



POLITICS



Sunday October 22, 1995

WHY WAS COLOMBO NOT PROTECTED?

— asks Ranil in House

Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe (Leader of the Opposition): This is the second set of Supplementary Estimates that this House is considering for the Ministry of Defence. It is going to a total of merely Rs. 14 billion, more than a 50 percent increase in the monies which we voted during the Budget. The Opposition, United National Party at this stage has no intention of opposing these estimates. But, nevertheless, we have a duty to speak to the country and to this House to express our point of view and the reservations we have on certain matters. At the time that we are discussing these estimates, there are military operations being carried on in the Jaffna peninsula. Therefore, if some of the issues that have been raised here in this House are one for which the answers might endanger the lives of those who are taking part in the operations in Jaffna. Then I would suggest that the Hon. Minister, the acting Minister of Defence, give a reply to that in the Consultative Committee rather than here in this House.

military operations in Jaffna, we are going to capture the city of Jaffna, you cannot expect the LTTE to sit and wait. We may not support them. We will oppose them. We may not agree with them. But, any military strategy requires that both sides to take action which they think will give them an initiative or an advantage. This was not a secret. There were announcements abroad and all that the city of Colombo was at that risk. Then, why could not this city be protected? Surely, there may have been the need to take troops out, say, of the city. But protection lies not merely in having troops, but in your intelligence network. If you reduce the number of troops, increase your intelligence network.

for sometime until he had to be rescued and taken to the hospital. How many are going to come? This is a sad situation we are in. That is why even today morning I decided to speak to the Hon. Prime Minister for her to take whatever measures that are necessary that are needed for the security of Colombo. I am speaking on behalf of the citizens of Colombo, the voters of Colombo District. You do that and we will give you whatever co-operation we can. But ensure that the food supply is coming in for the next few days. Monday is Deepavali. The food must come in before that.



have no answer, and this is the sad situation that this country has come today. This is why I felt that we have to raise these issues. While we are not going to oppose this estimate, we have to raise these issues. The country must know, we must know, and even the Cabinet must know what has happened. That is all that I would say on this.

There is only one other matter, the question of people affected by this fighting. We have one group in Colombo. There are people living around in Kolonnawa and other areas. We have to ensure that they get adequate compensation, the environmental problems arising from this are handled in the next few days. It can affect the city of Colombo, and those are some of the areas that we have to take. They are temporary refugees. That is one group.

The second group are the refugees in Jaffna. As the LTTE and the army clashes people are moving out and moving towards Chavakachcheri, towards the other areas away from the path of advance. They are going to Kodikaman and other areas away from the path of advance. Now they need food, they need shelter, they need medicine. The strategy given by the Government, the aim of the Government is said to be to win the hearts and minds of the people of Jaffna. Then if you do not give them this medicine now and the other assistance, what is going to happen? You will lose their hearts and minds.

The critical position faced by the people has already been highlighted by the government officials responsible for civil administration if Jaffna. Representations have been made by other hon. Members of Parliament. According to the information available there is a severe shortage of food and inadequate medical facilities. It is essential that these foodstuffs should go across before the rains begin. We are talking of a package but more important than that packages to all these people will be the packages of food and the packages of medicine that you can send before the monsoons begin. Otherwise they will not have trust either in the government of Sri Lanka or in the Parliament of Sri Lanka.

So this is the situation we have. We have to win the support of all sections of the people. We have to look after our own people, the people who live in this own capital, look at the security. We have come to a situation when we are having refugees in Colombo not only in Chavakachcheri, when we have to talk of getting assistance to people in Chavakachcheri and Colombo both because the government has failed to give any assistance to people either if they were in Chavakachcheri or if they were in Colombo.

So in this situation that we meet today, and it is this House to have any relevance, if the democracy is to continue, if Parliamentary traditions are to continue, I think there is a duty by the government if not today, may be next week to reply to some of the main issues which I have raised in my speech today. While thanking Hon. Members on both these sides I hope that we will be able to see a much more secured city of Colombo when we meet to debate the Emergency on November 7th of next month. Thank you.

In Parliament

on Friday

We have a National Intelligence Bureau. What is this National Intelligence Bureau doing? It is spying on some members of the Opposition and some members of the Government. It does not matter.

Mr. Anura Bandaranaike: Prime Minister's phone is also tapped.

Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe: Prime Minister's phone is also tapped. So where is the time to be running after the LTTE. Then if that is so, while you are doing that, make it secondary. Your primary duty is to look at the security of the city. Are there people? Today what you find, nearly 20, 30, 40 people coming and fighting in the Kolonnawa CPC, Petroleum Corporation premises. You know, I know that that is like. I mean we just averted a disaster. I must commend those who were able to bring this fire under control. If the main petrol tank exploded where would we be today? Where would you be? Your house, Hon. Member would have been affected. I mean people in the city were wandering. Some of them were getting ready to flee like when the Japanese came and bombed Colombo. That was the situation. But why? Has our Police and our intelligence failed in this. I mean that is the question we have to ask and Hon. Minister I hope you will ask the question in the Cabinet? Not only my security or his security, your security also. You have the CID, you have the Police special branches, you have the NIB, then why this situation can rise that 30/40 people can come with arms, with RPGs, others, fire on at the Police, shoot at the Army in Kolonnawa, in other places. What happened to the security system within the Kolonnawa installation? Was it maintained? Was it changed? I mean these are important questions. I have some information. I do not want to say in this House, but I think it is your duty as members of the Cabinet to find out what happened and I am sorry to say this much, but when the DIG Colombo went out today and made the statement it lacked complete credibility. It made matters worse. He was saying one thing and from your windows you could see a fire and you could see explosions taking place. I mean there must be credibility. When Mr. Douglas Devananda's house was attacked, his security was blamed for it. That is not the way. You must ask the DIG Colombo what he has been doing? That is the question we have to ask.

Mr. Anura Bandaranaike: Supplying false information to the government.

Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe: I mean what information he has been supplying, the intelligence, I mean surely the are questions we are asking you. Go there and find out. May be you, were not involved directly in it, but ensure the city is safe.

We are doing what we can. We do not want to play a role to obstruct anything. But the City of Colombo has to be safe. What is the outcome of this? Whatever investment that is made in the country will go down. The money is needed to repair this. The whole tourist season is gone. The share market will go down. The development will go down whatever that you were even thinking of. Things are bad enough in this country without this. It has made worse. The tourism is gone down. How many people live by this? The winter season is gone. The BBC correspondent has been shot and injured. I think that had been broadcasted throughout the world, that George Arney was injured, he was lying there

People must have their food and ensure that the city is safe. That is all that we are asking from the government at the moment. And we are asking to find out and tell us why security was at risk. I met the Hon. Prime Minister because from 3 o'clock in the morning I was in touch with her. I must commend her that despite the moment she knew of it, she took over and acted. Maybe that she has not been informed earlier. That is not my fault. It was I who had to convey that message first. Then we had to ask some other questions also. There is also a more important matter: This is not a time of national crisis? In a national crisis any Head of Government must be in the country. The Head of Government cannot be outside? Even if you hear about it as you are getting on to a plane or a ship you must stop that journey and come back.

These are the people who voted for you. These are people who have faith in the government. What did the people of Colombo think yesterday? What do they think? Your prime responsibility to the citizens of this country. It is worth while going and appearing after Ukraine now? We are just like Ukraine with fires taking place in our capital. It is the prime responsibility, I must commend the Hon. Minister Fowzie who went there and nearly got shot. That is one way (Interruption). No, the doctors shot him earlier. He went yesterday morning, he was there. I was in touch with him, we were trying to get some schools. The example must come from the top and why is it that the example was not set? Can any of you Hon. Members go back to your areas and say, or justify the absence of the Head of Government at this time of national crisis when it was known and the flight took place at 3.10 a.m.? I rang up and was told that the flight had taken place at 3.10 a.m. But this incident was known at 1 o'clock in the morning. This is a very serious situation. I do not want to go into detail, but I think this is an important matter and just as much as I commend the Hon. Prime Minister for taking this over, I have to condemn the people who ran away. Nero might have fiddled while Rome burnt. Is this not one worse? That is why I went and offered my co-operation to the Prime Minister in this hour to make the city safe for the Members of Cabinet, for Members of Parliament and everyone else to function. Today the Municipality of Colombo has set up a operations room and the members of the Municipality are there to give whatever assistance that you require. That I will tell you. Just as much as we are risking - many of us would have felt that we should have left the City and gone if the main petrol tank was to burst. Then what would have happened to Mr. M. H. Mohamed? What would have happened to my friend Mr. Baratha Lakshman who went out there? Someone has to set an example somewhere and that was missing in the country today. I am sorry to say about it but I have no doubt that the Hon. Prime Minister will give the necessary guidance that is needed at the moment.

In doing this, I have one other question to ask, because the Hon. Deputy Minister of Defence - the Acting Minister of Defence - referred to the fact that this became necessary, these arms became necessary, as a result of the peace talks breaking on the 19th of April. This also goes back to a sense of responsibility. The peace talks are supposed to have broken on the 19th of April. Did this come as a shock? What happened earlier? Hon. Nimal Siripala de Silva, do you know what happened earlier? You ask you not answer to the House. I do not blame you. If I ask you Hon. Minister, can you give an answer either? You do not know that Hon. G. L. Peris may know bits and pieces, but not everything. I must be fair by him also on that.

That is why we asked that all the correspondence between the Head of Government - between our President - and the leader of the LTTE be tabled in this House. It has not

happened up to date. In the meantime there are letters and documents which the LTTE offices abroad are sending us. Why not send them out from here? I was reading the letter which Prabhakaran sent, which was released on the 28th of March, to our President. The first ultimatum was March 16th and it was extended till the 28th. Then came the next letter.

Now, the LTTE says these decisions were not implemented. If certain promises were given in the letter of March 24th 1995, that were not being implemented, and they are putting that out as a defence. So, how can I reply to that? Hon. Ministers, can you reply to that? Were you all aware of the facts? If I ask you to reply to this letter now, to explain it, can you explain it? But this is the position. I mean this raises very important questions. One is the defence that the LTTE has put forward, saying that this is why we acted.

This is going around some European capitals. It may not come here. There is why we asked for all the letters to be tabled here. Someone must be responsible. We are having a government that no one is answerable. I cannot come and shout at any of the Ministers here because I do not think that you are aware of it. Do you know what was there in the letter of March 24th, the decisions? Was it discussed in the Cabinet? Then how can I hold you responsible? It brings a very much more important question, that the LTTE letter of April 19th has not come as a surprise. We should have been prepared. There were three weeks given and if the government was not going ahead in implementing some of those decisions that were referred to here, facilitate the speed implementation of your decision, not going ahead with those, at least the armed forces should have been on alert on April 19th. You just cannot come and say that you were taken by surprise on April 19th.

When you read the letter one conclusion you can come to was that from end of March the armed forces should have been put on alert and have been ready to face any consequences if these decisions were not being implemented, and that is what you see from it. Then what we see here is something quite different from what we heard earlier, what we read in this letter. Then why are we voting this Rs. 8.6 billion? Because you disregarded what was said even in the letter to Prabhakaran, and you did not put your army on the alert. I mean this is very serious. I would like to tell the House to let the Government tell us what has happened. Are we throwing these lives away when we had three weeks ahead notice. For all these lives thrown away was a question of us being taken by surprise. We should have been ready, we could have been ready and we were not ready. That is the major question that the Opposition wants to ask from you. That is why we want you to table all the letters.

I mean this is quite serious. Did you see this letter earlier, Hon. Members on the 28th of March were the Cabinet Members aware of this? Then did you all ask that you should take action, be prepared for it? I mean if this is the situation who is going to answer for it? We have our city burning. We have no Head of Government. Here are these letters. We

I myself want to avoid referring to the situation in the North or the strategy because this is not the time to speak of it when the Army Units, the divisions, are fighting out there. But the situation that has arisen in the country is serious. From this House, from the lobby or when the doors open we can see fires burning. Why is that taking place? The fighting is not only in Koodavil, but it is also in Kolonnawa. The refugees are there not only in Chavakachcheri, but in Colombo also. The daring attack yesterday struck at the head of this city, and one mile past the House of the residence of the Prime Minister, there was fighting going on between the LTTE and our own security forces. That is the situation that we have in this city today.

It was only a week or two days back we saw the safety of one of our own Members in this House, a leader of one of the parties, Mr. D. S. Douglas Devananda being affected. It is of this situation I want to speak. Why have we come to this? What are the steps that we have taken for the security of this city and of all the Members? Not only me, it is not only of the Members of the U.N.P. but it applies similarly to the Hon. Ministers here and to the Members on that side also. In the morning when I spoke with the acting Minister of Defence, I said that the Parliament must meet. We must at least show that business goes on as usual. It may be that the fighting took place about a mile away. But on both sides of the House we have to show that Parliamentary traditions and the democratic traditions will survive and will carry on despite what takes place in other parts of the country and I think for that tribute that all of us have assembled here and got together and have decided to go ahead with this debate.

There may be things being said on your side or on our side. But nevertheless, remember that this is the strength of the democracy. It is for this democracy that many of the United National Party including the Leaders sacrificed their lives.

Whether we are in the government, or Opposition, we are prepared to make those sacrifices to ensure that democracy will stand in Sri Lanka and will not fall. Yesterday, in the night the situation was very restless. Thousands of people were walking around in Nugegoda, in Kolonnawa, in Colombo North and in other areas. Thousands at Galle Face Green. If the United National Party really wanted to take power or create chaos, we could have done that yesterday night. We are not interested in that. As my friend Hon. Anura Bandaranaike said, "We will come to power in the normal way through the ballots of the people." That is why we decided yesterday night to issue some form of statement to ensure that mischievous elements did not get around and there would have been rioting in this city or in any part either being looting or even affecting some of the other parts of the country.

So, it is our prime duty to ensure that law and order is maintained and the city is safeguarded. But, we have to ask this question as to why this happened in the city? When we start military operations in Jaffna, then you must expect similar operations in Colombo. You cannot rule that out. When you announce publicly, "We are going to have

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