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Development

PRESS RELEASE

Western nations to provide arms to Sri Lankan

The Sri Lankan government is seeking greater military assistance from other nations after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) withdrew from peace talks on 19 April.

The people's Alliance (PA) won the general election on 16 August last year on a promise to settle the Tamil national problem. In November PA leader Chandrika Kumaratunge was elected President by an overwhelming majority on a peace platform. She promised to change the constitution to devolve power to the Tamil areas.

Peace talks between the LTTE and the governments began in October. The LTTE has insisted from the beginning that the day-to-day problems of the Tamils in the North-East should be solved before talks begin on substantial issues to settle the Sri Lankan problem, for the reason that changing the constitution could take a long time since the PA government does not have the required two-thirds majority in Parliament for the amendment or the repeal of the constitution. Because some of the provision of the Constitution are entrenched and require a two-thirds majority and approval by the people at a referendum. The repeal of the Constitution also requires a two-thirds majority and a referendum. The opposition United National Party (UNP) is now unlikely to support the government in Parliament. The issue may have to be decided in a drawn out battle in Court. The Court case and conducting a referendum may take a long time. Meanwhile, Tamils will continue to suffer.

The LTTE also demanded the removal of the Pooneryn army camp to make it easy for people to travel to and from the Jaffna peninsula without harassment by the army, the removal of the five-year old economic blocked and fishing ban and the freedom of movement for armed Tiger cadre in the East, where other Tamil army groups are present, fighting along with the army.

The government failed to disclose its devolution package and despite protests refused to appoint a permanent team of experienced experts for negotiations. President Chandrika Kumaratunge continued to send her personal friends who were already involved, apart from their normal employment, in government appointed Committees and Commissions.

Although the government announced that it was lifting the ban on the economic blockade and removing the ban on fishing, only a fraction of the essential goods, including food, fuel and medicine, were reaching the Tamil areas. The military was imposing its own blockade and continued to harass Tamil fishermen.

It appears that the government had been dragging its feet for the sole purpose of presenting a case to the Paris Aid Group, which met on 27 April, and Tamils now believe the government was not genuine in its statements on desire for peace.

These issues resulted in the LTTE withdrawing from the peace talks. On 19 April, the LTTE resumed hostilities and has thus far killed over 200 soldiers. LTTE has also destroyed two planes with surface to-air-missiles

Security forces have begun attacking civilians and bombing and shelling civilian areas. In the East the army has killed several civilians. Local MPs have complained about these atrocities and about the army using civilians as human shields. Last week a Tamil Woman who was forced to walk in front a Special Task Force unit on military operation in Batticaloa lost her legs in a landmine explosion and two other women were injured. Batticaloa Mr Joseph Pararajasigham has also complained about youths arrested, tortured and in custody.

Even as peace talks continued, the government has been strengthening the military. Top Sri Lankan military officials were in Moscow recently to purchase aircraft and other military hardware. Now the government has sought military assistance from India, China, and Western countries. Two western governments, Sri Lankan government says, have agreed to provide military hardware. Reports say these two countries are Britain and France. French military advisers have already been seen in Trincomalee, Batticaloa in the East and in Colombo. The government has also refused to accept a delegation in the West arranged by a NGO Consortium, to mediate between the government and the LTTE.

President Chandrika invited the other Tamil parties for a discussion on 17 May 1995, in Colombo Five Tamil parties participated. These Tamil parties say that according to the President the government intends to devolve power to the Tamil regions similar to those enjoyed by the states of India. The president however refused to provide details in writing saying that if disclosed, the press may use it to criticise the government and whip up the

feelings of the Sinhalese people. The Tamil parties say that they believe that the government is really nothing to offer to Tamil. The LTTE withdrew from talks for the same important reason.

Around 700,000 Tamils are internally displaced in Sri Lanka. There are over 250,000 Tamil refugees in the West and over 75,000 refugees in India. Western governments in recent months have been preparing to return the refugees to Sri Lankan.

Tamils are appalled by the treatment of the Tamil Community who are fleeing persecution in Sri Lanka and the steps taken to return refugees by Western governments, which are now considering to provide military assistance to the persecutor aggravating the volatile situation which creates refugees in Sri Lanka.

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