

NOTES AND COMMENTS

NGOs in Continued Jeopardy

The bashing of NGOs is continuing. They are being demonised as responsible for most of the ills plaguing Sri Lankan society. They stand accused of encouraging the continuance of the ethnic conflict, of attempting to divide the country, of providing a means for the intervention of foreign interests in the internal affairs of the country, for cultural and religious decay.

The opponents of the NGOS have now begun to call the NGOs an alternative government, an unelected group which seeks to influence, in most cases successfully, the elected government.

Mr. Gunadasa Amerasekera, a most vocal opponent of the NGOs, has gone further; he calls the NGO movement an imperialism that stands above the elected government and directs its policies and programmes. Would that the NGOs had such power!

We have said in the past that Sri Lankan society is excessively state-centered. The controversy over the NGOs is another illustration of this fact.

The opponents of the NGO movement are not content with opposing it ideologically or within the parameters of civil society. They call upon the government to regulate NGOs, to monitor the source of their funding and their disbursement, to supervise their activities; they want, in other words, the state to ensure that all NGOs act to further their notions of the community's interests. These same people attack the state in numerous other areas, as, for example its pursuit of liberalized economic policies; they call the government corrupt. Yet, in their extreme discomfiture over the activities of NGOs, all they can do is to squeal for state intervention.

This attitude does not surprise us; what is surprising is the attitude of the government.

In dealing with protests over the proposed revisions to the Voluntary Social Services Organizations Act, to which we referred in the last issue of PRAVADA, the Minister of Foreign Affairs has sought to justify them on the basis of the need for public accountability. We agree that some NGOs working in certain areas of activity need to conform to the law of the land and be publicly accountable to that extent. However, public accountability, even in these areas, is not the same as accountability to the state. What opponents of NGOS as well as the government want is the subversion of NGOs to state direction. As the statement on this subject issued by the Civil Rights Movement, reproduced as a document in this issue, asserts, they both assume that every sphere of human activity is the legitimate concern of the state. This is a very dangerous and undemocratic notion which must be resisted.

After Jaffna?

The celebrations and self-congratulations over the military success are hardly over; yet, the hard realities of the consequences of the capture of Jaffna by government troops are becoming slowly but surely clearer.

If war is politics conducted by other means, the Jaffna campaign launched by the PA government is a classic re-affirmation of that adage. PA strategists appear to have concluded that they could not effectively and successfully 'sell' the political package to the Sinhalese people without some record of military success against the LTTE. The government may have also expected a militarily discredited LTTE — defeated or weakened in their own terrain — to come to the negotiation table, accepting the government's terms. 'Breaking the military backbone of the LTTE' has been a phrase often used by many 'experts' in Colombo, in their analysis of pre-conditions that may favour any Colombo government in dealing with Prabhakaran.

Prabhakaran, obviously, is the most hated man in Colombo. Yet, he has also repeatedly proved that, pressed against the wall, he could be several steps ahead of Colombo. The Riviresa operation of November-December, personally led by Deputy Defence Minister General Ratwatte himself, with superior fire power and heavy deployment of troops far outnumbering the LTTE's personnel strength, is no exception. Pressed against the wall, Prabhakaran resorted to a strategy that enabled General Ratwatte to win the battle in Jaffna with relative ease, but made sure that the victory would be an unbearable burden, for many years to come, for the entire government and the Sinhalese populace.

Shifting the entire Tamil population from the Valigamam division of the Jaffna district to the mainland, along with the LTTE's best cadres and weapons, was a response which Colombo's military strategists would never have anticipated. When General Ratwatte's troops organized the victory parade in Jaffna, they saw only a depopulated territory, with no society as such. Thousands of troops are now needed to control a conquered territory with no population. And the government is finding it extremely difficult, for military-security reasons, to allow the free movement of Tamil refugees back to Jaffna. Re-deployed in the Eastern Province and in the mainland parts of the Northern province, the LTTE cadres have been mounting attacks on the security forces. Continuous harassment of government troops appears to be one component of the LTTE strategy.

The broader LTTE strategy in the aftermath of the Riviresa Operation seems to be one that is designed to enable Prabhakaran to dictate terms to the Colombo government for quite some time to come. The politico-military scenario after the capture of Jaffna by government troops is being cunningly manipulated by Prabhakaran

to the LTTE's advantage. Ironically, the responsibility of militarily defending Jaffna is no longer with him. Relieved of that arduous task, he has begun to direct his attacks on the Eastern Province and on Colombo. While the government used over 15,000 soldiers to attack LTTE-held Jaffna, Prabhakaran may need only a few dozens of his suicide attackers to create chaos and confusion in Colombo. Colombo's economic and administrative installations and places of concentration of civilian population are easy targets in a war which is becoming as dirty as unpredictable, as was clearly demonstrated in the attacks on the Kolonnawa oil installations and on the Central Bank.

Politics in the South — with rancorous divisions and disunity usually associated with any democratic polity, but unusually intense in recent months — is rather fragile, compared with the authoritarian politics that Prabhakaran has imposed on the Tamil society under his control. The government's economic development and political agendas are vulnerable to even short-term destabilization which is likely to be one of LTTE's immediate and easy objectives.

A Foreign Policy Governed by Political Expediency

The Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, has gained a curious popularity in recent times. In a public opinion poll conducted by the *Ravaya* newspaper, Kadirgamar was given the highest rating among all cabinet ministers; he rated high on knowledge of the subject, competence, honesty, closeness to the public, etc..

Minister Kadirgamar has recently been in the news on several issues. He has been on a highly publicized mission to Myanmar, has made a telecast on the Central Bank bomb-blast and taken issue with the Australian government over the Australian Cricket board's decision not to come to Sri Lanka for their scheduled World Cup match.

However, it is with two aspects of the visit to Burma that we are primarily concerned with here. According to reports, the Foreign Minister was accompanied by officials and a 22-member trade delegation to Myanmar with the intention of a "common desire to further strengthen traditional ties of friendship and cooperation". Kadirgamar also met with the head of State of the Union of Myanmar, Senior General Than Shwe, who is also the Prime Minister and the Chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Why the sudden urge to "strengthen bilateral ties and improve mutual understanding"?

The military junta has ruled Myanmar since 1989 when they refused to accept the verdict of a general election which was won by the NLD, the party headed by Aung San Suu Kyi.

The regimes' undemocratic tenure of office and its blatant human-rights violations, including the detention of opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, have been crucial obstacles to Myanmar's regional and international relations. The

1994 UN General Council resolutions spoke of grave concern at "continuing violations of human rights reported by special rapporteur, in particular, summary and arbitrary executions, torture, forced labour and forced relocation, abuse of women, politically motivated arrests and detention, restriction of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and assembly, and the imposition of oppressive measures directed in particular at ethnic and religious minorities."

SLORC has responded to its political and economic isolation in two ways. It released Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest last July and initiated a Constitutional Conference, to which all parties were invited, to draft a constitution for the country. These measures were enough to persuade several countries that the military rulers were ready to hand over power to a civilian government; ASEAN countries construed the measures as a triumph for their policy of "constructive engagement". Several countries, Japan foremost among them, rushed in with investments to take advantage of the opening up of the economy.

Nothing has, however, really changed. Other political prisoners still languish in SLORC jails. Human rights violations continue unabated. The Constitutional Conference has been manipulated to serve army interests to the extent that the NLD, Suu Kyi's party, has withdrawn from it.

As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, trade with Myanmar has been insignificant in recent times. Although Myanmar is not in SAARC, it is a member in the evolving regional cooperation through the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) initiative. In short, there is little in way of economic importance in special bilateral ties with Myanmar at present.

Sri Lanka has a government committed to respect for and observance of human rights, nationally and internationally. Why does it then seek to give respectability to a state that is blatantly in violation of all democratic and fundamental rights, particularly when it has so little to gain in the area of economics? Or could one argue that this concern is not an integral part of its foreign policy, adducing its record in, for example the United Nations, where it refused to condemn Nigeria for the murder of dissidents including Ken Saro-Wiwa? This analysis is something we hope to do later.

For the moment, we would like to set the visit to Myanmar and the mention of traditional ties in another context. The government recently ordered the Customs authorities to impound copies of Dr. Tambiah's book, *Buddhism Betrayed*; this book had been at the center of a controversy about two years ago but since then has been freely available for sale. There was no immediate reason for impounding copies of the book. The government converted a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka by a senior Japanese monk into a state visit. There is now also a decision to stop tuition classes, sports meets and such other school functions on Poya days and Sundays; this has been a long standing demand of the Buddhist lobby. There is obviously an effort by the government to appear to fulfil the role of protector of the Buddha sasana that is cast upon it by the Constitution; the visit to Myanmar is best seen as part of this effort.

The government may be seeking to placate the Buddhist lobby and reduce or eliminate its opposition to the political package, but these manoeuvres have dangerous implications for its democratic and human rights credentials.

Cricket and Foreign Affairs

Ironically, simultaneously with the colossal human and financial devastation of the bomb blast in Colombo, the Australian's possible withdrawal from World Cup cricket matches to be played in Sri Lanka has become a serious foreign policy issue. Even before the bomb, the Australians were wary about competing in the region (India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), worried by the prospect of hostile fans reacting to various allegations made by the Australians against Pakistani and Sri Lankan teams. But, it is Foreign Minister Kadirgamar, who seems to be emerging as legitimate umpire in this matter. In a telecast statement, he provided an articulate three pronged offensive. First, he stated that the "sporting public" was thoroughly disappointed with the Australian

refusal to play in Colombo. (No wonder he is considered more in touch with the public in opinion polls. It is just awful that the "sporting public" was distracted by a devastating act of war, not to mention the disappointment of capitalists at all the forgone profits if venues are shifted.) Second, he pledged that the government would make new and strengthened arrangements for the Australians; among these was a promise that the Minister of Sports will also stay in the same hotel as the team. (Now that must be reassuring for the Australian team for their safety from possible suicide bombers, who assassinated some heavily guarded political leaders, including Rajiv Gandhi.) Thirdly, and more importantly, he stated that if the Australians actively discourage any other country from competing in Sri Lanka, that would be considered a 'hostile act'.

Are we come to a situation where the successful hosting of cricket matches is as much a matter of national prestige as finding solutions to a devastating war? It is beginning to look as if the priorities of Sri Lankan foreign policy are being determined not by national interest or by principle but by short term political needs. ■

BOOK LAUNCH AT SSA

Rohini's outstanding first novel was chosen as one of the 20 selected titles for the recent Feminist Book Fortnight. And rightly so too. It is set in Bombay and although Rohini included a preface with essential background for readers unfamiliar with the vast and vibrant city, the book transcends all cultural boundaries. Highly positive in its outlook, it's a series of stories following people (mainly women) caught up in various encroaching situations. From unfair working conditions, pitiful wages and sexual harassment at work, to infidelity and violence in the home, these women are struggling with dilemmas. But it's their courage and strength of purpose that you will remember. A compelling read.

The Voice.

The South Asia Edition of the novel *To Do Something Beautiful* by Rohini (Published by Streelekha, Bangalore) was launched in Sri Lanka on 4th December 1995, at the Suriya bookshop of the Social Scientist's Association. The author, Rohini Hensman, was present and addressed the gathering.

The first edition of *To Do Something Beautiful* was published by Sheba Feminist Publishers in London in 1990. It was selected that year as one of the 20 titles for the Feminist Book Fortnight and received favourable reviews. The lower priced South Asia edition of the novel was published by the Women's Press, Streelekha of Bangalore in 1995.

To Do Something Beautiful is now available at the Suriya Bookshop and at other reputed bookstores Island wide. It is priced at Rs.150/=