

Sri Lanka: Situation Report

Situation in the North-East:

The military build-up in the north continued throughout April and May until the 27th, when the joint security forces launched a major assault on the Jaffna peninsula by land, sea and air. 20 Battalions were reported to have been drawn into this military operation, code-named Operation 'Maruthey' (Whirlwind). An indefinite curfew was declared in many parts of the Northern Province.

Defence Ministry sources rejected the idea that this operation was a preliminary to a major assault on the peninsula. They said that their intention was to broaden the perimeter held by the security forces around Palaly air base, and also to clear the northern coastline in order to disrupt the line of supply to the LTTE from the sea.

By the 29th May, newspapers reported that several major LTTE bases in Velvettithurai, Madagal, Oddusuddan and Mankulam had been destroyed. Other sources said that shelling and bombing had severely damaged the areas around Valvettiturai, Chunnakam, Tellippalai and Jaffna Town.

Twelve people including three students from the Jaffna Polytechnical College were killed in the aerial bombardment in Velvettithurai on the 31st of May. The McLeod hospital at Inuvil and the Multi Purpose Co-operative Society buildings at Chunnakam and Tellippalai were also damaged. In Jaffna Town, the areas surrounding the Manohara were continuously bombarded. The exact number of civilian casualties is not known.

The government communique claimed that more than 150 LTTE cadres were killed and another 100 or so wounded, while admitting the loss of 60 soldiers including two senior officers. The Jaffna newspapers maintained that the LTTE lost 12 of its members at Tellippalai, 7 at Thondamanaru and 11 at Mullaitivu. Subsequent to the commencement of Operation 'Maruthey', the LTTE has reportedly dismantled all 'civilian' structures like Sitoravais (village councils), rural courts and civil defence communities set up by them in the past months, since they are expecting a bigger assault on the peninsular to follow.

There were repeated confrontations between the security forces and the LTTE in the Eastern province. On the 29th May, the army suffered a loss of 29 men when they were attacked by the LTTE in Vakaneri in Batticaloa District.

The LTTE presence in Thoppigala and other jungle covered areas in Amparai, and in the area north of the main road leading from Pollonnaruwa to Batticaloa in Welikanda and Poonani, continued to pose a major threat to the security forces operating in the area.

On May 20, newspapers carried reports that the Army had shelled the areas around a major Hindu Temple in Mullaitivu (Northeast) during the annual temple festival; one shell fell directly into the premises of the Temple and over 20 devotees were killed on the spot. This incident sparked off a great deal of indignation in the community in general and on the 23rd the government announced that a Special Commission was empowered to look into the incident.

Killings of civilians as a part of the on-going ethnic war continued during the month of May 1992 (see also the following article: Politics of massacres).

Seven islands situated off the coast of Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka are today virtually devoid of population. These were islands which were retaken from control of the Tamil Tigers in October last year after a massive military operation by the Sri Lankan security forces which resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties as the Tigers withdrew without putting up much resistance.

Over ninety percent of the civilian population who fled the islands in the wake of the military operations have not yet returned despite strenuous efforts made and incentives offered by the government and its allied Tamil groups like the 'Eelam Peoples Democratic Party' (EPDP). Offers of adequate supply of free food and other essentials have failed to woo the people.

Of the islands' total population of 150,000, only about 12,500 are residing there, most of whom are the elderly and small children who could not join the others in the exodus.

In the largest and the most populated of the islands, Kayts, the two battalions of soldiers outnumber the 466 women, children and elderly men who remain out of the 74,000 inhabitants who lived here before the fighting began.

Repatriation of Refugees from India:

The repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees from South India continued during May, with the Indian government air-lifting an average of 500 persons a week to Trincomalee. The Ministry of Rehabilitation, on May 18th, gave a figure of 23,060 repatriations. The re-

turnees are flown into Trincomalee and then taken to 'transit' camps in Vavuniya and Mannar, where they are lodged, awaiting re-settlement in their places of origin; however, resettlement has proved to be difficult due to the on-going conflict situation in the areas from which the refugees originally fled the country, namely, Mullaitivu, Mannar and Vavuniva.

The Ministry of Rehabilitation also continued to announce that Muslims could now return safely to Mannar island: however, the response from Muslims who had been displaced from Mannar and who are now living elsewhere in the island, continued to the poor.

Peace Initiatives

The Buddhist Mission which visited Jaffna recently had two rounds of talks with the LTTE leaders and submitted a 13-point set of proposals to the LTTE delegation. The LTTE did not give a formal response in reply to the proposals submitted by the Buddhist mission. However LTTE controlled papers in Jaffna, presumably reflecting the Tiger position, indicated that the proposals fell far short of the expectations of the LTTE.

The 11-Member Buddhist peace delegation comprising 10 Buddhist priests and a layman was led by Rev. Balapitiye Siri Siddhaththa Mahanayake Thero. According to the delegation leader the intention of the visit was to pave the way communal harmony and building of a strong bond between the Sinhalese and Tamils and to achieve peace through negotiations.

The delegation had their first round of talks with the LTTE deputy leader Mahedrarajah (Mahathaya), its chief spokesman Anton Balasingham and its Secretary Yogaratnam Yogi. In his welcome speech, Anton Balasingham stated that the visit marked a significant step towards peace as the doors for peace were still open. In the second round of talks, the LTTE delegation consisted of Anton Balasingham, Mrs. Adele Balasingham, V. Balakumar (former leader of EROS), Ms. Jeya (leader of the LTTE Women's Wing), and Y. Yogi.

The delegation saw and spoke to forty government policemen and one soldier held captive by the LTTE. In response to a request for their release, it is learnt that the LTTE wanted the government to release 41 of their cadres presently in custody in return for freeing the policemen and soldiers.

'Black Cats' and the Udugampola Bombshell

Premadasa Presidency and his government have been hit by a bombshell which came in the form of startling revelations by the once powerful Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG), Premadasa Udugampola, who until recently headed the Bureau of Special Operations.

The Udugampola disclosures, contained in a series of press statements and sworn affidavits by the now fallen DIG, have served to lift the lid slightly and peep into who was responsible for what transpired during the dark period from late 1988 to early 1990 during which dreaded death squads known as 'Black Cats', 'Green Tigers' etc. resorted to exemplary and arbitrary killings on an unprecedented scale. Those were the days when people endured the revolting daily spectacle of floating corpses slowly drifting along rivers finding their way to the sea around the southern coast, the sight of mutilated and partially burnt bodies on roadsides, and of bodies smouldering in the rubber-tyre-pyres in various parts of the country.

The United Nations Working Group on 'Disappearances', in its report of January 1992, stated: "An important new feature in combating the JVP uprising was the proliferation of death squads whose main task was to kill suspected rebels and sympathisers. These squads operated in plain clothes and moved about freely in unmarked vehicles, passing roadblocks unhindered, and engaged in fearsome forms of exemplary killings". The overwhelming evidence is that the 'death squads' consisted of members of the police force and security services or that they were operating in close collaboration with them.

Evidence suggests that most of the incidents of widespread and arbitrary killings attributed to 'death squads' during that period occurred in areas of the Southern, Central and North Central Provinces where and when Mr. Udugampola was in charge as DIG. However, that does not mean that 'death squads' did not operate in other areas over which Udugampola had little jurisdiction. Nor does it imply that the phenomenon of death squads has completely disappeared now. After the resumption of fighting between government forces in the northeast, similar 'death squads' have been operating in plain clothes, moving around in unmarked vehicles and engaging in the same sort of fearsome exemplary killings particularly in the east of the Island.

Whatever the personal motivations are for his recent disclosures, the fact is that they reflect on the Presidency, the Government, the Police and the Armed Forces, the Attorney General's Department and the Members of Parliament belonging to the ruling party. It may be true that the DIG has come out into the open, as alleged by the Prime Minister in his widely reported response, because he was not given an extension to continue in the police force and for the reason that his probable involvement in the abduction and murder of lawyer Wijedasa Liyanarachchi is to be reopened before the courts. However the issues raised by the disclosures are no longer matters limited to the relationship between a disaffected police officer and the government as his employer. They are issues of vital public importance going to the heart of good governance under the rule of law.

Udugampola has also alleged that the "killers known as Black Cats" were mobilised to confront the JVP, that they were used during elections to kill political opponents including many members of the SLFP, that these Black Cats were supplied and operated by UNP Members of Parliament, and that the "Black Cat terrorism" helped them to win the elections. He has asserted, "I can myself testify to the truth of some of the facts mentioned by the Commissioner of Elections in his recent report. The 100 odd impersonators found lodging in a pilgrims rest in Anuradhapura was part of the UNP's impersonation machinery. Terrorism was necessary for this to be operated without impediment", he has stated.

These allegations and others contained in Mr. Udugampola's disclosures cannot be simply dismissed by accusing him of being "a pawn in the hands of a corrupt clique which is conspiring to overthrow the elected government" as the Prime Minister has done. Nor is the attempt by the government to muzzle the newspapers, which had given publicity to the DIG's statements and affidavits, by filing charges against them in courts under Emergency Regulations an appropriate and legitimate response to the serious issues that have already been brought into the public domain.

The allegations are serious enough to warrant the appointment of an impartial Commission of Inquiry composed of eminent jurists of unimpeachable integrity and sturdy independence with wideranging powers to carry out an investigation.

Opposition Leader Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike has challenged President Premadasa to resign and face her in a fresh presidential election following the political storm over Deputy Inspector General of Police P. Udugampola's recent disclosures.

Mr. Udugampola's allegations seriously reflected on President Premadasa and his government, and the President should resign and accept her challenge to face her at an election, she added.

Meanwhile, seven opposition political parties also have called upon the President and his government to resign in the wake of the DIG's allegations and the report by the Commissioner of Elections on the 1989 presidential and parliamentary elections. They also called for an independent Commission of Inquiry to probe the allegations.

In the meantime, military sources claimed that, although the Tigers had acknowledged holding 40 policemen and one soldier, they are holding many more soldiers captured in ambushes and attacks on army camps about whom they have not given out any information.

Cabinet Minister and President of the Ceylon Workers Congress, S.Thondaman, has stated that he would visit Jaffna on a peace mission if the Parliamentary Select Committee proposals fail to bring about a political solution. Mr.Thondaman, whose earlier plans to visit Jaffna to talk with LTTE leaders were aborted following hysterical propaganda backlash from extremist chauvinist forces in the south of the island, said in the press interview, "Nobody can stop me now, since a Buddhist delegation has also visited Jaffna on a peace mission". Mr.Thondaman stressed the need to evolve a consensus of all parties, which was the essence of the democratic system. He welcomed any move by any party to bring about a settlement of the northeast problem.

The Swedish government has expressed its willingness to assist in the peace process in Sri Lanka if the parties to the conflict were to approach it. In response to a letter addressed by Prof. Peter Schalk of the Upsala University, the Swedish Foreign Minister has stated that: "In order to make possible for Sweden to consider to play an active role in the attempt to reach a peace agreement with the fighting parties, it is indeed necessary that both sides turn to the Swedish Government and demand explicitly that it shall engage in such a peace process".

While there is no indication that the Sri Lankan government has responded to this initiative, Lawrence Thilagar, a Central Committee member of the LTTE and who presently lives in Paris, has re-

sponded. In a letter addressed to the Swedish Foreign Minister, Mr.Thilagar has said, "The policy of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has been to engage in unconditional talks with the Sri Lanka government with a view to ending the conflict. We are willing to sit and discuss with the Sri Lankan government the establishment of a structural frame within which the two peoples in the island may live in equality and in freedom."

While the above mentioned initiatives went without any concrete results yet, there is also mounting pressure for a military solution. The 'Parliamentary Select Committee to seek a resolution of the ethnic conflict' also seemed to be reaching a stalemate. In the aftermath of the Opposition decision to launch the campaign of 'no-cooperation' in Parliament, the SLFP announced that it would withdraw from participation in the Select Committee until such time as the government would change its attitude of confrontation with the Opposition. On 28 May, seven Tamil political parties - ACTC, TULF, EROS, ENDLF, EPRLF, TELO, PLOTE - said they were seeking an interview with the SLFP leadership to appeal to the SLFP to resume its participation in the Select Committee. However, reports of a meeting of the Central Committee of the SLFP conveyed the impression that the SLFP was not willing to reconsider its decision.

Indo-Lanka relations

The decision taken by the government of India on May 15 to outlaw the LTTE was also one which would have many repercussions in Sri Lanka. Although many observers in both countries felt that this was a largely 'symbolic' gesture, and was an exertion of pressure on

both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government to move towards a process of negotiated settlement of their differences, the ban and the subsequent indictment of LTTE leader Prabhakaran as one of the accused of the Gandhi assassination necessitated a re-consideration of the issues with regard to a possible negotiated settlement of the ethnic conflict. The LTTE has accused that India in collaboration with the Sri Lankan government has prepared a "three-point plan of aggression against Tamil Eelam". According to an article in its Tamil weekly "Kalaththil", the three points of the plan are :

- * To create an alternative leadership among the Tamils to that of the LTTE;
- * To falsely implicate V.Prabhakaran and other important leaders of the LTTE in criminal offences, and thereby seek to legitimise their aggression under the pretext of attempting to capture them; and
- * To first drop Sri Lankan troops in areas where the LTTE leaders are presumed to operate from, and thereafter Indian special troops would follow in order to support the Sri Lankan soldiers. For this purpose, India has already anchored in the Bay of Bengal off the coast of Sri Lanka two Naval Vessels carrying special troops, who are proficient in Tamil.

The article adds that the two governments are already undertaking joint preparations according to the above plan, and that by making false criminal charges against the LTTE leaders, the Indian government was seeking to portray them as criminals. It is in this attempt to create an alternative leadership that the TULF leaders were recently invited for talks in New Delhi where, for the purpose of reorganising the party, the Indian government gave them Rs. 10 million, the article alleges.

Politics of Massacres

Karapola, Muthugala and Alanchipothana are very small villages on the northernmost borders of the Mahaweli 'B' Scheme. To reach these villages, you have to turn off the road from Pollonnaruwa to Batticaloa a little before you come to Welikanda, at a junction known as Sevanapitiya and travel on a dirt road for about seven kilometres. Beyond Alanchipothana, the Mahaweli river flows on its way to the sea at Trincomalee. And on the other side of the river is LTTE territory.

Karapola and Muthugala are 'purana' (old) Tamil villages, the villagers say they have lived there for seven generations or more. They have been rice cultivators by tradition and are typical dry zone farmers, impoverished, resigned to their fate.

Alanchipothana is a more recent settlement of Muslims

from the Eastern Province who lost their homes in a major cyclone in the late seventies. The village is situated on the not-so-arable land in that area. As a result, the farmers of Alanchipothana have tended to work in the fields of the villages of Karapola and Muthugala on a leasehold system. Somewhere in this cycle of things, the Tamils seem to have been pushed further down the ladder of deprivation and pauperisation while the Muslims have moved upwards. This unfortunately reinforces some of the racist stereotypes that abound in Sri Lanka. In the present case, what needs to be kept in mind is that some degree of economic tension between the Tamil and Muslim communities was already present in the villages. And when the Tamils declared, somewhere after the New Year festivities of mid-April, that they would not be leasing their fields to the farmers of