

Thondaman Proposals : What Next?

Mr. Thondaman, the leader of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, is planning to go to Jaffna in January to discuss his peace proposals with the LTTE leaders. Mr. Premadasa, the President of the Republic, remains non-committal, even though the peace plan is being put forward by a senior member of his own Cabinet. While the President is playing a waiting game, Sinhalese chauvinistic forces have already found a new patriotic rallying point. Is Sri Lanka moving towards another phase of chauvinistic rage, as happened in 1987?

The Thondaman initiative, if positively reacted to by Messrs. Premadasa and Prabhakaran, has the potential of opening up a new political front between the government and the LTTE. But both sides intensely mistrust each other. And the military offensive, launched by the Sri Lankan armed forces in the Jaffna Peninsula - the Tiger heartland - makes any peace talks a little unrealistic in the foreseeable future. Mr. Thondaman's role at the moment, then, is that of a go-between. His task, at the minimum, appears to be to keep the peace wheel moving between Jaffna and Colombo.

It was in October that the Colombo press began to publish reports of Mr. Thondaman, the Minister of Rural Industrial Development, talking through some contact persons with the LTTE. A group of European Quakers, doing rehabilitation work in Jaffna, is also reported to be among the initial intermediaries.

PROPOSALS

The Thondaman proposals are contained in a long letter sent to the LTTE by the CWC leader in early November. It presents a broad framework of a political solution to the ethnic problem; it does not present concrete proposals. In the long preamble of his letter, as reproduced in the *Sunday Times* of November 17, Mr. Thondaman asserts that the problem of the North-East cannot be postponed, ignored or be solved by "sweet talks or useless promises." It can only be solved, stresses the Minister, "by a concrete and a genuine effort by the

Government to arrive at a political solution."

This letter does not indicate that the framework of the solution, as conceived by Mr. Thondaman, is expected to go beyond the existing system of devolution. However, it posits that "the modalities of devolution must be drawn up in the backdrop of the developments of the last eight years." What does this particular 'backdrop' entail? It refers to the goal that the militant groups had been waging a war to achieve, namely, the establishment of "a separate homeland with a national identity." Any settlement, concludes Mr. Thondaman, "will have to guarantee the requisites of a separate state and an assurance that their lands and other possessions would not be alienated."

The scheme of devolved power, according to the Thondaman letter, should clearly demarcate centre-province relations particularly with regard to (a) land, (b) law and order, (c) finance and financial institutions, (d) education and culture, (e) agriculture, (f) industry, and (g) finance.

MUSLIM REPRESENTATION

With regard to the Muslim minority in the North and East, the proposal is to establish Muslim Pradeshiya Sabhas in Muslim majority districts. These Sabhas will collectively form a 'Union' within the province. Muslim groups will also be given representation in the North-East Provincial Council, in the Provincial Land Commission and in the Provincial Public Service Commission. The Union of Muslim Pradeshiya Sabhas will have the authority to establish an agricultural bank, a rural industrial bank and an insurance company. This Union will also have extensive powers with regard to school education; among them are the establishment of new schools, formulation of curricula and syllabi, and the prescription of text books. Obviously to allay Muslim apprehensions about possible Tamil domination in the North-East Provincial Council, Mr. Thondaman states that "all privileges and rights enjoyed by the majority [in the province] should be equally applicable to Muslims as well."

LTTE'S RESPONSE

The LTTE's initial reaction in late October was a letter sent to Mr. Thondaman. It merely invited the Minister to visit Jaffna to begin talks on the proposals. Mr. Thondaman declined the invitation conditionally. In his response, he wanted the LTTE leadership to send him a 'working paper' that would indicate their position and constitute a basis of talks.

In the second week of November, the LTTE sent another letter to Minister Thondaman stating that it was pointless to open up negotiations so long as the Thondaman proposals remained those of the CWC and not of the government. Two other conditions were also laid down by the LTTE: the government should end the economic blockade imposed on Jaffna and halt all security operations in the North-East.

MANOEUVRING IN COLOMBO

The LTTE's laying down of conditions for talks, and its questioning of the CWC leader's authority to initiate discussions, marked a slight change in the course of events earlier charted by Mr. Thondaman. He met the President on November 11 and suggested that the time had come for the government to put forward its own proposals. In his usual non-committal way, the President is reported to have told Mr. Thondaman to approach the opposition parties and seek their views while the government would be considering its own response.

Subsequently, Mr. Thondaman met Mr. Anura Bandaranaike of the SLFP and Mr. Dinesh Gunawardena of the MEP. Both took up the position that a set of proposals to resolve the ethnic conflict could best emerge through the Parliamentary Select Committee, headed by Mr. Mangala Moonesinghe.

The Thondaman proposals are now placed before the Moonesinghe Committee.

Meanwhile, Mr. Thondaman has been stating in public that he would be visiting Jaffna →

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in mid-January, soon after the *Thaipongal* celebrations. He has also hinted at the possibility of meeting Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader.

SINHALESE OPPOSITION

The Thondaman initiative has quite understandably attracted a great deal of attention among Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist forces. It has indeed aroused their anger, too. Ever since these proposals were made known to the public in mid-November, the Sinhalese press had been cautioning the government and the Sinhalese people about the intentions of Mr. Thondaman. In one of the cartoons published in *The Island* and its sister paper *Divaina*, Mr. Thondaman is depicted as carrying a Thaipongal present on a platter to the Tigers. The present is the Northern and Eastern slice of Sri Lanka!

The real bombshell was, however, dropped by Mr. Premadasa's own Buddhist constituency. On December 17, the Monitoring and Action Committee on Buddha Sasana and Buddhist Affairs issued a statement, which received extensive publicity in the Sinhalese press, alleging that "Mr. Thondaman's proposals contain[ed] in effect the elements of an independent state except the name of Eelam." The statement further went on to say that these proposals would "undoubtedly tend to disintegrate the country, destroy its territorial integrity, and aggravate ethnic disharmony."

The Sangha and lay Buddhist leaders who issued this statement have also cautioned the 'country' (by this, they obviously mean the Sinhalese-Buddhist populace) about "the dangers that [were] fraught in [Mr. Thondaman's] proposals". They have expressed particular anxiety about proposals "to merge the North and the East into a single provincial council and hand over the control of ports and harbours to that council, empower such Provincial Council to negotiate foreign aid, recruit Tiger members to the security forces and the police and make decisions pertaining to land administration."

Among the signatories to this statement are Madihe Pannasiha Maha Thera, Weligama Nanaratana Nayaka Thera,

Bellanwila Wimalaratana Thera, Maduluwawe Sobhita Thera, Mr. Gamini Jayasuriya, Professor M. B. Ariyapala and a number of lay Buddhist leaders. Notable absentees are the Nayaka Theras of Malwatte and Asgiriya Chapters of the Siyam Nikaya who are housed in Kandy, the traditional seat of state power.

The latest Buddhist priestly leader to join the debate is Rev. Professor Walpola Rahula, the Chancellor of Kelaniya University. Describing Mr. Thondaman's proposals "anti-national, vicious and destructive," Professor Rahula, in a statement issued on December 25, called upon all patriotic clerics and laymen to totally reject them. The proposals, according to the Maha Thera, "seek to hand over the Northern and Eastern Provinces to the LTTE terrorists. They contain all the ingredients of the State of Eelam, though the actual word 'Eelam' is not mentioned."

The ideological battle lines are now clearly drawn.

GOVERNMENT'S SILENCE

Most curious in this entire controversy is the non-committal stance maintained by President Premadasa and his government towards the Thondaman proposals. It appears as if President Premadasa is reluctant to associate himself with the Thondaman proposals, although he has allowed his cabinet subordinate to go ahead with meeting the LTTE leadership.

The waiting game of the government can very well become counter-productive. Notwithstanding the merits or de-merits of the Thondaman initiative, extreme Sinhala-Buddhist forces have now found a new platform to oppose any political alternative to the war. They are attempting to whip up militant nationalist opposition to Thondaman because he is himself a Tamil. The argument is that a Tamil Minister is now trying to appease the Tamil Tigers by virtually creating an Eelam in the North-East.

Surely, Mr. Premadasa doesn't have to commit himself to the details of the Thondaman proposals. He can still make his position unambiguous with regard to the general political framework of these

proposals. By not doing so, the President is merely allowing some of the most reactionary ideological and political forces in Sinhalese society to dominate the current political debate. What the President should do, even at this belated stage, is to take political responsibility for the Thondaman initiative, and then help to effect a new political momentum in which not only the LTTE, but also all other Tamil groups and more importantly the Tamil people, can participate.

President Premadasa is obviously fighting shy about new and publicly scrutinised political links with the LTTE. Perhaps, he does not want to repeat the bitter experience of his own abortive talks with the LTTE in 1988-89, conducted in utmost secrecy, which resulted in the diminishing of his own political credibility. Besides, there is a school of thought within the regime which argues that the present conjuncture is most favourable for a crushing military victory over the LTTE. Mr. Premadasa is probably reluctant to take a clear political stand that would nullify the delusions of a military solution.

Whatever may be the case, President Premadasa should not wait too long before taking up a position clearly favourable to the opening up of a new political front. What he should, and can, ideally do is to propose a federalist solution, accompanied by a package of concrete proposals aimed at ending the war and building confidence among the war-ravaged Tamil people. Mr. Premadasa's responsibility as the elected President of the Republic, who incidentally enjoys unrestricted access to the mass media, is not just to talk to the LTTE, but primarily to address the Tamil and Sinhalese people in such a way that extremist forces on both sides of the ethnic barricade are isolated and weakened.

Failure by the President to take the political offensive in favour of a non-militaristic solution to the ethnic question will immensely strengthen reactionary Sinhala nationalist forces. Even the Mangala Moonesinghe Committee of Parliament might not be spared by them. If the tide is not turned back soon, the little political space that exists in Sinhalese society favouring a political alternative to the war is likely to be lost. J.U.