

Govt. will adopt 'war and peace' policy with LTTE

By Feizal Samath

COLOMBO, May 24 — Sri Lanka's new government will continue a policy of militarily weakening Tamil rebels while seeking a political settlement of the 10-year-old separatist war, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe has said.

Wickremasinghe — appointed to a new cabinet sworn in soon after the May 1 assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa — said that the government was looking at a political package, which was essential for lasting peace.

"At the same time, the security forces would seek to disarm the militants...." he told a group of journalists on Sunday at the northwestern town of Puttalam.

Premadasa was killed by a suicide bomber suspected of having links with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The guerrilla group denied the charge. More than 28,000 people have died since 1983 in the Tigers' campaign for independence in the north and the east for a minority community of 2.5 million.

Wickremasinghe said that solving the ethnic problem, maintaining economic policies and growth, and sustaining programmes to eliminate poverty were the key issues facing the government.

He said that the military offensive had slowed in the past few months but the armed forces had strengthened their hold in the east and were putting pressure on the rebels in the north.

"The unit of devolution in the north and the east is the most difficult issue. There has to be some agreement by political parties on this," he said.

A parliamentary committee with representatives of the main political parties has discussed ways and means to end the conflict for the past year.

While there is agreement on giving more autonomy to Tamils in the north and east, where most of them live, politicians differ on whether the two regions should be merged into one — the main demand of the rebels.

Wickremasinghe said that he hoped a political package would be ready by the end of 1994, when presidential elections are due, so that "the whole of Sri Lanka, including northern Tamils, (can) participate." The northern Tamils have not voted in recent polls.

Reacting to criticism of rising inflation and increased government spending, the prime minister said the government had been looking at ways of cutting costs.

"We have been looking at the reduction of expenditure, and we would reduce (it) further by eliminating spending that is unnecessary or... (putting) off expenditure which need not be incurred this year," he said.

A treasury review is being made in which ministries have been asked to axe projects that need not be implemented this year, government officials have said.

Wickremasinghe said the economy would not suffer because of the cutbacks and was expected to grow by 5.5 per cent or more this year, up from 4.3 per cent, because of good weather favouring tea, rubber, coconut and rice production.

The government has been criticised for spending lavishly on Premadasa's rural welfare programmes.

The new president, Dingiri Banda Wijetunga, has said that these programmes will continue with less fanfare and with spending cuts.

Premadasa's policies that attracted foreign investment will also continue, the President has said. —
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