

PM invites Prabhakaran for direct talks. (1993, June 24). *The Island*.

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From S. Venkat Narayan
Our Special Corr.

NEW DELHI, June 23 — Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe yesterday invited Velupillai Prabhakaran leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), for direct talks to find a lasting political solution to the decade-old ethnic dispute in the island.

He extended the invitation while talking to this correspondent at a tea party hosted in his honour by Sri Lankan High Commissioner Neville Kanakarathne here yesterday evening.

Mr. Wickremasinghe reiterated the Sri Lankan government's willingness to find a political settlement to the bloody civil war the LTTE has been waging for Eelam — or separate state for Tamils — in the island's Jaffna peninsula, which has so far claimed more than 33,000 lives.

Asked if he has a time-frame in mind for finding a solution to the ethnic tangle, the premier said: "If possible, we would like to find a solution by tomorrow!"

He regretted that Mr. Prabhakaran has ignored the Sri Lankan government's invitation for direct talks. He admitted that neither he nor any of his ministerial colleagues has ever met the LTTE chief.

When I pointed out to him that, during my half a dozen meetings with Mr. Prabhakaran in India and Sri

Lanka in the early 1980s, I had not found him such an unreasonable man, Mr. Wickremasinghe said: "We don't know because we never met him. But what does he want?"

Mr. Wickremasinghe made it clear that in a democracy, the LTTE must be prepared to discuss its demands with the government across the table. It must be prepared to fight elections along with other political parties in the island. There is no way anyone can hand over power to the LTTE on a platter without holding elections, he declared.

Earlier, answering questions at a press conference, the premier explained that the Sri Lankan government never really gave up the political option to settle the ethnic problem. The military action is no option as such but is necessary to persuade the LTTE to give up guerrilla warfare as a futile exercise and to agree to negotiations.

He denied that the government has imposed any economic blockade on the island's troubled northern and eastern provinces. Barring a few specific items such as batteries and the like, all others like food articles are being sent to the provinces, he added.

Mr. Wickremasinghe said there is no truth in the reports that Sri Lanka is planning to seek India's assistance to tackle the menace from the LTTE as it did six years ago.