

Sri Lanka: Situation Report

Thondaman Proposal

The past weeks were marked by an intensification of the attempts to bring about a resolution of the ethnic conflict. But the much publicised proposed visit of cabinet minister and leader of the 'Ceylon Workers Congress' (CWC) S. Thondaman to Jaffna to discuss with the LTTE has been abandoned, at least for the time being, amidst a hysterical and vicious campaign orchestrated by extremist Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist forces in the south of the country against his visit and proposals he has submitted to the all-party parliamentary select committee appointed to find ways and means of resolving the ethnic conflict. Among his proposals are the acceptance of a permanently merged North-East Province which will have a Governor appointed by the President with the concurrence of the Chief Minister of the Province. The proposals also sought to effect some changes in the administration of justice in the North-East Province, to do away with the concurrent list of the present system so as to increase the extent of devolution and limit to a greater extent powers of the central government. It also proposes a Union of Pradeshiya Sabhas (regional councils) within the merged North-East Provincial Council to look after the interest of the Muslim community in the area (das Gesamtpaket an Vorschlägen liegt im Südasienbüro vor und kann gegen Einsendung von DM 5,- in Briefmarken bezogen werden).

The ongoing campaign against Thondaman's proposals is reminiscent of many such inglorious ones of past years when these same forces prevented any negotiated settlement of the ethnic question and brought the country to its present pass - rocked by continuing violence, death and destruction.

Reincarnations of K.M.P. Rajaratnes, L.H. Mettanandas, N.Q. Diases, and Cyril Mathews of a bygone era jumped on the band wagon of this campaign in the form of Gamini Jayasuriya, Dr. Gunadasa Amarasekera, Dr. Nalin de Silva, Rev. Dr. Walpola Rahula and some other leading Buddhist prelates. The "Sinhala Arakshaka Sanvidhanaya" (Movement for the Defence of the Sinhalese) under the leadership of Mr. Gamini Jayasurya has been formed

which can claim direct lineage from the Bauddha Jathika Balavegaya, Sinhala Bala Mandalaya, Eksath Bikku Peramuna, and Maubhima Surakeema Sanvidhanaya of yesteryears. This organisation has been established with the "aim of protecting and safeguarding the just and inherent rights of the Sinhala masses"!

Not uncharacteristically, the Sinhala mainstream printed news media, most notably the "Divayina" and the "Lankadeepa" offered prominence and space for this campaign of denunciation and distortion of Thondaman's proposals. The old and famous Sinhala-Buddhist ideologue, Ven. Madihe Pannaseeha Maha Nayaka Thera characterised his proposals as coinciding with the very demands of the LTTE and regarded it as a betrayal of the Sinhala Buddhists. The All Ceylon Buddhist Congress rejected the proposals describing them as a "frankenstein monster".

"The Most Venerable" Rambukwelle Vipassi Thero, Maha Nayake of the Malwatte Chapter, (speaking at a meeting called by Buddhist Societies at the Kandy Dalada Maligawa to protest over reports that the government was going to permit the construction of a Muslim school on the land which was occupied by a bus depot and at which a resolution was adopted to launch a fast unto death if the government went ahead to allocate the land to build a Muslim school) declared his position in characteristic style: "The proposals of Mr. Thondaman which were designed virtually to hand over Eelam on a platter to the Tamils of North and East without saying so in so many words should be rejected totally. It is bewildering to all that Mr. Thondaman who represented only a minority community should be sent to the North and East to talk peace while there were so many Sinhala leaders in the country. These proposals which have been presented in a manner most inimical to our

country and the nation threatening dire consequences should be vehemently opposed by us, the Sinhala-Buddhists who are the legitimate heirs to our land".

If one believed that Buddhism stood for peace and non-violence, the man who occupies the exalted position of the Vice Chancellor of the Kelaniya University, Aggamaha Panditha Venerable Professor Dr. Walpola Rahula Thera did not have any such illusions. In a statement issued to the press he declared, "Currently there is dreadful war in our country. In the meantime there are proposals for peace talks. I too have been invited to send in my proposals. I sincerely feel that this is not an opportune time for talking. We should not forget the disaster caused by holding such peace talks earlier. We should see to it that we don't act in such a short-sighted and unwise manner again. Not only should we stop holding talks, but stop also all meaningless



Thondaman prevented from making peace?

celebrations until this war is ended. We should first conclude the war. Only then should we conduct talks and have celebrations". The message of this Buddhist prelate of some international repute is clear: fight and fight, kill and kill, defeat the enemy, then we can have talks with the vanquished followed by celebrations. Very Buddhist indeed!

If anyone wants evidence as to why the ethnic conflict is still raging in Sri Lanka, the article prominently published in the "Divayina" of 25th and 27th December 1991 by Dr. Nalin de Silva of "Jaathika Chintanaya" fame provides it: "Defeating the LTTE is a matter of time. What must be done today is to defeat the LTTE utterly and absolutely. This is the best time to do so. To enter into discussions with the LTTE at this moment in time is tantamount to betraying the country to Tamil chauvinism. The objective of these proposals (Mr.Thondaman's) is to grant Prabhakaran a Tamil state without using the word Eelam. In one way, these proposals are even one step beyond the demand for Eelam. An Eelam state would have to draw on some financial resources from within the country, while receiving foreign aid; but according to the proposals, the Sri Lankan government would be committed to give some financial support to the Tamil state. The Tamil government would have no reciprocal obligations. The result of these proposals will be the birth of a Tamil state in the North and East and in a short time one would also witness the absorption of Mr.Thondaman's 'Malainadu' (hill country) to this Tamil state... Not only the LTTE but all other parties with the words Tamil or Eelam or both in their names, believe that from way back in history there have been two ethnic groups - Sinhala and Tamil - in Sri Lanka and that North and East have been the traditional homelands of the Tamil people... There are no two ethnic groups that have lived in this country for thousands of years. It is only the Sinhala people who have inhabited this island for over a thousand years and who have a traditional and unbroken culture".

It is generally believed that Mr.Thondaman's peace efforts including his proposals and the proposed visit to Jaffna to talk to the Tiger leaders had the blessings of President Premadasa. However, as the anti-Thondaman campaign went into over-drive and when Lalith Athulathmudali and other UNP rebels dubbed the proposals as those of the President and that Mr.Thondaman was only acting as a proxy for him, the President began to distance himself from the peace efforts by saying that the "government would not accept unilateral solutions and that any settlement must

receive the approval and consensus of all sections of the people". He also appears to have persuaded Mr.Thondaman to submit the document containing his proposals to the Parliamentary Select Committee. As a consequence, it is now up to this Committee to consider the proposals along with others that may be submitted.

Tamil Refugees in India

Since July 1983, tens of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamil civilians from the North-East of the island have fled to India because of the continuing armed conflict and the atrocities and excesses committed by the Sri Lankan security forces. At any one given time, at least as many as 250.000 Tamil civilians have taken refuge in India, particularly in Tamil Nadu.

Although the conditions under which the Tamil refugees were living there were not particularly congenial or comfortable, at least they have been free from the risk to their personal security. Following the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement of July 1987, a substantial number of these refugee families returned to their home areas. However when the confrontation between the Indian Peace Keeping Force and the LTTE commenced in October 1987, the situation changed and the overwhelming majority of the refugees continued to remain in India. Even during the period of that confrontation which lasted from October 1987 until December 1989 neither the Indian central government nor the Tamil Nadu state government required the Tamil refugees to return to Sri Lanka. In fact the position adopted by the Indian government was that they would not be asked to go back until they felt safe and secure to return to their homes.

With the outbreak of the so-called second Eelam war between government forces and the LTTE in June 1990 followed by intensified military operations which included a sustained campaign of aerial bombardment and the imposition of an economic blockade causing unendurable hardships for the civilian population of the North-East, there was a fresh exodus of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians to India. Even after the departure of the IPKF, India did not require the return of the Tamil refugees to Sri Lanka.

Today an estimated 230.000 Tamil refugees are said to be in India. The fighting between government forces and the LTTE has not only abated. It has in fact intensified day by day with the continuation of aerial bombardment. The economic blockade is continuing driving the civilian population to near

starvation. According to reputed international human rights organisations like Amnesty International and Asia Watch, thousands of Tamil speaking defenceless civilians have "disappeared" or have been arbitrarily killed in the areas of the North-East where the security forces have regained control. In addition, an estimated 750.000 people have been displaced and have become refugees and living in makeshift camps. Latest indications on the military front indicate that the security forces are poised to launch a major offensive in the Northern areas, particularly in the Jaffna peninsula. The tragic consequences for the civilian population from such an offensive is not hard to imagine.

Hence it must be obvious to anybody that this is not the best time, in fact it is the worst time, for the Tamil refugees presently living in India to be required to return to Sri Lanka, that too to the war-torn areas. However, it would seem that the governments of India and Sri Lanka are united in their thinking that they must return, and in fact already one ship had left the Madras harbour on 20 January with approximately 600 Tamils. It is reported that the enforced departure of the rest of these refugees from India will continue in the coming weeks.

There is no doubt that the government of India, which had in the past adopted the view that Sri Lankan Tamil refugees would not be required to return until their safety and security in their home areas could be assured, has undergone radical change of heart on the question of these refugees. It is widely speculated that this change has occurred following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the alleged involvement of the LTTE in that murder.

Many will share the grief and anger with the government, the various political parties and the people of India at this brutal assassination. However, it must be said that the uninvolved Tamil refugees living in India should not be penalised for a crime for which they were not responsible. Having acted in the best traditions of humanitarian spirit in accommodating hundreds of thousands of refugees at the time of their need, and magnanimously spent vast sums of money upon their maintenance for a number of years, it is hard to imagine that the Indian government could have, in the present circumstances, come to a decision to ensure their enforced departure to Sri Lanka where their safety and security will be gravely imperilled. Hence the government of India is urged to reconsider the matter and not to require the departure of Tamil refugees to Sri Lanka until such time as their safety and security can be assured.