

**Opinion**

**Sri Lanka falters on peace front**

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Steadfast refusal by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to give a firm date for talks with the Sri Lankan government, has thrown the whole peace process out of gear. Though the Ranil Wickremesinghe government is making all bids to bring the LTTE to the negotiating table sometime in August, the outfit insists that unless all conditions related to the ceasefire agreement signed between the island government and the rebels on February 23, 2002, are fulfilled it cannot hold talks at all. To LTTE supreme leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, Tamils' right to self-determination and recognition of their distinct identity are of much importance for their existence on both political and social planes. The United National Front government-headed by Wickremesinghe has so far not shown its conciliatory gesture in this regard. Nor has it acceded to the rebels' demand for de-linking de-proscription issue with the talks date. And then, the Prime Minister has categorically rejected the outfit's demand for interim administration to be the only agenda of the proposed peace talks. Both in his address to the European Parliament in Brussels in May and discussion with Norwegian peace facilitators recently, Wickremesinghe maintained that interim administration of north and east of the island would be part of the proposed peace talks in Bangkok. By taking such stand, the Sri Lankan, Prime Minister who visited India in the first half of June, i.e., second time since being elected to office in December last, sent a clear message that his government would not go against public opinion on the proposed peace negotiation.

On the other hand, President, Chandrika Kumaratunga believes that any discussion with the rebels would be meaningless without core political issues being addressed first. In this regard, the Sri Lankan, President appears to be non-committal. And she stresses for their being taken account of by the LTTE-- join the island's political mainstream unconditionally, renunciate secessionist tendency, repose faith in the country's Constitution and avoid human rights violation against minorities in north and east of the island.

She has conveyed her desire to the Sri Lankan Prime Minister and Norwegian deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen also. But then, her different public posturing on the resolution of nearly 18-year long ethnic conflict has not given veritable signals at times. She says she is not happy with the modalities of the truce agreement. At the same time she feels her country cannot afford violence and bloodbath anymore.

Political rivalry between Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe is cited as the reason for this kind of conflicting statement. However, the LTTE's self created rogue image and indulgence in non-civilized practices such as extortions and abductions are not less responsible for this. No one in Valaichchenai area of the eastern Sri Lanka will forget how Tamils apparently backed by the Tigers had ran amok against Muslims killing over

a dozen people, besides burning down their shops in the last week of June. The incident sparked by Muslim traders' call for general closure of shops in protest against perpetration of extortion bids on them had touched off Batticaloa and Amparai districts also. According to police, the violence was caused by the Tigers "who wanted the hartal to fail." Even common people felt that the LTTE presence in these areas made such repugnant incident to happen. Before the signing of the truce agreement, the Tigers had no unrestricted presence in the eastern areas. Now they have not only fair presence but also free movement for political works in the east. "Provisions of the ceasefire are loaded in the favour of the Tigers, it is commonly believed.

Clearly, the LTTE's arm-twisting acts have rather increased after signing of the agreement which is fifth one in row since 1987. Just a few days ago, the University Teachers' Human Rights (UTHR), a Tamil rights group wrote a letter to the United Nations expressing their concern at the Tigers' unbridled indulgence in abductions in both north and east of the island. An 82-year-old man was put under captivity by the rebels for several weeks. He was released only after sustained international pressure on the LTTE.

The monitoring missions too have noted with exasperation the rising incidents of abductions by the rebels. Since first March 2002, as much as 21 cases of kidnapping have been reported from eastern districts. Of them 10 are from Batticaloa, five from Amparai and rest from Trincomalee. Northern Jaffna town has also reported the incident of abductions.

Forcible conscription of children below the age of seventeen for its armed forces is yet another heinous act of the LTTE which has gained momentum since the ceasefire came into the force. According to the UTHR, conscription of innocent children increased with the arrival of the LTTE's intelligence chief, Pottu Amman in Batticaloa this April. Giving strength to this allegation has come a recent media report that six girls, all aged either 13 or 14 fled from the LTTE's run training camps in the Sittandy area of Batticaloa district. Sri Lankan officials said these girls were among 80 children being trained for the LTTE armed forces by the Tigers. The UTHR plans to present a report in this connection to the UN Special representative for Children, Olara Otunnu who is visiting Sri Lanka next month. Interestingly, the government and the Norwegians are quite aware of such activities of the Tigers. "No action could be taken against the rebels though they are engaged in such activities to the hilt. The government fears that the Tigers might withdraw from the current peace process if any hard step is taken against them," a Sri Lankan parliamentarian said. True, the UNF government appears to be lenient in its approach towards the rebels. It is said due to this reason the ceasefire is still on in the island. For the first time the truce between the government and the LTTE is witnessing such a long period of lull, which has lasted beyond 150 days. Earlier, ceasefire could not last beyond 90 days. Despite the Chandrika Kumaratunga government's Himalayan efforts, the LTTE broke a ceasefire agreement within two months after signing it in 1994. Political observers say Prime Minister, Wickremesinghe has been adopting no nonsense approach towards the whole peace process this time round.

However, to President Kumaratunga the Sri Lankan Prime Minister's move towards the peace front has not been meaningful enough to get encomiums and public applause. She feels the UNF government should ensure that the rebels must not interpret government's conciliatory move towards the resolution of the ethnic crisis as a sign of weakness. Her expression of frustration over the ceasefire modalities and the current state of affairs in the eastern and northern parts of the

island have considered to have affected her relations with Wickremesinghe. There were even rumours that the President may dismiss the UNF government. But then, she cannot do so before Wickremesinghe-led government completes one year in office in December 2002. The Sri Lankan Constitution empowers the President to dismiss an elected government by dissolving Parliament one year after its formation.

Consequently, the political space in the island is filled with suspense and consternation. However, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, fully aware of this fact, is making all efforts to checkmate Kumaratunga before she could make any threatening move on the political chessboard of the island. In the purchase of a fleet of vehicles for the President's security, the Prime Minister and his team find a chance to rein in Kumaratunga. The UNF government has alleged that irregularities have been made in the purchase of 48 vehicles for the President's security. To look into the matter in detail, a Cabinet sub-committee has been constituted, which will submit its report soon. It is pointed out that if the report confirms the allegation of irregularities, impeachment motion could be introduced against Kumaratunga. Then, any move to impeach the President will require two-thirds support in 225-member Parliament. As such the UNF government, having merely 121 members in Parliament, will not dare plunge headlong into the situation which will, except for embarrassment, offer nothing. "The most that can be done is to put a motion on the Order Paper later this year, keep the issue alive and prevent her from dissolving Parliament," a Sri Lankan parliamentarian was quoted by a daily as saying.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government received a shot in the arm when the new Indian External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha, during his recent visit to the island, reiterated India's stand for peace in the island. In the din and bustle of Indian foreign minister's visit, however, what the Sri Lankan leadership could not avoid taking notice was New Delhi's insistence on the extradition of LTTE chief Prabhakaran who is required to face trial in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case in India. Thus, message is clear that Prabhakaran's extradition would continue to be a latent factor in the whole peace initiative in Sri Lanka.