any previous attempt to offer a just solution to the Tamil questions, although there are sticking points on issues such as unit of devolution, merger and so on. Now, in principle, President, if things go well, are you willing to improve on this package, if you are convinced that would help?

Yes, certainly. If it is to stop this destructive war and bring about a durable peace, certainly we are willing to look at amendments to our proposals and such like. Of course, we will have to ask the majority of the people of the country. Quite apart from the chauvinists. You can't please everybody. But I think we can carry it through if there is a positive response from the LTTE.

By whatever name called, this is not just devolution but a structural change attempted in your Constitution, with particular reference to Tamil areas. Some people have asked for a federal framework and so on. The name is not important, but you are committed to that structural change?

Well, we have said so. In the constitutional draft we have tabled in Parliament, it's very clear.

As Chairman of SAARC, you are reported to be keen on holding an early summit of SAARC leaders. I read that in the press. The Government of India, however, appears to have been lukewarm about joining the summit in view of its problematical relationship with General Musharraf's regime in Pakistan. Is there any forward movement in sight?

Yes. Today, we discussed SAARC and there are those very strong unique issues. I had occasion to talk about this with the P.M. (Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee) today and the Foreign Minister (Jaswant Singh). Yes, I think there is a possibility of moving forward. Last year, after a sort of total halt of all SAARC processes for some time – since Kargil – we were able to



V.V. KRISHNAN

“India has been playing ball with us very well. They are fully supportive of the peace process that we have started. They believe, like us, that the final solution can only be found in a negotiated settlement. At the political level, I think we have arrived at an excellent point in Indo-Sri Lankan relations.”

that while the FTA has given them some room, its implementation is still perhaps discriminatory in the sense of India allotting quotas and imposing other restrictions. For example, on the ports where tea can land in India. Do you propose to take this up at your level?

We have taken it up already. We have facilitated the entry of Indian goods under the FTA, but from the Indian side the obstacles have not yet been removed. And some new obstacles have been brought in after the signing of the agreement. The proportion of Sri Lankan goods to Indian goods exported has not changed – it's 1:1.3 in favour of India. I brought this up today with the Prime Minister and he has agreed to look at it at the highest level. I think it is just bureaucratic blocks.

And, finally, very briefly, how do you see Sri Lanka-India relations going at this stage?

Very well. Extremely well. We have no complaints at all (except the details of these [FTA-related] bureaucratic problems). At the political level, I think we have arrived at an excellent point in Indo-Sri Lankan relations. ■

have most of the technical committees sitting on the various subjects. Now the decisions of those committees cannot be implemented until the Standing Committee of Foreign Secretaries meets and ratifies that. Then we can start that work: on the economic front, cultural, education, etc. Terrorism. The work has been done. Now the Foreign Secretaries have to meet. I think today we had a very positive response – and I'm very appreciative of that – from the Indian Government. They probably would agree that the Standing Committee meeting be held very soon in Colombo. That is the Foreign Secretaries, so we have to take it on from there.

There has been some media speculation, particularly in Sri Lanka, about Indian concerns, which you must have encountered. Are you satisfied that India is playing ball on your vital issue?

Yes, very much so. They have been playing ball very well with us. They are fully supportive of the peace process that we have started. They have always told us that. And they also believe, like us, that the final solution can only be found in a negotiated settlement. They have told us that very clearly. And they are very supportive of our moves at the moment.

The LTTE issue will not pose any potential problem?

Doesn't look like it.

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and Sri Lanka has come into force. Sri Lanka's top exports are garments and tea. The exporters' lobbies have generally expressed the view

A significant neighbourly call

In Delhi in the last week of February, President Chandrika Kumaratunga discusses with Indian leaders a range of issues, including the process to settle the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

JOHN CHERIAN
in New Delhi

MUCH importance is attached to Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's three-day visit to India in the fourth week of February. It was Kumaratunga's first visit to Delhi after she was re-elected President in December 1999. The visit came at a time when the peace process facilitated by the Norwegian government in the island was gaining momentum. A Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry official said that Kumaratunga's visit to Delhi could "be seen as a prelude to peace talks" with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Kumaratunga met Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh and apprised them of the peace talks and her government's efforts to introduce constitutional reforms to meet the demands of the Tamil people for greater devolution of powers.

The Norwegians have put forward a set of confidence-building measures to facilitate the process of resolution of the ethnic conflict in the island. In recent days, Kumaratunga has expressed cautious optimism about the prospects for peace and emphasised that the opportunity to end the fratricidal war should not be lost. In an interview to a television channel in Delhi, she said that talks with the LTTE could start in two months. Kumaratunga said that she had the "total support" of the Indian government in her efforts to bring about a lasting solution to the ethnic problem.

A statement issued by the External Affairs Ministry after the conclusion of the Sri Lankan President's visit said: "India reiterated its consistent support for the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and for a negotiated political settlement of the conflict, as the only way to restore lasting peace which would meet the aspirations of all elements of Sri

Lankan society."

Reports said that the United Kingdom and Japan would be invited to send observers to monitor a peace agreement between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Officials in the External Affairs Ministry have said that during Kumaratunga's wide-ranging talks with Vajpayee and Jaswant Singh, India's "well-known" views of the concept of third-party monitoring were made clear. The officials pointed out that India was opposed to the concept of third-party monitoring in Jammu and Kashmir. India told Sri Lanka that it should approach the issue of "third-party monitoring" with caution and that third-party involvement had the potential to complicate matters further in the island nation. Indian officials pointed out that "third parties" may have their own agendas.

The Indian government seems to be unsure about the ramifications of multi-lateral mediation in the Sri Lankan con-



Lakshman Kadirgamar and Chandrika Kumaratunga with Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and Indian Ambassador to Sri Lanka Gopal Krishna Gandhi.



President K.R. Narayanan with Chandrika Kumaratunga.

flict. Moreover, New Delhi is reluctant to be a mediator between the two sides. Indian policy-makers seem to be weighing the long-term implications of multi-lateral intervention in Sri Lanka for India's own internal conflicts. The official statement issued during Kumaratunga's visit said that the discussions "reflected the high priority attached by both countries to the maintenance of close and friendly relations based on mutual trust and understanding".

Although the Sri Lankans insisted that the issue of a monitoring group was premature, they pointed out that once a truce was in place groups from outside, acceptable to both parties, would have to do the monitoring. According to the Sri Lankans, no country has been short-listed for the job. An observer of South Asian affairs said that New Delhi was wary of the idea of "truce monitors" because it wanted to forestall the possibility of India being requested to send a token force to monitor a truce and thus getting involved in the ethnic conflict. On the other hand, after the visit of the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister to Islamabad in mid-January, Pakistan gave \$20 million in credit to Sri Lanka for military purchases.

"Some sort of a mechanism is necessary to oversee a ceasefire. This should not

be a source of controversy. They (the monitors) should be treated like election observers from various countries. The monitoring mechanism should not be under the U.N. umbrella, as no self-respecting sovereign country will accept it," said a Sri Lankan observer. Norway, he said, was ideally placed to play the role of a facilitator, as it had "no agenda and is far away from the area of conflict". Besides, Norway is one of the few countries that had a leverage over the LTTE, he added. Norway has given asylum to many Tamil refugees.

According to External Affairs Ministry officials, the Sri Lankan President's visit gave both countries an opportunity to discuss substantive issues. An important topic discussed during Kumaratunga's stay in Delhi was the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) process. Indian officials said that there was a "forward movement" on the issue since the visit of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in December 2000. India had then agreed to re-start official-level meetings of the SAARC.

During Kumaratunga's visit, India announced that the SAARC Standing Committee meeting could be scheduled for the middle of 2001, provided the date

was convenient for the rest of the SAARC members. The Standing Committee is the forum of Foreign Secretaries of the member-nations. However, the External Affairs Ministry spokesman said that no consensus had emerged on the holding of the SAARC summit.

Sri Lanka, however, feels that it had broken the logjam and re-started the SAARC process. Sri Lankan officials give considerable importance to the SAARC process since they believe that it would help bring about peace in the region. The Sri Lankans point out that a SAARC summit would allow Vajpayee and Pakistan's Chief Executive Pervez Musharraf to meet at a neutral venue. But a SAARC summit may not take place in the near future because of the strains that developed recently between New Delhi and Kathmandu. The next SAARC summit is to be hosted by Nepal.

The Sri Lankan President kept the Indian leadership abreast of her government's efforts to speed up the process of introducing constitutional reforms. Kumaratunga has always insisted that any solution to

the Sri Lankan conflict should be within a united Sri Lanka, with the devolution of more powers to the regions.

A senior Sri Lankan analyst said that the devolution process was almost over as much of the decentralisation process had been completed. He said that the focus was now on the proposed new Constitution as a bigger devolution package would be more difficult to negotiate in a divided Parliament. The radical constitutional changes envisaged by Kumaratunga are needed to give the LTTE additional incentives so that it will give up terrorism and get involved in the democratic process. The efforts of the Kumaratunga government to get the new Constitution adopted before the general elections in October 2000 proved the honourable intent of her government to address the genuine grievances of the Tamil minority.

According to the analyst, the first challenge is to get the LTTE to accept the new Constitution. The second challenge is to get the Opposition, inside and outside Parliament, to support the new Constitution. As things stand, it was for the first time that Douglas Devananda and Feroz Ashraff, two MPs from the north and the northeast, were given important portfolios in the new Cabinet. ■

Preparing for talks

The two sides are preparing to talk, but the political resolution of the conflict still appears to be elusive.

NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN
in Colombo

HAD Velupillai Prabhakaran been allowed to write the entire script, it may have read differently. For instance, the Sri Lankan government would have responded at once to the unilateral ceasefire announced by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and had it shown a reluctance to do so, the international community would have rapped it on the knuckles and forced it to do so. Of course, Britain's new anti-terrorist law would not have got past Parliament.

As it happened, the LTTE leader wrote only a part of the script, and though he tried to dictate the rest, the problem was that there were too many other actors with minds of their own. Colombo ignored the ceasefire, not just when it was initially declared for one month on December 24, but at each extension thereafter.

After some initial remarks by the junior British Foreign Office Minister Peter Hain asking Sri Lanka to reciprocate the truce, the international community looked the other way as the security forces launched one military offensive after another in Jaffna Peninsula.

As for the U.K.'s Terrorism Act, 2000, the LTTE did not get outlawed under it when it came into effect on February 19 as the Sri Lankan government would have liked. Instead, acting more subtly, the British decided to put off indefinitely the announcement of a list of organisations that would be proscribed under the new law, thereby keeping the noose hanging over the LTTE's head.

Beginning with the meeting between the Norwegian peace envoy Erik Solheim and Prabhakaran on November

1, 2000, the LTTE leader has projected himself as a messiah of peace. First he called for talks, then declared a truce, and seemingly turned the other cheek as the security forces re-established themselves in Jaffna peninsula. Whether or not this is really a new Prabhakaran, no one knows for sure. But at every step he seems to have moved closer to the negotiating table, even though the government stood away. Now a stage has come when it is almost impossible for him to back off from the process.

In regard to the Norwegian initiative, the LTTE raised the stakes in mid-February, when Anton Balasingham, who has emerged as the LTTE's pointman, virtually threatened to pull out of the process should the U.K. ban the group under the Terrorism Act. Now that the British have put off the decision, the LTTE has little choice but to stay in the process. It is now fairly certain that peace talks will be held. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar has said that negotiations are "likely to commence in a few months time". But he added an all-important rider: "if all goes well".

Norway is said to be finalising a so-called memorandum of understanding which envisages certain "goodwill gestures" by both sides before the start of any

talks. There is no official word about this "MoU", but reports in the Sri Lankan press have suggested that on the LTTE's side it includes a commitment not to attack any civilian targets – which mainly means no bombings or assassinations. The government, for its part, will send more food supplies to the LTTE-held areas in the north, and perhaps certain other items that have so far been embargoed, in order to address the LTTE demand for "normalisation" of civilian life in those areas.

The MoU also provides for an international committee to monitor the "goodwill gestures", and the composition of the committee is still being finalised. So far the government has held firm on its position that there will be no ceasefire from its side ahead of talks. Both President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Kadirgamar have said that a ceasefire will become a possibility only after the start of negotiations and then, depending on the "satisfactory progress" of the talks. As if to drive home the point, the military launched a series of operations in December and early January, facing virtually no resistance from the LTTE. It thus re-established control over most of Jaffna Peninsula. Now the LTTE controls Elephant Pass, and Palai, its forward defence position for the Pass.

On February 22, the LTTE extended for another month its unilateral ceasefire, due to end on February 24. While doing this, it reiterated its demand that the government reciprocate the gesture, and urged the international community to use

its "good offices" to persuade Sri Lanka to do so. But it seems that the Tigers may finally accept the government position on this.

While it has taken nearly three years for the Norwegians to get to the current stage of the process, the pre-talks phase of getting the two sides together, which seemed impossible at one time, may actually turn out to have been the easy part. The two sides are preparing to talk, but there still seems to be no meeting ground on the "core issue", which according to the government is the political resolution of the conflict, and which should form the



Posters in Colombo asking citizens to refrain from spreading rumours that will "strengthen the enemy".

main substance of the negotiations.

In her address to the nation on February 4, Sri Lanka's Independence anniversary, Kumaratunga declared that the new Constitution drafted by her government, which it tried to put through Parliament last year, would form the bedrock of a political solution to the aspirations of the Tamil people. The LTTE shot back that it had to be the Thimphu principles. Balasingham said from his base in London that no solution would be acceptable to the Tigers unless it was based on the principles of the right to self-determination, the recognition of Tamils as a distinct nation, and of their right to a historically deemed homeland.

Let alone presenting it to the LTTE, the government has yet to build a Sinhala consensus on its draft Constitution. It was still-born in Parliament last year precisely because of the absence of such a consensus, and it is unlikely that there will be one now. So far the rift between the ruling People's Alliance (P.A.) coalition and the Opposition United National Party (UNP) seems only to be growing. The UNP complained recently that it was not being kept informed by the government of the developments in the peace process, and that the little it knew was thanks to Solheim, who has made it a point to meet Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe each time he is in Colombo.

If the government wants to negotiate a political settlement with the LTTE that will not be opposed by the Sinhalese majority, it is imperative for it to take the UNP along. That is the only way the real hardliners in the majority community, represented by the Buddhist monks, the Sihala Urumaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, can be silenced. But such a bridge-building exercise is not on yet.

THERE are many more uncertainties. One of them is the Indian position on the peace talks. As Kumaratunga left in late February for a short visit to New Delhi, the question in Sri Lanka was whether India would countenance the legitimising of the LTTE, which seems to be the inevitable consequence of the peace talks. In fact, in the current process, like it or not, the LTTE has seemingly emerged as the primary and main representative of the Tamil people.

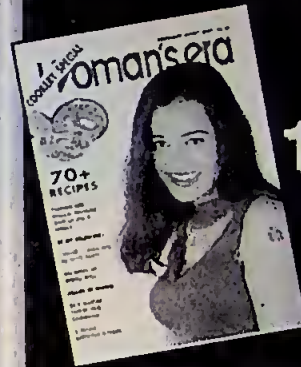
It seems that India did not expect the Norwegian initiative to come this far, to the point where the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE are on the verge of talking to each other. New Delhi was in all probability surprised at the November 2000 Solheim-Prabakaran meeting that set in motion the chain of events up till now.

Kadirgamar told *Frontline* that the LTTE was being accorded primacy in the talks because the immediate priority was to end the war. "For that purpose we have to bring to the table those with guns in their hands," he said. But, he added, when it comes to working out a durable political solution, there may well be other political parties to be involved.

But where are the other Tamil parties? Except for the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and the Varatharaja Perumal faction of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), the others, including the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), have more or less signed away to the LTTE whatever remained of their claims to leadership, and seemed to have accepted the moral and political authority of the group as the chief negotiator on behalf of the Tamil people. Whether India can live with this fast-emerging reality is one of the many questions that will finally decide the shape and substance of the negotiations between the LTTE and the government, when they take place. ■

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