

## Thondaman: Sinhala leaders don't want solution. (1993, November 07) *The Sunday times.*

# Thondaman: Sinhala leaders don't want solution

By Roshan Peiris

Senior Minister and CWC leader S. Thondaman has reiterated his charge that Sinhala political leaders do not want to solve the Tamil ethnic problem in Sri Lanka.

"Unfortunately this is my experience, history will prove me right", Mr. Thondaman said in an interview with *The Sunday Times*.

The veteran leader of the biggest estate union also warned that strikes might cripple the estates, if plantation workers were not given a better deal, amidst moves to extend the contracts of private management companies.

Excerpts from the interview:

**Q:** You wrote to the President about what you term the arbitrary and indiscriminate arrests of Tamils out side the North and East. What has been the outcome?

**A:** I have had an acknowledgement of the letter. But what I want to say is, and a fact little known is that I met President Wijetunga as far back as May or June to make similar representations about the harassment of Tamil people. I also gave a formula which would not compromise on national security while at the same time stopping the harassment of Tamil people.

This formula was accepted by the President who asked

the then Defence Secretary Walter Fernando to implement my formula. It was effective but now with the change of Secretaries somehow things have taken a serious turn, so much so that I was constrained to raise it at the Cabinet level.

The Defence Secretary was asked to take note. Upto now there has been no lessening of harassment but I am awaiting action which I am confident the President will take.

**Q:** Speaker M. H. Mohammed has said he is ready to go to the North and talk with the LTTE together with you or alone. Are you still prepared to go?

**A:** For the last two years I have volunteered to go. I am always willing to hold a dialogue with the LTTE if the Government wants me to. I am getting impatient and so are the Tamil speaking people that the problem in the North and East stays unsettled. I feel this problem must be settled pronto. Take the situation in Colombo as an example. A Tamil man can't go to worship at a temple, walk along the beach or even go to work without harbouring a fear that at any time he would be arrested. This is not hypothetical if I may add. There have been many such incidents involving young Tamil men. The Tamil speaking people and their families live in fear awaiting the fearful knock on the door or arbitrary arrests.

Also see what a telling indictment it is that apart from the CWC sponsored candidates no other Tamil candidates won at the last Provincial Council election held in May this year. I have finally come to the sad conclusion that in the near future not even the CWC could help Tamils to win seats. So this problem must be settled as a top priority matter by the Government.

**Q:** You have virtually raised a hornet's nest with your interview to the Tamil Nation published in *The Sunday Times* where you state that all Tamils must

get together and strengthen their hands and the rival Tamil groups must stop betraying the freedom fighters. You are referring to the LTTE as freedom fighters?

**A:** First and foremost I believe all Tamil political parties must get together and not keep fighting among themselves. Fighting would not help the cause of the Tamil speaking people. As for calling the LTTE freedom fighters I am not quite sure what word I used. But I must say that the LTTE is fighting for a cause, that is what I meant.

**Q:** Do you expect Tamil political parties such as the EPRLF and the TULF whose leaders were killed by the LTTE, to get together with them?

**A:** Keeping grudges won't help to solve problems and a divided Tamil people no matter what reason, will only delay the solution to the ethnic problem which has gone on unabated for over a decade.

**Q:** You are a member of a Sinhala Government but in this same interview you have stated that all Sinhala Governments are the same and every Sinhala leader will say that he is keen to solve the problem but, never wants to solve it. Is this really your considered view, while being in the Cabinet.

**A:** Unfortunately that has been my experience. History will justify what I have said. I have made similar observations in Parliament. Take S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike or Dudley Senanayake, both men of political worth but were they able to solve the Tamil problem? What I have said is nothing new.

This is the belief of the CWC and myself. I don't say that Sinhala leaders have not been concerned about the Tamil problem. But unfortunately the end result as you can see has not been satisfactory.

**Q:** President Wijetunga has said that he will hold

elections in the North and East. What is your view?

**A:** I respect his good intentions, but I do not know just how elections can be held. President Premadasa in 1989 also spoke of having a civilian administration in the North and East but it came to nothing. Only time can tell whether elections would be successful.

**Q:** Most of the Tamil parties have expressed the view, and the EPRLF has made a statement that considering the ground situation they will not participate in proposed elections. What is your view?

**A:** There is something in what the Tamil political parties are saying. At present they are not sure of what kind of reception they will have.

**Q:** The President has also spoken of a referendum in the East to consider the question of the North-East merger. Are you for the referendum?

**A:** I am all for a proper referendum but not an apology for a referendum. That is not what we want.

**Q:** What do you mean by an apology?

**A:** What I mean is that all eligible people must be able to vote at the referendum and all political parties must be able to participate freely with no fear and with no danger to their lives. If this could be done I am for the referendum.

**Q:** Is there a possibility that the present unrest on the tea plantations would lead to a series of strikes?

**A:** The President has acknowledged my letter about the extension of the private management of estates for the next thirty years. Also that the managements are seeking a contractual revision by trying not to give 300 days an year of work.

There is a great deal of frustration among the workers and I think rightly so. If no remedial measures are taken there is the possibility of strikes breaking out and crippling the plantation industry.