

Offering the Olive Branch

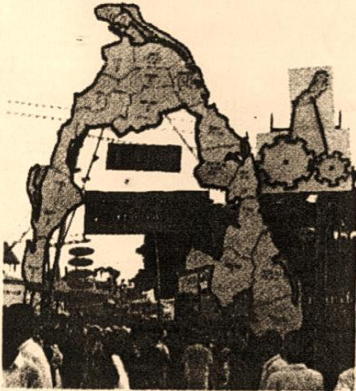
Kumaratunga and the LTTE take halting steps towards the negotiating table

By VAASANTHI in Jaffna and Colombo

As a medical student in Jaffna University, Vasu has barely had time for studies. Or to think of a career. He has been too busy coping with a life of trials, war and deprivation in this strife-torn peninsula, seeing little else in his 24 years. Now, barely a month after a new Sri Lankan Government has been sworn in at Colombo with Chandrika Kumaratunga as the prime minister, he feels things will change.

And Vasu—with 75 lakh others in an area that still reverberates with sporadic gunfire as Sri Lankan security forces fight the LTTE—will have something to look forward to. "We feel Chandrika will do something positive," says Vasu. "There is hope that peace will come."

Photographs by K. SURENDRAN



The question is when? Ever since Kumaratunga's People's Alliance coalition assumed office in mid-August, offers of negotiation leading to peace have been flowing fast and talk in both the Tamil strongholds and among the majority Sinhala turns as much to peace as it does to the crucial presidential elections due in November. Though Kumaratunga claims that people voted her in on democracy and anti-corruption issues, the fact that solving the crisis was a major manifesto promise, that moderate Tamil parties lend support to her in Parliament to maintain her majority, and that Sri Lanka bleeds off close to a quarter of its revenue on civil war costs and that 1,500 people have died since 1993, all indicate its importance. "We are enormously sympathetic towards the people of Jaffna," says Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar. "But everything takes time. We have been in power only for a month and we have done a fair amount. I can't tell you when the cease-fire will be declared."

As of now, both sides are posturing to inch towards the middle ground of detente. LTTE spokesman Anton

A quarter of the country's revenue has been used to cover the cost of the civil war and 1,500 people have died since 1993.

Balasingham talks about how Kumaratunga is the best bet for peace in years and how she is welcome to Jaffna the minute she reciprocates the LTTE's suggestion of a cease-fire. "We are pleading for a cease-fire," says Balasingham. And Kumaratunga, reacting to LTTE leader Velupillai Pirabhakaran's offer of a cease-fire and unconditional talks on September 5, has asked the LTTE to name a negotiator for meetings.

This olive branch waving is welcome. But, mutual animosity has been systematically built up over the past three decades and Kumaratunga's approach, though attractive, will have to withstand the pressures as much from the LTTE as from Sinhala decision-makers: the still powerful United Nationalist Party opposition, the entrenched bureaucracy and certainly, the armed forces, for whom peace means a lessening of clout and defence allocations. "I don't only have political enemies now," Kumaratunga told *INDIA TODAY*. She adds: "I am always aware that the Tigers finish off people who don't agree with them."

While this statement underscores the politics of violence, it also throws up critical issues of peacemaking. Essentially, there are three questions. One: how will the new Government absorb the parallel LTTE-run administration that holds sway in north Sri Lanka, running everything from the police to overseeing business and taxation? Two: how will Kumaratunga balance her moderate Tamil allies who could be angered if the LTTE is accorded official pre-eminence in the new structure? Three: would the north-east province stay as it is, or will it be further carved, or merged—the first would be to appease Sinhala Muslims and the second could lead to trouble between the Tamils and Muslims, although it is said that the LTTE has expressed the willingness to approach the Sri Lanka Muslim Conference, an important Alliance member, to broker talks.

Even if all this is worked out, there is a good chance that the LTTE may



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