

Chandrika: LTTE's changing perception. (1994, November 27). *The Island.*

CHANDRIKA: LTTE'S CHANGING PERCEPTION

The attitude of the LTTE towards the P.A. in general and towards Chandrika in particular has to be carefully examined by anyone who is contemplating the island's future in terms of a peace package and its dividends. There are two aspects to this attitude. One: the reason or reasons for Chandrika and her government insisting on peace. Two: the obstacles faced by her and the possibility of her submitting to these in due course as other leaders have done in the past.

Though the LTTE had been expressing very strong reservations about Chandrika's bona fides in handling the ethnic problem from the time it became apparent that she was going to be the P.A.'s undisputed leader there was a marked change in their view after her significant victory at the Southern provincial elections. While Tamil politicians and opinion makers exulted over that victory in the deep south, which had long been considered a bastion of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism - claiming that it augurs well for resolving the ethnic conflict, the Tigers preferred not to say anything except sound a mild note of caution in some of their publications. This clearly showed that they were reassessing their view that Chandrika was merely picking up Premadasa's "fishing rod" to insidiously drag in minority votes. The prompt manner in which she set about the problem in the north as soon as she assumed office seems to

have finally convinced the LTTE that her intentions were somewhat genuine. There was Tamil public opinion too which they could not ignore. Therefore they made a very significant move after the general election.

'Tamil Eelam' the official English language news letter of the Tigers in London stated in its October issue "The LTTE made an unprecedented gesture in welcoming the election of a new Sri Lankan Prime Minister. It could be that they recognised in Chandrika Kumaratunga a Sinhalese politician of different mettle".

It should be mentioned, however, that whatever the Tigers said in favour of Chandrika was always said in strict context as it were - harping on the old refrain that the Sinhala polity, despite the occasional lip service to finding a solution, is historically incapable of offering an honourable settlement to the Tamils. Nevertheless it would not be an exaggeration to say that, going by the evidence available, the LTTE was, for the first time since its inception, convinced in some measure that a Sinhala leader was genuinely keen on cementing a peace with the Tamil people.

That the Tigers upheld this view at this juncture can be deemed quite significant if one were to consider the explanations proffered then, setting out the true reasons behind Chandrika's peace initiative. One was that she was acting in accordance with a simple budgetary formula which

was ultimately intended to consolidate her position among the Sinhalese.

The formula can be stated thus: Stop the war for some years at least - this would help divert some billions from defence spending - finance the subsidies promised to the Sinhalese with the sum thus diverted - secure the loyalty of the Sinhala majority with these subsidies and then if the need were to arise prosecute the war from a firm political base in the south.

According to another view which sought to explain the 'true' motive behind Chandrika's peace initiative, she was actually following the tenet of the peace lobby in Colombo - that the best and sure way of ensuring the disintegration of the LTTE is to take away the sole external factor which has, at all times and under the most adverse circumstances, prevented the organisation's inner contradictions from imploding and overwhelming it - this sole extraneous factor being war. Sections of the peace lobby argue that if the Sinhala polity could be fully weaned away from the idea of making war in the northeast then the army will have to stop fighting - which in turn will leave the LTTE without the only occupation they are familiar with.

They claim that corruption in the LTTE has reached enormous proportions and has become so cancerous that the leadership is scared to take any drastic step to root out the problem. The

arrest of Kuttir, a senior leader in the Vanni, and several others allegedly for embezzling millions from tax funds which benefited from Kuttir's fraud is cited as a good example by the proponents of the peace strategy to illustrate their thesis. There is also utter frustration within the organisation and the number of cadres volunteering to be Black Tigers is a sure manifestation of this moral rot they say, and the LTTE, according to them, is able to prudently skim such problems as they surface only because of the war - by sending culprits occupying sensitive positions to the battle front or by making it an excuse to make changes in the affected portion of the command structure.

Therefore, argues this influential section of the peace lobby, it is very essential for the government to bring peace to the northeast in order to expedite the only process by which the LTTE can be made to fall apart.

The LTTE no doubt is wary of the peace lobby's proximity to the powers that be in the P.A. This view which tried to read the peace lobby's peace strategy into Chandrika's Jaffna initiative, however, was something which the LTTE was familiar with from Premadasa's days. (It was discussed in these columns at that time)

But despite this and other explanations which



President Chandrika Kumaratunga

sought to impute insidious motives to Chandrika's stand on bringing about peace to the war weary people in the north, the LTTE as we noted earlier, showed an unprecedented inclination to trust her personal bona fides and hence to welcome her election as Premier.

In this they showed the Tamils that they were at one with them. And also in this they were telling the Tamil people and perhaps the world once more that they were not the intransigent and crude warmongers they are generally portrayed to be.

However they qualified their position by reiterating three things - history, vested interests in the army and India.

To quote from "Thamil Eelam" - "History is a good teacher, and what lessons (sic) the Tamil people learnt from past history (sic) have

proved to be always unpleasant. No Prime Minister or President in Sri Lanka has ever been able to redress the grievances of the Tamil people; nor were they able to keep promises and undertakings. Either they did not have the political will or they got submerged under forces of Sinhala hegemonism. The fact is, there is an underlying reservoir of Sinhala chauvinism that surfaces every time some settlement seems possible. That could assume different faces - opportunist politicians, the greed for power of the party in the opposition, the Buddhist Maha Sangha, the armed forces, war profiteers....."

Yet, said the publication, the LTTE welcomed Chandrika's election as Prime Minister.

The November issue of the 'Erimalai' in an editorial apparently written just a day or two before Gamage's assassi-

nation paid a terse but glowing tribute to Chandrika's courage and steadfastness in "walking through the door of peace that has always been kept wide open by the hands of love extended by the people of Jaffna and the Tigers" despite the unfriendly attitude of the army and India. It further observed that "The main opposition party the UNP is awaiting an opportune moment to express its opposition to the peace initiative. The army has already expressed its hostility and is placing obstacles. Hiding its intention of taking revenge, on the Tigers, India fumbles, unable to stop the peace process."

The atmosphere, then, was most conducive for the second round of talks - Chandrika having secured (or so it seemed) what no Sinhala leader before her could secure - the LTTE's trust in her strictly personal bona fides.

Like everyone else the LTTE also seems to have been impressed by Chandrika's landslide victory and hence to probably ease things for her came up with the unofficial "hold your fire unless attacked" order - their stand being that since it is the government which in 1990 rejected out of hand their unilateral and officially declared ceasefire, the moral responsibility of declaring one again falls on the government (regardless of who is in power).

on 15.11.94, Balasingham acknowledged at a press conference in Jaffna that the LTTE was observing an

unofficial ceasefire for a week). But then there was Malli's decapitation at Welioya two days after Balasingham's announcement. Malli alias Col. S. Innaathamby Pathmanathan is a fairly senior person among the LTTE's field operatives. He had played an important role in the attack on the Indian army camp at Mulliavalai, the final assault on ENDFL positions the same year, and the attacks on Mankulam, Elephant Pass, Kokkavil and Poornery.

By focusing attention on Malli's decapitation and six other incidents which the LTTE's claims were deliberate violation of their goodwill gesture, the Tiger leadership is making a very important point politically - it is corroborating the case it has been building up since Chandrika's rise to power - that her intention to bring peace to the North despite her honesty and sincerity will be defeated by vested interests in the Army, and that reservoir of Sinhala chauvinism which, in their view, remains a constant in Southern politics.

In other words, they are telling the Tamils that even a good Sinhala leader can be overwhelmed by forces inimical to the Tamils getting an honourable settlement. All their publications have been predicting that Chandrika, though good, will have to ultimately submit and yield to these forces. And the manner in which the Army has responded to their unofficial ceasefire proves it, they tell the Tamils. To do so is crucial to their very existence.

The Government and its policymakers as usual seem to be oblivious to the political content of the whole issue. One can also see that they have begun to cast doubts on Chandrika's *Bona Fides* itself now, which doesn't bode well for the future of a government that may soon find itself cash-strapped. The editorial of the LTTE's Jaffna paper 'Eelanan' on 21.11.94 is worth examining in this respect.

"Is the Chandrika Government genuinely interested in settling the ethnic problem by finding a political solution or is it trying to cheat the Tamil people like the previous Government. This is the question raised by the Tamil people today, and there is nothing wrong in asking this because after Chandrika assumed duties as President, people expected many changes to take place, and they were disappointed and this made them ask this question. If Chandrika wants to settle the ethnic problem, she should take steps immediately, otherwise even if she wants to settle the ethnic problem it will not satisfy the people."

In this respect there are 2 main obstacles for Chandrika, one is from the Army which has enjoyed many powers earlier, and the other is from India which tried to keep Sri Lanka under its influence. In the UNP government, the Sinhala extremists and Buddhist organisations obstructed the settlement of the ethnic problem. These 2 factors have not lost their power but they have only been weakened. Today the Army is a powerful position. It is not easy to satisfy the army. When Chandrika was appointed as Prime Minister, she tried to settle the ethnic

problem, but the army put obstacles. The reason for this is that the Army enjoys many facilities, and many Army officers have become millionaires because of the war. So how can the army agree for cease-fire and bringing the war to an end?

"The other obstacle is India and its intelligence agency. They tried to establish their supremacy in Sri Lanka and failed. It was the Liberation Tigers who prevented this. India thinks that Liberation Tigers prevented it by establishing its supremacy in Sri Lanka, and India cannot digest and hence doesn't like Chandrika's government conducting peace talks with the Liberation Tigers."

"If the Chandrika Government is genuinely interested in settling the ethnic problem, it should change the structure of the Army Headquarters, and Sri Lanka being an independent country should not give in to pressure from the Indian Government, and for this the Chandrika Government has got the authority and power. Otherwise it will also have to disapp, from the Tamil people."

Some days after this it appeared almost certain that the government was going to send a signal to the north by bringing the security forces command structure under the purview and control of a civilian bureaucrat.

The P.A. leadership has changed its mind. Gen. Wanasinghe remains. The grim prospect of fighting another war is at the back of everyone's mind on both sides. As the blue tint euphoria vaguely dissipates from the war torn lands of the north, the fond hopes of the Tamils will be scattered there, dashed to smithereens once more.

— Taraki