

Premadasa and Prabha—What went wrong

What went wrong between Prabhakaran and Premadasa? It was almost a fanatical belief among many Sinhalese and even among some Tamils who are usually well informed that President Premadasa was somehow in cahoots with the LTTE. The diplomatic cocktail circuit and the intelligence community which normally hold the prerogative on the truth of such momentous issues contributed in no small measure in entertaining and propagating this belief. And of course it suited the political objectives of those who stood to benefit from this belief's persistence.

And hence the question "What went wrong between Prabhakaran and Premadasa?" is naturally bound to arise among those who have fervently subscribed to the belief that Premadasa would ultimately talk to the Tigers. The question sounds almost silly if one were to view the position taken by the LTTE from the time it had talks with the government, in 1989.

It would also demonstrate how a large number of decisions and perceptions which have determined the course of the war and its politics have been essentially shaped by interpreta-

tions arising from certain fundamental beliefs about the ethnic conflict, which have gained currency in the south from time to time. The LTTE had made its point clear from last year — that Premadasa's pro-Tamil stand was an insidious sham.

The message reiterated was this — the Tiger brooks no one who dares to lead them up the garden path with a view to ultimately destroy them.

The 'Hot Spring', currently Jaffna's only English tabloid which was established and edited by Mr. S. Kodeeswaran — (the man from Trincomalee who figured in the case on language rights which became a landmark in the legal history of Sri Lanka) carried an article by one S. Alagaratnam six days before Premadasa was blown up.

The writer takes to task those in the south who were crying foul at Bishop Kenneth Fernando for undertaking a peace mission to Jaffna. He says "I have gone through tens of letters to the editor of the *Island* including that of a lady of 83' and several, articles on the subject of the Anglican Bishop of Colombo meeting with Prabhakaran. It is a pity the Sinhalese people as a whole (Vasudeva Nanayakkara — one

swallow does not make a summer) fail to understand the aspirations of the Tamil people and the acute problems they are facing problems forced on them by successive Sinhalese governments from the day this island gained independence."

The writer goes on to say "some of the writers question the propriety of Prabhakaran bringing in shiploads of arms while speaking of peace. Is not president Premadasa purchasing Pucara bombers, super-sonic bombers and what not, while always saying there will have to be a political solution and not a military solution to the ethnic problem? If Prabhakaran is not armed and ready to repel the invading forces what right has he to talk of peace?"

"One of the writers says the Rev. Bishop should have sent a bullet through Prabhakaran's brain. The most suitable persons to receive this gift in his brain is President Premadasa, for as commander of the forces ordering the firing of artillery shells from army camps and navy vessels all the 24 hours of the day."

"Does not those this cowardly act kill the ordinary innocent Tamil, destroy his house, destroy his temple, school,

market, shop and what not besides playing psychological war especially among women and children? This type of war was not carried out against the JVP because the victims will be Sinhales, his kith and kin. And practically every day this President says aloud that the war is only against the Tigers and not against the Tamil people."

"Why do not these writers and the Sinhalese people as a whole see this diabolic crime? One can understand the firing of these when the army is on the move to capture a Tiger held area.....but to do this practically every day and at all hours even in the nights is pure simple genocide."

"Here I would like to remind the efforts made by Chancellor Helmut Kohl to punish Eric Honecker for ordering the killing of east German crossing into West Germany."

"Now who is going to punish Premadasa for this heinous war crime? Has to be left to Karma only" (*The 'hot Spring' — 25. 04. 93*)

Of course it was quite clear six days later that the task of punishing Premadasa was not left to the whims of Karma but to the lethal determination of a Black Tiger.

The Tigers began to

identify President Premadasa as the chief belligerent among the Sinhalese from mid last year. Around that time 'Erimalai', an official LTTE magazine put out in France with material prepared in Jaffna, had

trying to guide the army towards a military victory". (p18)

It appears that the LTTE had come to the conclusion that Premadasa was actually setting about creating the ideal political and

sa's intentions at this. They had characterized him as a Sinhala chauvinist leader who was anyway a bet for them because he was a strong nationalist — meaning that he would not seek Indian assistance to fight them. It is in this context that they tried to save him during the crisis created by the impeachment. LTTE's decision to send the eleven EROS MPS who were under their control for the purpose of voting with the government on the impeachment, was based on the perception that the Indians were behind the move to impeach Premadasa and that they would prop up Gamini Dissanayake, who according to them would have no qualms about inviting India to crush them.

But it appears that from mid '92 the LTTE was becoming suspicious that Premadasa was gradually being drawn wittingly or unwittingly into the Indian orbit. It was noted in the Peninsula that Premadasa was giving a free hand to what was described as the militarist lobby to push the line publicly that it would be stupid to talk to the LTTE and that it should be defeated militarily at whatever cost. The Tigers became quite wary of Premada-

section of the militarist around Premadasa were making ulterior moves to create conditions which would ultimately make him see common cause with India against the LTTE.

It was also clear to them that India had stopped orchestrating the belief that Premadasa would ultimately betray the interests of the Tigers and that Delhi was very keen to please Premadasa and win him over.

The Tigers had to make a quick move before the Colombo Delhi rapprochement was cemented by Premadasa and his 'hawkish' advisors.

The rejection of LTTE's cease fire in 1991 and the role of the select committee are two more factors that have to be reviewed in the aftermath of Premadasa's death.

When the LTTE's unilateral cease fire on January 1, 1991 was rejected by the government the Tigers believed that Ranjan Wijeratne and the military had overruled Premadasa who had wanted to reciprocate the Tiger's cease fire. "The government policy makers were unable to grasp the dangers and pitfalls of extending the war deep into the Tamil terri-

tory. Caught up in this belligerent attitude, the Sri Lankan Government made a disastrous mistake in rejecting a peace gesture proposed by the LTTE at the beginning of the year 1991."

"The LTTE's peace initiative was misconceived by the government as an attempt to seek a breathing space to regroup and reorganize. The military hierarchy assumed the LTTE was weak and that it was the right time to strike. The government rejected the peace offer and proposed unfair and unacceptable terms and conditions which amounted to nothing less than total surrender", observes 'Adele Anne' in an English book put out by the LTTE in Jaffna early this year (*Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers — released by the Publication Section of LTTE, Jaffna 1.1.1993 p.69*).

However, it appears that the LTTE became alarmed when Premadasa began to make use of the Select Committee process to muster support among a few Tamil representatives in the East to seek Western sanction to create the appropriate political and social conditions in the Eastern province to facilitate the consolidation of the army's military gains in this region and thereby enable the security forces to with-

draw sufficient troops from there to hit Jaffna. The LTTE came to see the whole Select Committee process as an insidious design by Premadasa which was an integral component of a large military strategy aimed at defeating them.

Four days before Premadasa was blown up, the official daily of the LTTE carried an editorial titled "Dead rope giving Premama" (*Kathai vidum ma*). The editorial says that Premadasa is a good public speaker who is also good at telling tall tales. "Mr. Premadasa who has got accustomed in this manner to telling tales to people, is telling tall tales even in the matter of finding a solution to the ethnic problem". The 'Eelanatham' argued that the Premadasa government is keenly involving itself only in finding a military solution" (26-4-93).

Although bumbling many a turn the LTTE could see that Premadasa was making some moves in the right direction — a dangerous direction. Anyone familiar with the history of the LTTE will know that Prabhakaran rarely bothers himself with clever counter moves. He just checkmates.

by Taraki