

SRI LANKA

Dwelling on devolution

With India's help, Colombo tries to sell its peace plan

By Manik de Silva in Colombo

New Delhi and Colombo have succeeded in smoothing the feathers ruffled at the Harare non-aligned summit by an encounter between prime ministers Rajiv Gandhi and Ranasinghe Premadasa. The two sides are now buckling down to a new round of talks to finalise what both governments hope will be a durable peace package to end Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict.

Reports from both capitals confirmed that the thrust of the present effort is to ensure the participation of the Madras-based armed Tamil groups in the next round of talks. But the militants have been making noises indicating resistance and analysts believe that New Delhi will have to use its muscle to bring them to the negotiating table.

Following the Harare storm where Gandhi, angered by the release to the

press of a letter Premadasa wrote him following a private meeting, used some strong rhetoric. Subsequent high-level diplomatic contacts were aimed at mending the fences and also paving the way for the next round of negotiations in October.

Diplomats regard these contacts as crucial and say that Colombo is anxious to broaden participation by including not only the Tamil militants but also some of the Sri Lankan opposition parties. These parties helped the peace effort by cooperating with the Political Parties Conference (PPC) which President Junius Jayewardene used as a device for achieving a broad consensus on the peace package.

However, it is clear that former prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party

(SLFP), the country's major opposition force now leading the campaign against the peace package of devolution, will remain non-cooperative. The SLFP, which kept out of the PPC, is now orchestrating the opposition which includes an influential section of the Buddhist clergy.

At Harare, Gandhi responded to a press conference question on the Sri Lanka situation with the remarks: "We just don't know what the Sri Lankan Government is doing. Do they really want to do something or do they want to dither for another six to seven months or a year and kill more people in Sri Lanka? It is really for the Sri Lankan Government to decide what they want to do. Do they want to finish this problem? They have to have some political guts, they have to have some decisions and step out and do it. If they don't like to have our help on this, we are quite willing to withdraw and do nothing. We have been accused of having camps in India. There are no training camps for militants, for extremists, for terrorists in India. I am very categorical in saying this."

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Gandhi said that he had seen Premadasa in confidence at Harare. The letter Premadasa wrote him "purporting to record their discussions" as the Indian media had it, had been deliberately released to the press. "This will make it very difficult for us when I get back," Gandhi said. Premadasa, while maintaining that there was nothing secret in the letter, has freely conceded in his subsequent parliamentary statements that Sri Lankans must appreciate that the Indian prime minister finds it difficult to help Sri Lanka to resolve the conflict without the support of Tamil Nadu, the southern Indian state populated by 55 million Tamils.

Sources in Colombo said that Premadasa's first parliamentary statement following his return from Harare had been cleared by Jayewardene. Premadasa, who said that nobody need be agitated by Gandhi's press conference remarks, stressed that there was nothing to be gained by harping on the past.

Gandhi, he pointed out, had said what he did when he was upset over the Karachi aircraft hijack in which several Indians had lost their lives. "Whatever

the reason for his replies, I am quite confident that Sri Lanka has the assistance of Mr Rajiv Gandhi and his government," Premadasa said, in a conciliatory gesture. Predictably, the SLFP, whose hostility to Premadasa is an open secret, seized the opportunity to suggest that the prime minister lacked the diplomatic skills of negotiation.

However, Jayewardene said in a speech on 14 September that 90% agreement has been reached with the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the moderate group with which Colombo has been negotiating the devolution package. He said that the government intended introducing legislation to set up the provincial councils which will be the units of devolution once the Indian Government, the TULF and the armed groups agreed to the package.

While the TULF had indicated progress during its discussions in Colombo last month, the armed Tamil groups have not yet indicated any willingness for compromise. In a recent interview with the Madras-based daily, *The Hindu*, Velupillai Prabhakaran, the

leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the militarily most powerful separatist group, made clear that he has not retracted from the separatist demand.

Prabhakaran argued that even with the negotiations confined to a framework of provincial councils, Bandaranaike was mounting strong opposition to the proposals. The LTTE leader, of course, has to take account of India's thinking. Prabhakaran has said that if either Jayewardene or New Delhi can point out an alternative to the separate state, "we would put it before our people and only if they approve can we consider changing our stand even to an extent."

But diplomats believe that India has the ability to bring the militants into line. Once Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran returns to Madras from the US where he is receiving medical treatment, moves towards getting the militants into next month's talks are expected. Jayewardene and Gandhi will meet in Bangalore for the next summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in November, when a final deal could be struck. □