

Attitudes change like headlines

By Our Political Correspondent

Attitudes appear to be changing as fast as headlines on free media matters. The People's Alliance which solemnly promised a free media policy is now warning its MPs not to talk too much to journalists. On the contrary, the UNP which in the bad old days threatened or throttled the free media, is now encouraging its members to build close relationships with journalists and foster free media principles.

Government MPs should not make statements which will embarrass the government and leak information to the national press, Minister and Chief Whip Richard Pathirana has reiterated.

This warning given by him at the group meeting in September was recorded in the minutes and copies were distributed among the MPs at the last meeting also to remind them that they should not leak out information to the National Press especially what takes place at group meetings.

In contrast, when UNP MPs complained that they were not getting sufficient coverage in the National Media Party Leader Nani Wickremesinghe said they should maintain better relations with journalists.

It seems the UNP is undergoing a revolutionary change to reach out to a people's party while the People's Alliance is going the other way.

The recent decision to hold UNP's all Island Executive Committee meetings in provincial towns seems to be paying dividends. An estimated gathering of 2500 UNP members assembled in Galle for the Executive Committee meeting over the last week. The committee had previously met in Matale and Kataramgama, but the Galle meeting was considered the most successful. As this session, the UNP decided to set up four committees to deal with specific areas - constitutional changes in the party, Devolution of power, Strategies for winning the next election and a new vision for the party. Tyrone Fernando and Henry Jayamaha will head the first committee, Anura Bandaranaike and Sarath Amunugama, the second, Imtiaz Bakker Markar and Mano Wijerane, the third, Ronnie de Mel and Lakshman Yapa Abeywardene, the fourth.

It was also decided that every party representative, be it a Pradeshya Sabha, Provincial Council, or Member of Parliament should participate in every meeting of its respective committee.

This came after criticism that PS and PC members were not showing enough interest in these meetings.

When the Executive Committee discussed the Devolution Package, Anura Bandaranaike who heads the committee on this issue made what was regarded as an excellent contribution. The idea that emerged was that the UNP should support further devolution and possibly make Pradeshya Sabhas the focus of administrative devolution. However the UNP will insist on the unitary status of the country.

Some Muslim members from the East, including M. M. Muthappa said they felt there should be no merger of the North-East and that the interests of the Muslims would be best served in a separate Provincial Council for the East.

Mr. Muthappa said he was making this comment, though there was the possibility he would be killed for it. The Executive Committee was of the view that the war against the LTTE should be continued.

Mr. Amunugama who is the Secretary to the Committee on devolution is to prepare a full report on the issue, providing the basis on which UNP policy will be formulated.

The UNP will place emphasis on the youth as part of its vision for the 21st century. It was decided that those who were found guilty of nepotism and corruption while holding Cabinet posts should not be re-nominated at the next General Elections. Young members said preference should be given to youths from villages, rather than children of former Ministers or top-rungers.

Former Finance Minister, Ronnie de Mel said the country must move fast into the world of technology. For this the country should expand its English education.

Meanwhile, the UNP's sub-committee on National Integration has submitted its findings.

The team headed by Tyrone Fernando states it is vital the UNP should regain the traditional minority vote bank, if it wishes to come back to office.

The report says the UNP should build up its own Tamil leadership rather than rely only on a future alliance with the Ceylon Workers Congress. It also refers to a vacuum in the Muslim leadership of the UNP in the East. It is necessary for the UNP to build its own Muslim leadership in the East without relying too much on the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC).

The report states:

1. What should the UNP do to further this objective?

a. Acceptance and realisation of the political value of religious, ethnic and cultural minorities who account for nearly as much as 30% of the population segmentation under the three categories.

Fig: 1981 Census

Buddhists	69.30
Hindus	15.48
Muslims	7.55
Roman Catholics & Other Christians	7.61
Others	0.06

b. The UNP has historically had the bulk of the

Civil defence force in offing

As a thick pall of smoke shrouded the skies over Colombo after Thursday night's catastrophic blast of oil tanks by the LTTE, Parliament went into crisis debate on Friday with tight security in and around the city.

Acting Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte gave an assurance in Parliament that under no circumstances would the military operation in the North be called off.

Saying the intention of the LTTE may have been to compel the Government to call off the current offensive the Minister assured the House that nothing of that sort would happen.

Col. Ratwatte had a word of praise for the stand taken by Opposition Leader Rani Wickremesinghe who extended his fullest co-operation to the Government to meet the grave situation.

It was around 2.30 a.m. on Friday when Mr. Wickremesinghe's domestic aide put him up to tell him about the Kolonnawa inferno.

He called General Secretary, Gamini Athukorala on the cell phone at Hekandara and told him to closely monitor developments.

Mr. Wickremesinghe then contacted President Kumaratunga but was told she had left for the airport at the nakath time of 2.05 a.m. She was flying to New York via London to attend the UN Jubilee sessions. Mr. Wickremesinghe did not give up. He called the VIP lounge at the airport but the President had already boarded the Emirates EK007 flight which took off around 3.10 a.m.

The UNP leader, then contacted Anura Bandaranaike who in turn contacted Sirimavo Bandaranaike and informed her of the attack. He told Ms. Bandaranaike that the opposition leader wanted to speak to her. Mr. Wickremesinghe then contacted the Premier and told her that the security of the city and food supplies must be ensured. He assured the LNP's fullest co-operation in these and other efforts.

The UNP leader also suggested that Indian assistance would be sought to fight the fire, while efforts were also made to control the pollution. Taking an initiative, Mr. Wickremesinghe called the Indian High Commissioner in Colombo regarding the crisis and later called the Prime Minister to tell her that India was willing to help. Ms. Bandaranaike later telephoned the Indian envoy to obtain assistance.

minority support, until the 1994 parliamentary and more the 1994 presidential elections where for the first time the SLFP and its constituent alliance PA was successful in ending this 'vote bank'. It is imperative that the UNP realises that it should as a matter of utmost priority regain this traditional minority vote bank if it ever wishes to come to power.

c. Right at the moment, the PA and the President seem to be holding on to its new found minority support base despite the chaos taking place in government ranks.

d. The UNP on the other hand has not demonstrated sufficiently in the past year that it is serious about regaining this traditional vote bank by its words or deeds.

2. What needs to be done

a. The minority cultural, religious and ethnic groups should be made to understand and appreciate the traditions of the UNP in upholding the basic principles of non-communal and non-sectarian values unlike the SLFP.

b. For this to be effective the UNP must start talking in one voice both inside and outside of parliament. At the moment the UNP is being portrayed as being the SLFP was being portrayed not long ago, as being the defendant of Sinhala-Buddhist values and objectives. Whilst there is nothing wrong in this impression on its own, it should not be the only platform of the UNP.

There are so many complicating signals emanating from the UNP today, that it is imperative for the leadership to say enough is enough and go back to its constitutional obligations.

a. When UNP parliamentarians speak in parliament and outside, they should be conscious in not giving an impression of speaking only on behalf of a particular ethnic, religious group.

The leadership should issue a clear guideline to all Parliamentarians, Provincial Council Members and other elected representatives to articulate non-communal sentiments.

Personal opinions of members of parliament and other elected representatives should be superseded by the party platform which in turn should be in line with the party constitution.

b. The group should embark on a well thought out, consistent strategy of supporting minority religious, cultural and ethnic groups both within and outside parliament.

The minority political parties represented in parliament should be regularly met and consulted to ensure that they get the feeling that the UNP is concerned about their special problems/aspirations.

Notwithstanding the leaders role in this strategy, Parliamentarians who have credibility within minority groups should be appointed to embark on such a strategy.

c. Concern must be shown for the following issues/ rights in particular:

1. Language rights
2. Cultural rights
3. Religious rights

The UNP leader was also in touch with Acting Defence Minister, Anuruddha Ratwatte and Health Minister A.H.M. Fowze.

He suggested that an Operations Centre be set up and the Colombo Municipal Council could take care of the displaced people.

After Ms. Bandaranaike directed Education Minister Richard Pathirana to allocate school buildings to house the refugees, a Committee chaired by Acting Mayor K. Ganeshalingam was set up to take care of the refugees.

Former Attorney General Tilak Marapane and former Essential Services Chief Charitha Ratwatte were called in by Mr. Wickremesinghe to assist in the work.

However, the statement made by Mr. Wickremesinghe over the National Rupavahini and his appeal to the people to stay calm and act with restraint had irked Minister Mangala Samaraweera, a confidant of the President. He contacted the Rupavahini news room and asked whether they were still living in the UNP era.

But Premier Bandaranaike was appreciative of the role played by Mr. Wickremesinghe.

On her part, the Premier arranged to have Parliamentary sessions and summoned an Emergency Cabinet meeting for noon on Friday.

In Parliament, UNP Chairman, A.C.S. Hameed came out strongly against the Government saying, "You came promising to usher in peace but today peace is in pieces. Today, see what you have done to Sri Lanka. One year ago, we gave you the country with a booming economy. Eastern Province was cleansed of terrorism and Colombo free of LTTE attacks. But today the country is in a shambles.

The signal that this incident gives the international community is most damaging."

The National Security Council also met for an emergency session for at least two hours at Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte's room in the Parliamentary Complex.

At the emergency Cabinet meeting held under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet considered a proposal to get a civil defence force to be actively involved in the security of the citizens.

4. Fundamental rights/Human rights
5. Land issues
6. Rehabilitation/re-construction efforts/refugee issues
7. Political rights
8. Plantation rights/conditions/issues.

The above issues are of special concern to minorities. The UNP should regain the initiative of championing these issues from the government, and constantly articulate this concern both within and outside parliament.

d. Regular and credible contact is necessary between UNP leadership/representatives and religious leaders/representatives.

UNP members who have credibility with religious dignitaries should be given this responsibility.

e. Regular contact with human rights groups, non-governmental organisations, professional bodies, diplomatic corps should be another feature with a view towards showing concern for minority issues/problems.

This too can be done by a designated team or persons on a systematic consistent basis.

f. Concern for Indian Tamil plantation workers in respect of their workers rights, welfare/health, housing issues, political rights must be given the utmost priority as we would otherwise have a similar situation as faced by the country in the North & East, in the estate sector areas before long.

It is important that we build-up UNP Tamil leadership to articulate this concern, rather than rely solely only on a future alliance with the CWC.

There are many promising Indian Tamil origin trade union leaders affiliated to the LJEJU who should be identified as a matter of priority and given the utmost encouragement to fight for the Indian Tamil origin plantation workers rights.

g. UNP communications should be as a matter of policy in the two official languages. All posters/publications/notices should be in the two official languages.

h. The commitment of the UNP to a just and fair political solution to the North/East issues should be articulated more and more whilst reaffirming its commitment to a united Sri Lanka.

i. UNP should embark on a strategy of developing and harnessing close contact with Tamil National Political groups, Indian National Parties, Muslim governments such as Libya, Iraq, Pakistan, Malaysia, Middle East as these governments/political parties exercise and will continue to exercise influence over the Muslim/Tamil minorities in our country.

There should be an international arm of the UNP set up so that a systematic approach could be embarked upon.

j. There is a lack of Sri Lankan Tamil leadership in the UNP. It is imperative that the UNP launches an effort to identify prominent Tamil personalities to give this leadership. Needless to say these personalities should have credibility amongst their segment group.

k. There is also a clear vacuum in Muslim leadership in the Eastern Province. It is necessary for the UNP to build its own Muslim leadership in the Eastern Province without relying too much on the SLMC to communicate

Col. Ratwatte who briefed the Cabinet on the situation explained the difficulties in providing security at all important institutions. The Minister also took serious note of what is alleged to have been transmitted over the "Sirasa" FM Service and ETV stating that it was misleading and would cause panic among the people.

It was alleged that the Sirasa has said the people should flee to safer areas in view of the impending danger from the fire while ETV had mistakenly said that Sapugaskanda oil refinery was also on fire. This was corrected later.

After a lengthy discussion the Minister decided to summon the top brass of the "Sirasa" and ETV and advise them on the matter.

Minister Samaraweera said "Sirasa" licence should be cancelled forthwith. However Minister Mahinda Rajapakse opposed such a move.

The Cabinet told Media Minister Dharmasiri Senanayake and Col. Ratwatte to summon the heads of these institutions and admonish them.

When the matter was brought up in Parliament by Col. Ratwatte, some opposition members pointed out that ETV had corrected the mistake. But Col. Ratwatte said they corrected it after they were directed to do so.

At the Cabinet meeting and during Parliamentary sessions on Friday the Ministers generally looked disillusioned partly at least, because the President was not present at this time of crisis.

Party leaders also met the Speaker on Friday to discuss various matters including security.

They also discussed the UNP's no confidence motion against Minister Ashraf on the Galle Port Project.

UNP leaders who met the Speaker on Thursday insisted that the no confidence motion should go into the Order book and that an early date be granted for the debate.

The Speaker accordingly allocated October 31 for the debate. But Minister Ashraf did not agree with this date as the Party Leader's Meeting on Friday on the grounds that at least ten MPs would be out of the country during that period attending the UNP's 50th anniversary celebrations.

Eventually the parties agreed to debate the motion on November 2.

the UNP message of national integration and ethnic harmony based on a future UNP/SLMC electoral political alliance.

l. The UNP should as a matter of priority come up with an economic development plan for the North and East of this country. National integration can be more effectively forged through an integrated development plan linking the North and the East economically with the rest of the country. The UNP should take the initiative from the opposition to campaign this cause.

m. The national integration sub-committee should embark on a fact finding ideas soliciting campaign in order to familiarise itself with current needs/priorities for national integration.

Apart from advertising for ideas from among the general public it could encourage representations to be made before its committee from among the special interest groups.

This could be the basis for the sub-committee recommendations to the working committee and the leader.

n. The national integration sub-committee could study the devolution aspects of the constitutional reform process and the fundamental rights chapter in particular in detail and recommend to the leader the working committee its conclusions which may be used as a guideline by the party in the future.

The UNP Parliamentary group meeting on Monday was a low profile one, because members appeared to have exhausted themselves at the Galle meeting.

Mr. Wickremesinghe commented.

The main topic was the strategy for the Budget debate.

Chief Whip Wijeyapala Mendis said former President Premadasa had cut down on the time allotted for the Budget debate. Members felt the UNP was now at the receiving end of that decision. Young MPs told the party leader should take the matter up with the Government and get more time for debate.

Mr. Amunugama suggested that no member should be given more than 30 minutes. He cited former President Jayewardene as saying "If you can't say it in 30 minutes you certainly can't say it in 45 minutes."

Mr. Amunugama suggested the UNP should rely on Government speakers rather than merely giving prepared speeches. It was agreed that Ronnie de Mel should draw up a plan to ensure a lively Budget debate.

While the UNP had a comparatively short group meeting for 45 minutes, the Government group meeting went on for nearly five hours the longest since the PA came to office.

President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga arrived around 6.00 p.m. when the meeting was in progress with Mr. Pathirana in the chair.

Minister Saumyamoorthy Thondaman, one of the first to speak hit out at Deputy Plantations Minister Athauda Seneviratne, though not naming him.