

Sri Lankan President shows determination in pursuing peace

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

Despite a spate of intelligence reports suggesting that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are planning fresh assassination attempts against the President and other prominent individuals, President Chandrika Kumaratunga is pursuing with unflinching courage what she calls "a hard and tortuous path" to end the 13-year-long civil war that has killed thousands and created hard-core assassins in the island-nation of Sri Lanka. President Kumaratunga has indicated that her government has "almost finalized" a package of proposals to resolve the long and violent ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese, the majority group that follows Buddhism.

Since she came to power as prime minister with a wafer-thin majority in August 1994, Kumaratunga has carried out three rounds of negotiations with the Tamil Tigers, who, through a series of violent acts over a decade which successfully eliminated almost all moderate and radical Tamil leaders from the scene, represent the Tamil community in Sri Lanka. In November, Kumaratunga won the presidential election with a huge margin to become the fourth Executive President of Sri Lanka, the office she vows to eliminate by this summer, and subsequently handed the prime ministership over to her mother, former prime minister and elder statesman of Sri Lankan politics, Sirimavo Bandaranaike.

First foray for peace

Soon after she took over as prime minister in August, Kumaratunga's government sent a high-level delegation to the northern province of Jaffna, the undisputed stronghold of the Tamil Tigers. At the time, this foray was widely criticized by the Sri Lankan Army, a reservoir of Sinhalese chauvinists, but it paved the way for the first round of official talks. It was during this visit by officials from Colombo that Kumaratunga came to realize how desperately the Tamil population in Jaffna wants peace. This finding has been a very important ingredient in helping the Sri Lankan President to muster courage and challenge the Tigers.

The second round of negotiations, scheduled for Oct. 24, 1994, was sabotaged by assassins who murdered opposition leader and presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake at a public rally. Sri Lankan police chief Frank Silva has since revealed that he has collected evidence which suggests that

Dissanayake was killed by a suicide bomber linked to the Tigers. However, Silva did not provide any clue as to why Dissanayake should be chosen as a target by them, nor did he state whether the suicide bomber was actually a member of the Tiger clan or one of the pool of mercenaries spawned by the violent conflict, who may or may not have a loose criminal connection to the Tiger apparatus.

The pope's intervention

The second round of negotiations took place in early January, and the discussion was focussed around issues relating to cessation of hostilities and reconstruction. Colombo presented a package of proposals expected to cost about \$800 million. The possibility of establishing a North-East Development Authority with the participation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the organization that the Tigers belong to, to oversee the reconstruction process, was ostensibly put on the table during this round of talks. Also in the hopper was a proposal to facilitate movement between the Tiger-dominated Tamil areas in northern Sri Lanka and the south, by opening up an alternate sea route via Pooneryn and a land route via Elephant Pass. The second round of talks did not succeed in resolving any of these issues.

The third round of talks, which took place on Jan. 14, was held in the context of Pope John Paul II's visit to Sri Lanka on Jan. 20 and 21. The pope's impending visit led to the cessation of hostilities, since both parties to the conflict were anxious to ensure that this important visit by the apostle of peace should proceed without incident. And the third round of talks succeeded in extending this cessation of hostilities indefinitely. Meanwhile, President Kumaratunga has said that the government would send a team of technicians to the north to start work, and the LTTE has agreed to provide labor. "We are willing to start even tomorrow," Kumaratunga said, "but the dates have not yet been fixed."

As President Kumaratunga is getting down to the brass tacks of bringing peace to the island, she is simultaneously fighting a number of powerful enemies of peace; some of them are known, some are in the shadows, and some others are completely invisible.

The reason for such a complex situation has been best explained by President Kumaratunga herself. In a recent in-

interview with the Madras-based Indian news daily *The Hindu*, Kumaratunga said that the cult of violence was the progeny of the predecessor United National Party (UNP) government, during whose reign in 1982 the nation was torn apart by an orgy of violence in Colombo in which thousands of innocent Tamils were slaughtered. Recalling those dark days, Kumaratunga said that the UNP's addiction to violence had pushed the Tamil people into becoming violent. Manipulation was another method used by the UNP and former President Junius Jayewardene, she said. Even India, President Kumaratunga maintained, was manipulated for a short while.

Hornet's nest within the Army

The first threat to President Kumaratunga comes from the Army, a nest of Sinhalese chauvinists in collusion with Buddhist Sangha fanatics who have made hay during the decade-long ethnic violence. Arms purchases, commissions, and the bribes associated with such deals, as well as counterterrorism training undertaken by the Sri Lankan Army from, among others, the Israeli Mossad and the British Secret Intelligence Service, made the Army all-powerful and almost unaccountable.

The failure of the politicians, coupled with the unleashing of the cult of violence by the political leadership, provided the unscrupulous Army brass with the necessary ingredients to build their empire—an empire built on phony nationalism and bloodshed—within the country and without. It is for this reason that President Kumaratunga, in an interview with Sri Lankan daily *The Island*, said, "I face a greater threat to my life from corrupt Armed Forces officials and vested interests in the business sector than from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam."

President Kumaratunga has accused the Army of perpetuating the war against the Tamil Tigers, and has already moved in to reorganize the defense establishment, a move that is now ready to go into effect. The resignation of Defense Secretary Gen. Hamilton Wanasinghe, a powerful figure, ostensibly under pressure from the President, is expected to trigger the much-sought-after revamping of the Army apparatus. Reports from Colombo indicate that Wanasinghe's passport was impounded following news that he was ready to leave Sri Lanka under the pretext of seeing his children in India. Wanasinghe has, however, denied the report, describing it as part of the "mud-slinging campaign" against him.

The invisible enemy

The problem with General Wanasinghe, and for that matter, with the Sri Lankan Army as a whole, goes beyond the allegations of hunger for power. One Sinhala daily reported recently that some top officers of the National Intelligence Bureau, which comes under Defense Secretary Wanasinghe, had been selling secrets to a European embassy in Colombo. Although the name of the European embassy and the nature of the secret documents have not been made public, the Sri

Lankan elite's long-standing closeness to Great Britain raises serious concerns. General Wanasinghe has denied the charges, and has reportedly told his associates that the charge may have originated from the Tigers themselves, to discredit him further. General Wanasinghe was the only serving five-star general in the Army, and retired as the top commander of all combat troops deployed against the Tamil Tigers in the island's northern and eastern regions.

The second variety of killers lurking in the shadows is exemplified by the suicide bombers, such as those who assassinated President Premadasa and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Some of them, if not all, were one-time associates of the Tigers, or have direct links with the Tigers. Killers all, these suicide bombers most likely work on contracts, and contract could be handed over to these faceless assassins by the Tigers or any number of other individuals or organizations, such as that unnamed European embassy allegedly buying secret documents from National Intelligence Bureau top brass.

Plans to disrupt the peace process

There exist indications that the shadow killers are planning to lay waste to the peace efforts of President Kumaratunga and her government. A few weeks ago, two of the commandos in charge of providing the President with an inner ring of protection, were apprehended with sticks of dynamite which they had smuggled into the presidential residence. Subsequently, a photographer was arrested at Kumaratunga's home just outside of Colombo. The arrested individual has reportedly told intelligence agents that the Tigers had commissioned him to photograph the area.

These threats, from wherever they are issued, cannot be taken lightly. In a matter of 18 months over 1993 and 1994, Sri Lanka witnessed the assassination of President Premadasa, former National Security Minister Lalith Athuluthmudali, and UNP presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake—top-ranking political leaders with maximum security protection. Even Chandrika Kumaratunga, describing these developments, told reporters that "it is a bit worrying." She told newsmen that her intelligence agents have told her that the Tigers have targeted her.

Although Kumaratunga's sheer courage and determination to bring about a resolution to the ethnic conflict have been widely hailed in various international fora, the fact remains that the Sri Lankan President has received little real help from anyone, except perhaps Pope John Paul II, whose presence in Sri Lanka at a crucial hour was highly significant and productive. Her greatest strength at this point in time, although it may not provide her with the required security, is her firm conviction that the Tamil population in Sri Lanka wants peace, and that if the Tigers, for the same reason perhaps as the Sri Lankan Army, push for further conflict and violence, the Tamils will stand up against the folly of continued bloodshed.