

CHAPTER III

PREMADASA - LTTE TALKS

- *Adele Balasingham*

There is nothing like war to manifest ironies. History too, has its quirks. So one shouldn't be surprised to discover that having escaped from the island of Sri Lanka we had now returned, but this time under very different circumstances. Our base was not Tamil Eelam, but the Sinhala South; nor were we being hunted in lanes and fields, but enjoying the comforts of a five star hotel in Colombo. We were not dealing with an ally who had become an enemy, but an enemy who had become an ally. Furthermore, we were not on a mission of war, but one of peace. These were my reflections on May 3rd 1989 as we flew in a Sri Lankan Air Force Bell helicopter on our mission to Vanni to airlift out LTTE delegates for their participation in peace talks in Colombo. We were flying from Colombo into the airspace of the Indian occupied territory of Tamil Eelam. A select team of journalists from Colombo were flying alongside us in another helicopter.

Two giant MI24 helicopters gunships of the Indian Airforce intercepted our craft and followed at a distance. It was an affront by the Indians to impose themselves on our flight for we knew that the Sri Lankan Air Force did not seek India's permission for this mission. Their commanders believed that they had sovereign rights to fly over their territory and did not require Indian permission to enter the Tamil Eelam air space. Not surprisingly, the Sri Lankans were taken aback at the sudden and unexpected threat posed by the heavily armed Indian helicopters. Nevertheless, disregarding this hostile intrusion, the Sri Lankan pilots remained calm and stayed on course, flying towards their designated destination while scrutinising a map of Vanni.

In our view, this deliberate tagging of our flight constituted an unfriendly act by the Indians, signalling that they viewed the nascent relationship between the LTTE and the Premadasa government with some displeasure and scepticism. The action sent a message to Mr. Premadasa and the LTTE that, while publicly she welcomed the opening up of a dialogue between the two parties in this ethnic conflict, privately India was peeved and would assert herself as a superpower in the region and also would try to remain a major player in the turbulent politics of Sri Lanka.

The Indian helicopters, their unmistakable message delivered, disappeared into the blue haze. We proceeded with our project, flying over the sun baked paddy fields and hamlets of thatched mud huts, towards our destination in the jungles of Nedernkerni. Seen from the sky, the dense jungle green interspersed with hues from swampy lakes and marshy lands and shades from open fields all added up to an enormous patchwork quilt. And somewhere beneath the thick green canopy, dug in deep, were hundreds of our guerrilla cadres, watching as our helicopters circled overhead. We had entered the pick up area.

Before our departure from Colombo, it had been arranged with the Sri Lankan military establishment that our cadres should mark a huge white cross in a clearing in the jungle to indicate to the helicopter pilots their whereabouts and a safe landing zone. But as the helicopters circled repeatedly, a glimpse of the white cross remained elusive. Flying from one area to the next the helicopter gulped fuel as we scanned the jungle below for a sign of the landing zone. As the search went on, our excitement at the prospect of meeting our cadres again waned, as we wondered if the fuel would hold out for us to cover the vast area of jungle stretching to the horizon. Had the pilot got his directions wrong or was it our cadres who had made a mistake? It didn't really matter; what concerned us most was to locate the landing zone as quickly as possible, while we had the fuel to do so. Then, just as thoughts of abandoning the mission entered into the pilot's considerations, we saw a red spot in the distance. As the Bell helicopter chugged closer to the spot, it transformed into a young man frantically waving a red flag in a bid to attract our attention. Gradually, a white cross became evident through the green. It had to be our cadres. Bala picked up the short-range walkie-talkie, dialled in the code number and smiled when he

heard, "Hello Bala Anna, we receive you".

As the two helicopters slowly descended, the faces of our cadres became discernible through the trees and bushes of the thick jungle skirting the open landing field. A quick glance around reminded us that we were still at war with both India and Sri Lanka. Hundreds of heavily armed cadres had been deployed to defend the area in the event of a sudden military operation by the Indian army. The cautious LTTE cadres, satisfied that the passengers in the helicopters were bona fide and not a ruse to draw them out into a hail of gunfire, rushed forward from their jungle cover carrying trays of cakes and biscuits for their guests. Extending the legendary Tamil hospitality even in the midst of a remote jungle, the cadres served the journalists and pilots with food followed by soft drinks and 'elani' (young coconut juice) for refreshment. The cadres were curious also. After all, they had been in their jungle hideout for eighteen months and this was their first friendly visit during that period. But most of the curiosity focused on the Sri Lankan helicopters and their pilots. It was quite an irony for the craft to be carrying out a non-hostile mission over Tamil territory. The infamous Bells had become synonymous with terror and death amongst the Tamil people and were viewed with caution. Fifty calibre machine guns and rocket pods fixed to the helicopter had killed and maimed countless numbers of Tamils from the air and had reduced hundreds of buildings to rubble. Ironic also, was the sight of Sri Lankan pilots and LTTE cadres reticently greeting each other, quite a contrast to their recent history of mutual exchanges of fire in a bid to kill each other.

Mr. Yogaratnam Yogi, and Mr. Paramu Murthy - senior cadres from the political section of the LTTE appointed to expand the Tigers' negotiating team and to assist Bala - as well as their bodyguards and Mr. Jude, the communication man, emerged from the jungle dressed in camouflage uniforms: they were the people for whom this entire expedition had been undertaken.

With greetings conveyed and photos snapped, the slightly nervous pilots were anxious to get their idling helicopters back into the air and over more friendly territory before the fuel supply dwindled. So within half an hour of our landing in Nederkerni, Yogi and Murthy were on their way to Colombo, the capital of the Sinhala lion, to open a new and extraordinary chapter in the history of the brutal conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka state. Two

hours later, the helicopters landed on the grounds of the Colombo Airforce headquarters in the centre of the capital. After talking to the media personnel in the Airforce grounds, we were taken to a pre-arranged venue (Colombo Hilton Hotel) with tight security arranged by the Special Task Force (STF), to prepare for the historic first negotiations between the LTTE and the Premadasa regime.

Unrest in the North and South

After our miraculous escape from Jaffna and our return to the west, Bala and I travelled to many countries. There we met the Tamil diaspora and various government and non-government officials and explained the problems caused by Indian intervention and the tragic events, which culminated in the unanticipated outbreak of hostilities between the LTTE and the Indian 'peacekeeping force'. It was during this propaganda tour abroad that the situation in Sri Lanka became grim and the island sank deeper into a quagmire of escalating violence and political instability. The intervention of India in the ethnic conflict and the induction of the Indian army into the island were the causative factor for the Tamil resistance campaign in the Northeast and the open rebellion by the disgruntled youth in the South. Totally underestimating the depth of nationalist sentiments and the political consciousness of the peoples of the two nations, the induction of the Indian army as a 'peacekeeping force', under the terms of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, proved to be one of the gravest political, diplomatic and military blunders made by Rajiv Gandhi's administration. Ironically, the Indian troops who came to the island as a peace keeping force turned out to be the very catalyst of brutal violence in the North as well as in the South transforming its original character from a peace force into one of oppression and violence. On two fronts, the North and the South, disparate political and military struggles registered their opposition to Indian intervention thus, in the internal affairs of both the Tamils and the Sinhalese.

Disregarding the aspirations of the Tamil people, the Sri Lanka government, in collaboration with the Indian military forces, went ahead with the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, by

attempting to establish a Provincial Council for the civil administration of the Northeast. Provincial Council elections of 19th November 1988, held under conditions of war, fear, and intimidation orchestrated and supervised by the Indian military administration, made a mockery of the democratic process. Vote rigging, ballot box stuffing and other malpractices accounted for the electoral victory and assumption to power of the now Indian sponsored Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) in the Northeast. The installation of a pro-Indian Tamil political party to administer the Northeastern Provincial Council in the Tamil areas with a puppet politician at its helm, failed to diffuse scepticism but generated anger and criticism of India amongst the Tamil people.

The EPRLF Provincial administration functioned as a political extension of the Indian military occupation of the Tamil homeland. It primarily served Indian interests. It was instituted as a smoke-screen to conceal the military repression and persecution by the IPKF and to legitimise the now infamous Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The armed EPRLF cadres functioned as mercenaries with the Indian army and collaborated with its campaign to crush the LTTE and to silence criticism of their regime. Their treacherous politics earned the EPRLF the resentment and hatred of the people. Ultimately, EPRLF operated as death squads for the Indian army of occupation. Critics and dissidents suddenly disappeared, never to be heard of again and prominent LTTE supporters were found murdered in their homes or on the streets. This reign of terror fuelled popular support for the LTTE's resistance campaign against Indian military occupation and its puppet political regime. Alienated from the Tamil people, deserted by the Sri Lanka government, and in conflict with the LTTE, the Northeast Provincial administration of Varatharaja Perumal could not function amongst the masses. Instead, it confined itself within a square mile territory in the Trincomalee town under the protective cover of the Indian occupation army.

The unprecedented social and political chaos that tore the island apart during this period was the political legacy of twelve years of United National Party (UNP) rule which J.R.Jayawardene handed over to his successor, Mr. Ranasinghe Premadasa. When Mr. Premadasa was elected as the second Executive President of Sri Lanka on the 20th December 1988, he found himself in an

extraordinary conjuncture, confronting island-wide turbulence, unrest and unparalleled violence. In the Northeast, the Indo-LTTE war continued unabated. The IPKF, consisting of more than one hundred thousand troops, was struggling to contain dedicated LTTE guerrillas operating amidst a supportive populace. In Southern Sri Lanka there was insurrectionary violence - armed rebellion by the Janatha Vimukthi Perumuna (People's Liberation Front) - against the state. Popularly known as the JVP, the Marxist rebel organisation re-emerged - after being crushed in a revolt against Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranaike's regime in 1971- and brought chaos and anarchy to several Sinhala districts. By terrorising the public through murder and violence these 'Marxist revolutionaries' had 'liberated' several regions in the South and brought the Government's administrative machinery to a standstill. Thousands died in an orgy of gruesome violence. Political assassinations, lamp post killings, mass graves, tortured and mutilated dead bodies floating in rivers, funeral pyres of burning tyres littering the streets, and disappearances characterised the JVP's insurrectionary violence and the brutal counter insurgency campaign of the state 'security' forces. At its peak, hartals (strikes) called by the insurgents crippled civil society and severely disrupted public administration, grinding the society to a halt. Reprisals for non-compliance with insurgent demands were severe, striking terror into the hearts of the people. As the JVP violence spread, police stations were attacked and universities and colleges were closed down and the public transport system was paralysed. Except for the capital city, Colombo, most of the regional centres were seriously affected by the JVP insurrection. Adopting classical Maoist guerrilla model of encircling the city by taking over rural areas, the JVP posed an urgent and immediate threat to the newly assumed regime of Premadasa. Unlike in 1971, the JVP did not invoke the problem of class contradiction and proletarian revolution as the central theme of their armed insurrection against the capitalist State. The cardinal issue this time was the Indian military occupation of Northeastern Sri Lanka. The bourgeois class of the UNP, in JVP's perception, had allowed the 'Indian imperialists' to occupy the 'sacred land of the Sinhala race'. The Sinhala masses, which have been historically suspicious of Indian intentions, were swayed by this ultra-nationalist propaganda. The JVP leadership also condemned the Indo - Sri Lankan

Accord as a 'document of surrender' of Sri Lanka's sovereignty to an alien superpower. The 'red army' of the JVP was actually poised to invade the capital when Premadasa assumed power as the Head of State.

A shrewd and experienced politician, Mr. Premadasa grasped the underlying cause of the LTTE's war in the North and the JVP's insurrection in the South. He rightly concluded, that it was the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force, which had virtually taken control of all eight districts of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, including the strategically important harbour, Trincomalee, that triggered the dynamics of violence in the North as well as in the South. Premadasa feared that the Indian troops might stay on Sri Lankan soil indefinitely as the fighting against the LTTE had transformed into a war of attrition, a protracted low intensity conflict. He felt that neither the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord nor the Indian military presence had resolved the ethnic problem. It was the lack of vision and will on the part of the Sinhala political leadership, he thought, that led to foreign military intervention and occupation. His immediate concern was to expel the Indian troops from the country and invite the Northern and Southern rebels for peace talks and reconciliation.

While it can be said that Premadasa's origins brought him closer to the 'ordinary' man, it is nonetheless true that the 'ordinary' man in Premadasa embodied deep Sinhala Buddhist sentiments. And this was clearly evident in his choice of the Temple of the Tooth, the Dalada Malagawa, in Kandy, the heartland of Sinhala Buddhism, for his inauguration ceremony on 2nd January 1989. This historic Sinhala venue was at one and the same time an extension and an enunciation of his political objectives. His choice of the Temple of the Tooth for such an eminent day in his personal life signified his devotion to Buddhism and to the Buddhist heritage of giving primacy to religion over the matters of state. It was also a dramatic act of evocation of historically entrenched Sinhala nationalist sentiments. By taking the argument one step further, we can discern that Premadasa shared the popular feelings of resentment expressed island wide concerning the occupation of the Northeast by the Indian army. Political commentators would have noted that by opting for Kandy, with its history of resistance to foreign invasion, Premadasa was clearly signalling that he too resented and

intended to remove the occupying Indian troops from the island. Indeed Premadasa's consistent opposition to the Indo - Sri Lanka Accord and any political deal that would deepen Indian intervention in the island, was well known in political circles in Colombo.

Invitation to Peace Talks

Addressing the nation from Dalada Maligawa on January 2nd 1989, President Premadasa invited both the LTTE and the JVP for talks. Taking a swipe at India, he declared that the ethnic issue was an internal matter and had to be resolved without the intervention of external forces. Furthermore, he vowed that he would not surrender an inch of Sri Lankan territory to the foreigners. Insofar as the LTTE leadership was concerned, the message was clear. They realised that the new President was taking a confrontationist course with India; a matter that had to be taken into serious consideration in view of the critical situation the LTTE was in. Bala - who was in London at that time - and Mr Pirapaharan were in communication and I knew that Bala was favourably disposed to the idea of talking to the Premadasa regime. If the LTTE could get the IPKF out of the Tamil homeland with the collaboration of the new President it would be a remarkable achievement, Bala commented to me. We were waiting for further developments in Colombo before making a response. In the meantime, Mr. Premadasa lifted the Emergency and ordered the release of 1,800 hard core JVP cadres as a gesture of goodwill. These measures compelled the JVP to suspend their terror campaign in the South for a couple of months but they re-launched their insurrectionary war against Premadasa in full intensity after having mobilised and re-strengthened their ranks with the released cadres. Mr. Premadasa realised that his policy of appeasement towards the JVP would not work and that he had no alternative but to suppress them militarily. In his strategy to crush the JVP rebellion in the South - which was now posing a major threat to his rule - he had to secure the withdrawal of the IPKF. To this end, he needed the support of the LTTE.

As I was to learn from the horse's mouth during our dialogue with him, Mr. Premadasa admired the LTTE for their determination, dedication, courage and sacrifice. He was fully aware of the

objective conditions of Sinhala State repression that precipitated the armed liberation struggle of the Tigers. He felt that he could engage the LTTE in a positive dialogue and resolve the conflict through consultation, compromise and consensus, his famous three C's for conflict resolution. Having made a public announcement inviting the Tigers for talks, he desperately made attempts to contact the LTTE directly. The Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS) leaders, Mr. Balakumar and Mr. Pararajasingham, when queried by Mr. Premadasa as how to contact the LTTE, told him that Bala was available in London and that he was the only senior LTTE leader living outside Sri Lanka who had contact with the leadership in Vanni. Somehow or other, Mr. Premadasa managed to get our telephone number. Thereafter he phoned Bala regularly and established a friendly rapport with him. Bala told him that the leadership in Vanni was considering his call for peace talks and an appropriate decision would be made at a suitable time. He also told him that the LTTE would appreciate it if the President made a public commitment to getting the Indian troops out of the Tamil homeland. Thereafter the LTTE was waiting for Mr. Premadasa's response. On the 12th April 1989 Mr. Premadasa announced a unilateral cease-fire between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE in celebration of the Tamil-Sinhala New Year and called upon the IPKF to follow suit. Responding to Premadasa's move, the LTTE, in a hard hitting open letter to the Sri Lankan President rejected his offer of cease-fire arguing that 'until the Indian army of oppression leaves our land, there will be no such thing as a cease-fire'. The letter also criticised Premadasa for back tracking on his pre-election pledge to secure the withdrawal of the Indian army. Mr. Premadasa understood the message and the Tigers' resentment. Premadasa's nationalist and anti-Indian sentiments lent sympathy to the LTTE's armed resistance campaign against the Indian army of occupation. He also realised that he had to make a public commitment on Indian troops withdrawal to appease the LTTE and to gain their trust in his administration. Accordingly, on April 13th 1989, addressing a temple function on the outskirts of Colombo, Mr. Premadasa made a public announcement demanding that the government of India should withdraw the IPKF completely from Sri Lanka in three months. On the same day, Mr. Ranjan Wijeratne, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister issued a statement on behalf of the

government inviting the LTTE for peace talks. Pleased with the developments, the LTTE leadership - through their headquarters in London - sent a letter to the Sri Lankan President accepting the invitation for talks and requesting the Government to make necessary arrangements to facilitate these. The letter was followed up by quick confirmation by the leadership of the LTTE, appointing Bala as the accredited representative and chief negotiator. Following this turn of events, Bala and I made preparations to undertake a peace mission to Sri Lanka.

We arrived in Colombo on April 26th 1989 and were accommodated at the Colombo Hilton. A Government delegation consisting of Mr. K H J Wijayadasa, Secretary to the President, General Sepala Attygalle, Minister of State for Defence and Mr. Felix Dias Abeysinghe, a senior Foreign Ministry official paid a courtesy call in the evening. In a brief meeting, Mr. Wijayadasa conveyed to us the President's pleasure at the LTTE's acceptance to talks. We were told that the President would meet the LTTE delegation when other cadres were brought to Colombo. On the following day, Mr Sepala Attygalle and General Ranatunga visited us in the hotel to work out the date, venue and other modalities to bring the LTTE delegates from the Northern jungles. It was decided to give the Vanni mission media publicity and to take a team of selected journalists in the helicopters. The mission was to take place on the 3rd May 1989.

Meeting With Premadasa

Soon after our arrival at the hotel we were informed that a meeting with President Premadasa had been arranged for the following day, 4th May at 5 p.m. We decided to approach the meeting with a positive attitude, mainly concentrating on issues of mutual interest. We held the view that this could lead to constructive dialogue producing positive results. We were determined not to allow political contradictions to emerge in the process of the dialogue at this stage. Both sides had a lot at stake in ensuring the success of the talks. To achieve our objective, it was crucial that we should strike a rapport with Mr. Premadasa. Bala briefed us thoroughly about Mr. Premadasa - the man, his personal history and political philosophy. Bala had known him personally during his young journalist

days in Colombo. Born into a depressed caste with humble origins, Premadasa rose to the highest position of power in the country through hard work, perseverance and self-discipline. He was also a poet and a novelist. Though he embraced a right wing capitalist party (UNP) when he was a young man, he committed himself to a socialist political philosophy and worked with dedication for the socio-economic development of the poor. As the Minister of Local Government and later as Prime Minister, Mr. Premadasa launched island-wide community welfare movements to promote economic equality and justice. The famous 'one hundred thousand houses scheme' made him popular as a 'man of the people'. Though Mr. Premadasa practised progressive politics, his sphere of work and influence was confined to the South, primarily amongst the Sinhala peasants and the working classes. In spite of his lengthy and complex political experience, he had a very narrow and limited understanding of the dynamics behind the Tamil liberation struggle. He was opposed to any form of regional autonomy or self-rule for the Tamils. For him the concept of Tamil homeland and secession were blasphemous, since he always spoke of one people, one nation, and one homeland. Essentially Mr. Premadasa was a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist with a strong element of chauvinism, which he cleverly concealed under the politics of a unitary state. In his lengthy political history, he never took an active interest in the resolution of the Tamil conflict but rather functioned as a silent partner in the dark history of state repression under the UNP regime. His ultra-nationalist sentiments made him fearful and suspicious of India, whose power projection in the region, he felt, was a threat to Sri Lanka. His strong opposition to the Indo - Sri Lanka Accord and to the induction of the Indian Peace Keeping troops and his determination to throw the Indian army off the island were the external manifestation of his internal fear of Indian hegemony. There was thus undeniably a convergence of interests between the LTTE and Mr. Premadasa insofar as securing the withdrawal of the Indian army of occupation which had become a serious threat to our political struggle. With this commonality of interest, we felt we could do business with Mr. Premadasa.

Bala, myself, Mr Yogaratanam Yogi, Mr. Paramu Murthy, were driven in a convoy of STF commandos to President Premadasa's private residence 'Suchitra'. At precisely 5 p.m his assistants took

us into in his meeting room. Apart from the Sri Lankan flag on one side, the Presidential insignia on the wall, and a few photos of Mr. Premadasa meeting international dignitaries etc the room was an understatement of power and authority. The President came forward from this simple surrounding to greet us.

Mr. Premadasa was exactly as many photos I had seen of him portrayed: immaculately groomed, black shiny hair with not a wisp out of place, complimented by his spotlessly clean white national dress. Indeed his appearance corresponded with the general opinion that Mr. Premadasa was a meticulous man, highly disciplined in his personal behaviour and expecting the same stands from those around him.

The President did not make any attempt to extend his hand to me as we entered his office, but preferred to greet me in typical Asian style. (In Tamil and Sinhala custom, men and women do not shake hands on meeting, but rather fold the hands together near the chin with a slight bowing of the head) A twinge of guilt or perhaps hypocrisy flickered through me during this greeting, for here I was, exchanging niceties with a person whom I had criticised as one of the main perpetrators of oppression against the Tamils. I discovered my 'adversary' was a pleasant and hospitable man. But a man doesn't become President by social niceties alone and I was anxious to learn more of the mind behind this appearance of perfection. Of course, as diplomatic niceties dictate, his opening remarks conveyed his pleasure at the positive response of the LTTE to his invitation to talks. Bala reciprocated by conveying his appreciation to Mr. Premadasa's for not having stipulated any pre-conditions for talks.

At the outset Mr. Premadasa attempted to impress upon the LTTE delegates that he was a friend of the Tamils and understood their predicament and their political struggle. In his simplistic conception the ethnic conflict was a problem between the big brother and the small brother, an internal, fraternal problem that had to be resolved by the parties in conflict. He blamed the former President Julius Jayawardene for creating a political space allowing India to intervene in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka; a blunder that triggered off island wide violence, caused a bloodbath and chaos. Emphasising his triple principles of consultation, compromise and consensus, he said that the ethnic conflict could be resolved to the

satisfaction of all the communities living in the 'island nation', a concept he consistently emphasised to impress upon us that a solution had to be found within the unitary constitution. Bala, as the chief negotiator, was inclined to avoid issues that might create controversies and shifted the dialogue to the immediate and urgent issues - the problems of Indian military occupation, the war of resistance and the suffering of the Tamil civilian masses - issues that were of grave concern to the LTTE and the Tamils. Drawing on first hand facts and figures, Bala was able to provide Mr. Premadasa with a comprehensive analysis of the situation in the Northeast and the conditions of suffering of the Tamil civilians living under the Indian military occupation and persecution. Indian intervention had not resolved the Tamil question but rather aggravated the conflict to a dangerous level. The Tamil people suffered enormously and thousands had perished. The IPKF had drawn an iron curtain over the Northeast and was preventing news leaking to the outside world, Bala explained to the amazement of the President. He also drove home the pertinent point that while there were widespread protests, opposition and rebellion in the South on the question of Indian military occupation, it was the LTTE which was involved in an armed resistance campaign fighting the occupation army and therefore should be credited with genuine patriotism. This point was well taken by the nationalist in Mr. Premadasa who quickly responded with an appreciation of Mr. Pirapaharan and his guerrilla fighters for their courage, commitment and sense of patriotism. He condemned the JVP rebels as cowards arguing that they were killing innocent civilians but frightened to throw a stone at the Indian army of occupation. Furthermore, Bala explained to the President, the LTTE was vehemently opposed to the Indian attempts to consolidate the EPRLF's control of the Northeast Provincial Council by building a private militia in the name of Civilian Volunteer Force (CVF) through forceful recruitment of students. The Northeast Provincial administration was a fraudulently elected body and despised by the Tamil people, Mr. Premadasa was told. Another major issue requiring clarification before the talks got underway, Bala stressed to Premadasa, was the framework for the talks. The LTTE, he was emphatic, had no intention of reducing the talks to the terms and conditions of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The LTTE had rejected the Accord from the outset and

they would not be brought to accept it 'through the back door'. Premadasa appeared comfortable with these positions and confided that he had already rejected the request by the Indian Foreign Secretary, Mr. Singh, to confine the dialogue to the terms of reference of the Accord, during a recent briefing after the announcement of the talks had been made.

Thus ended the two hours of constructive dialogue. Both parties were pleased with the inaugural meeting. In conclusion, Mr. Premadasa assured the LTTE delegates that he would meet them regularly to facilitate the peace process. He also told Bala to contact him directly by phone if and when there were any difficulties in the talks.

An Army of Occupation

On the following day, 5th May, the first round of talks between the Government delegation and the LTTE took place in the Hilton Hotel. The Government was represented by Mr. K H J Wijayadasa, Presidential Secretary, Mr. Bernard Tilakaratna, Foreign Secretary, Mr. Bradman Weerakoon, President's Advisor on International Affairs, General Cyril Ranatunga, Secretary to the Minister of State for Defence, General Sepala Attygalle, Secretary of Defence, Mr. W T Jayasinghe, Secretary to Cabinet Sub-Committee and Mr. Felix Dias Abeysinghe, Election commissioner. Thus, the Government's team constituted a second level delegation of senior officials who were also close confidantes of Mr. Premadasa. The objective of the meeting was to work out the modalities and agenda for further dialogue. In the discussions that lasted for more than two hours, the LTTE delegation elaborated the atrocities and human rights violations of the IPKF and argued that the withdrawal of the Indian army should constitute the central theme of the dialogue. The role of the Provincial administration, the problem of Sinhala colonisation in Tamil areas, the problems of the Tamil refugees, the rehabilitation and re-construction of the Northeast were also put as issues in the agenda that needed immediate action. With the agenda agreed upon, the next meeting was scheduled for 11th May.

In a brief meeting with the President on the 11th, one hour before the commencement of talks, Mr. Premadasa spelled out

clearly how he expected the talks to proceed. Being a pragmatist and a shrewd strategist, Mr. Premadasa had worked out his own scheme meticulously for handling the talks with the LTTE. It involved a systematic and progressive expansion of the Government team from a bureaucratic level to a political level involving senior Ministers. The initial stage of the dialogue should address the urgent existential problems of the people of the Northeast to be followed by political discussions - in later stages - aimed at resolving the ethnic conflict, he felt. He also suggested that there would be intervals between the rounds of talks to enable the LTTE delegates to visit the Northern jungles to consult with Mr. Pirapaharan. Mr. Premadasa also informed us that he had upgraded his team of negotiators to Ministerial level but the accredited senior officials of the first team would assist the Ministers in the negotiations. He introduced the four Ministers who would participate in that day's session and thereafter. New Ministers would be inducted in the process depending on the topic of discussion, he said. Mr. Premadasa had chosen Mr. A C S Hameed, the former Foreign Minister in Jayawardene's government and now the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, as the chief negotiator to lead the government delegation. The other Ministers were Mr. Ranjan Wijeratne, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Ranil Wickremasinghe, Minister of Industries and Mr. Sirisena Cooray, Minister of Housing and Construction. President Premadasa also advised both delegations to be open and frank at discussions and involve in proper dialogue rather than debate. After a brief exposition of his tripartite principles (the three C's), he allowed both the teams to proceed to the Hilton Hotel and engage in further discussions.

There were several rounds of talks with the Ministerial team, as well and separately with the President, consisting in total of nine sessions from 4th May till 30th May 1989. During our dialogue with the Ministerial delegation we focused primarily on the Indian military occupation of the Tamil homeland and the atrocities committed against the Tamil people. For the Tigers and the Tamil people, these were crucial problems, life and death issues. We planned to internationalise the matter of Indian military intervention by bringing to light the gross human rights violations by the IPKF. The international community had been led to believe that the Indian

troops were doing a wonderful job of maintaining peace in the troubled island of Sri Lanka. Previously we had not been able to challenge the formidable propaganda machinery of the Indian government and its global diplomatic network. It was only now, with the opening of a peace dialogue in Colombo and with the backing of the new administration under Mr. Premadasa who shared our sentiments, that we had a forum to articulate our views and expose the truth. During the sessions of the first round of talks with the Sri Lankan Ministerial delegation, Bala, as the head of the LTTE delegation, presented the Tamil perspective of the Indian military rule in the Northeast. His central argument was that the Indian troops stationed in the Tamil homeland of Northeastern Sri Lanka could not be categorised as a peacekeeping force, but constituted an army of occupation. From my notes taken at these meetings, I reproduce the arguments advanced by Bala in the following terms.

‘There is a clear UN conception of what constitutes a peacekeeping exercise. There are internationally acceptable norms and standards of controlling conflicts and promoting peace. A peacekeeping army is a neutral force that stands between two or more conflicting parties or combatants. The main function of a peacekeeping operation is help maintain or restore peace in areas of conflict. A peacekeeping operation is a conflict control exercise. A peacekeeping force, in the UN tradition, is mandated to prevent escalation of a conflict situation and to create congenial conditions of peace. A peacekeeping operation involves deployment of military personnel without enforcement powers. The military personnel are not authorised to use force except in self-defence and they always carry light defensive weapons. A peacekeeping force should not act in any way to influence the balance of forces between the parties in conflict. These are basic guidelines and principles that govern the function of peace keeping. These are the internationally accepted norms. Under these guidelines and norms, the Indian army did not qualify to hold the status of a peacekeeping force. Originally, under the terms of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement, an Indian military contingent was brought to Sri Lanka for a peacekeeping exercise to monitor and supervise the cessation of hostilities between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE fighters. But soon after the Indian army assumed entirely a different role and became an active and dominant participant in an armed conflict

with one of the combatants - the LTTE. The armed conflict, though it was characterised as a disarming process, soon became an all out war between the Indian troops and the Tiger guerrillas. The war has continued unabated for the last twenty months and the Indian army and the LTTE have become the parties in conflict. Since a neutral mediating force for peace has directly involved itself in a military conflict the status of the Indian peace keeping enterprise has become questionable. The Indian military intervention and its offensive operations have violated all acceptable norms and practices of peacekeeping. The Indian army operating in Tamil areas is no more a neutral force. It does not control conflict or promote peace. Instead of preventing the aggravation of conflict, the conduct of the Indian troops has escalated violence and intensified the conflict. The Indian army has assumed extraordinary enforcement powers and has directly involved in the domestic affairs of this country. It is the considered view of the LTTE that the Indian troops present in the Tamil areas are not a peace keeping force but an army of occupation'.

The indepth critique of the role and function of the Indian forces by the LTTE delegation in the Colombo peace talks, and the joint statements revealing the theme and content of the discussions, generated tensions in the diplomatic relations between Rajiv's administration and the Premadasa regime. The Indian Foreign Ministry registered strong protests with Sri Lanka for providing a forum for the LTTE to discredit Delhi. In India's perception, the IPKF was sent to Northeastern Sri Lanka in accordance with the provisions of the Indo - Sri Lanka Accord. In other words, the IPKF was inducted to help Sri Lanka to maintain peace by de-commissioning the LTTE's arms. But now Colombo had joined hands with its historical enemy and was discrediting the Indian military force that had been doing the fighting on Sri Lanka's behalf. When the issue of Indian protests was raised at the dialogue, the LTTE delegation countered by arguing that the IPKF had miserably failed in the tasks of maintaining peace and disarming the LTTE. On the contrary, the war had escalated and the Indian troops were turning their guns on Tamil civilians to avenge their losses. The LTTE delegates further argued that more than five thousand Tamil civilians had lost their lives in this peace keeping enterprise and that it was the duty and responsibility of the Sri Lankan state to protect the lives of the

Tamil people - if it considered them its citizens.

The Role of Mr. Hameed

Following the expression of displeasure by Delhi, the drafting of joint press releases after each session became a difficult task. Mr. Hameed, Bala and I were given this sensitive job. Since the criticism of Indo - Sri Lanka Accord, the atrocities by the Indian troops and the demand for the withdrawal of the IPKF were the main themes that dominated the dialogue, the drafting of joint statements that would not offend or provoke the Indian government was a challenging task. Sometimes it took several hours to construct a few sentences. Bala insisted that the theme and content of the discussions should be incorporated in the joint statements. Mr. Hameed wanted to avoid controversies with India and sliced off the flesh of the dialogues leaving only a skeleton. Bala was concerned with the plight and predicament of his people and argued that the reality must be revealed to the world. With his profound experience in diplomacy, Mr. Hameed was concerned about sensitivity in international relations and did not want to displease Delhi. Though it took time and patience it was a pleasure to work with Mr. Hameed. He was a master at resolving contradictions.

The choice of Mr. Hameed was a shrewd act of diplomacy and politics by Mr. Premadasa. Indisputably, had Mr. Hameed not been on the scene, the Indians might still be in the Northeast. Of course, Mr. Hameed was chosen because he was a member of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. Presumably Mr. Premadasa assumed that the common link as members of the island's Tamil speaking communities would provide a basis for rapport and a working relationship between the LTTE delegates and Mr. Hameed. That was certainly a relevant point. But Mr. Hameed's success in the talks with the LTTE cannot be reduced only to his empathy with the Tamils, but from his own remarkable personal attributes also. Although small in physique Mr. Hameed was, in my view, a man of great stature. Whether it was his patience that contributed to his skilled diplomacy or his years as a Foreign Minister that had fostered his infinite patience, my knowledge of him was insufficient to decide. But certainly patience was an admirable characteristic of

Mr Hameed: it made him a wise man also. His intellect was as sharp as a razor. When Mr Hameed sat down at the negotiating table, he came well armed with specific objectives and a well thought out strategy to achieve them. Indeed, he planned his argument as if playing a game of chess. As secretary to the LTTE delegation, I was provided with the opportunity of being an observer as Mr. Hameed took the dialogue on its intended course. He measured every word, in anticipation of an expected reply, to which he had a contingency answer. And so he would work his way to the conclusion he aimed at. Aware of Mr. Hameed's objectives, Bala prepared himself and the intellectual duel between the two during the talks became a fascinating struggle. Meeting his match, Mr. Hameed was well tuned to the cutting off point. As leader of the Sri Lankan team he had his finger on the pulse of the response and sentiments of his colleagues and he neatly avoided contradictions to prevent the souring of the tone of the talks and the spoiling of potential agreements. In another shrewd move, Mr. Premadasa kept the hard-line racists, Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake, out of the talks. Had we met them across the table it is doubtful that that the talks would have got past the first round, such was the antipathy between us.

But as most experienced diplomats well know, what is said and commented on at the 'public' negotiating table is not always the full story. The private negotiating time is often as important, if not more so, than the public. Mr. Hameed was an advocate of private diplomacy. For him, complicated, subtle and contested issues could be best explored in private confidences away from the glare of the public. In pursuit of this strategy he often met Bala for private discussions in the evenings in our hotel. And it was during these times Bala and Mr. Hameed established a healthy rapport and respect for each other. While it was true that Mr. Hameed wanted to broach issues such as the administration of the Northeast after the withdrawal of the Indian troops, Bala, equally, conveyed the LTTE's position on this and many other matters. The maturity of both Mr. Hameed and Bala meant that there was unlikely to be any ugly public debates or damaging political fallouts on major differences of opinion. But in general Mr. Hameed was popular and respected on a personal level by Bala and myself and by the LTTE in general. His supplying of deliciously prepared Muslim buriani and goat

meat curry to the LTTE delegation added that all-important human touch to an otherwise calculated political process. Furthermore, it was Mr. Pirapaharan's high regard for Mr. Hameed that brought the two together in dialogue and allowed the talks to continue for as long as they did. Sri Lankan politics is certainly bereft of people of calibre and stature since his unexpected and sad demise. We miss him.

As the peace talks between the government and the LTTE progressed, focusing primarily on the abuses and excesses of the Indian army in the Tamil homeland, Delhi became uneasy and annoyed. For Rajiv's administration it was a serious diplomatic embarrassment. Though severely constrained by Mr. Hameed's cautious censorship, the joint press releases received publicity locally and internationally, exposing war crimes by Indian troops. Delhi's displeasure was expressed sharply through a press interview given by the Indian High Commissioner in Colombo, Mr. Lakan Lal Mehrotra on 14th May 1989 defending the role and function of the IPKF and criticising the LTTE for propagating 'misinformation'. Since Mr. Mehrotra's interview received widespread publicity in the local media and was thoroughly misleading, the LTTE delegation took up the issue at the Ministerial meeting on 16th May and demanded that their response should be incorporated fully in the joint release without rigorous censorship.

The LTTE delegates rejected the central point advanced by the Indian envoy that the Indian army had restored peace and harmony to the Northeast. On the contrary, the Tigers argued, the Indian army had brought "intensified violence and terror and the war still continued unabated in the Tamil provinces". Rejecting Mehrotra's contention that the Indian army had used minimal force in their disarming operations against the LTTE, the Tiger representatives said that the Indian troops had used maximum force with heavy weapons including field artillery, heavy mortars, tanks and helicopter gunships. Describing the High Commissioner's statement that civilian casualties were minimal as a deliberate distortion of truth, the LTTE declared that they had already submitted concrete evidence confirming the deaths of more than five thousand Tamil civilians. Dismissing the envoy's claim that the Indian disarming project was a success and the LTTE had lost its fighting capacity and was marginalised in the jungle, the Tigers stated that their

guerrilla units were engaging the Indian army all over the Northeast and inflicting considerable casualties and causing demoralisation among the troops. The LTTE delegates also queried as to why the Indian army, which had been carrying out de-commissioning operations against the LTTE, was arming other Tamil groups and recruiting a voluntary force called the Tamil National Army. Such activities, the Tiger delegates argued, violated the very spirit and the cardinal obligations of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord.

The LTTE delegates also presented a detailed account of the extreme hardships experienced by the Tamil people as a consequence of various restrictions and proscriptions imposed by the Indian army on day to day economic activities which had severely disrupted agriculture, industry and fishing in the Northeast. At the end of the meeting, we struggled successfully with Mr. Hameed to include most of our viewpoints articulated in response to the Indian High Commissioner, in the joint press release.

Delhi's Critique of Talks

The joint press release, which was given wide publicity both locally and internationally, provoked Rajiv's government into issuing a critical note through its High Commission in Colombo. The Indian release said:

"The High Commission of India has noted with regret the Sri Lankan government communiqués conveying the view of one party to the talks over the role and function of the IPKF in Sri Lanka and casting unwarranted aspersions on it. The High Commission notes that these communiqués make no reference to the circumstances in which the IPKF came to this country, the mandate that has been given to it jointly by the Governments of India and Sri Lanka, the immense difficulties of its task and the enormous sacrifices it has been making in an attempt to preserve the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka. As a result, a misleading impression may be created in the minds of the people. It was our impression that the purpose of the current talks was not to provide a propaganda forum

but to address themselves to the objective of bringing all concerned into the democratic process by giving up violence and accepting a commitment to the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka. If unfounded charges are made, it can only be expected that there would be a response to set the record straight".¹

At the Ministerial meeting, resumed on the morning of 18th May, two new Ministers, Mr. U B Wijekoon, Minister of Public Administration, Provincial Council and Home Affairs, Mr. P Dayaratne, Minister of Lands, Irrigation and Mahaveli Development were inducted to the meeting. The LTTE delegates wanted to discuss the issues raised by the Indian government in its critique of the peace talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka government. Bala, as the LTTE's chief negotiator, argued that the mandate given to the Indian army was to restore peace, normalcy and harmony in the Tamil regions, but not to wage a war against the Tamil people. The induction of the Indian troops with a mandate for peace keeping had created conditions of war in the Northeast and also turbulence and rebellion in the South, Bala said. Mr. Hameed argued that the Indian troops were mandated not only to maintain peace but also to disarm all militant organisations including the LTTE. To which the Bala retorted that the time frame given to the Indian troops to disarm the militants according to the Accord, was precisely seventy two hours, but the Indians could not disarm the Tigers even after twenty months and therefore the Indian government had failed to fulfil its mandate. The Tiger delegates also pointed out that, according to a clause in the Accord, India and Sri Lanka were obliged to co-operate to ensure the physical safety and security of all the people in the Northeastern Province. The LTTE criticised the Sri Lankan government for its studied silence when it had become very apparent that thousands of civilians had perished and the safety and security of the Tamils were in grave danger. The Tigers also complained that the Indian army had been building up a formidable military machine called the Tamil National Army by forcibly recruiting, training and arming Tamil youth to protect and preserve the EPRLF's Provincial administration. This formation of a military apparatus would lead to a civil war and bloodbath in Tamil areas, the LTTE representatives warned.

Referring to the critique by the Indian High Commission the

LTTE delegation stated that the Indian authorities misunderstood their mission. The LTTE negotiators reiterated that they were in Colombo to seek an end to war and violence that had been devastating the Tamil homeland and causing untold suffering to the Tamil people. The purpose of their mission was to seek a negotiated political settlement that should fulfil the national aspirations of the Tamils, they said.

On 23rd May 1989, the discussions at the Ministerial meeting centred on the issue of Sinhala colonisation in Tamil areas, particularly in the Eastern Province. Presenting a lengthy paper with statistics and maps, the LTTE delegation maintained that since independence there had been continued colonisation in the Eastern Province and that these colonisation schemes were state sponsored. Planned colonisation was one of the main factors behind the ethnic conflict, they argued. This had not only changed the demographic patterns of the Tamil areas but also drastically affected the social, economic and political life of the Tamil-speaking people. Thousands of Tamils and Muslims had been driven away from their historical habitations under the ruthless policy of discriminatory colonisation, the LTTE delegation argued. The topic generated lengthy and heated discussion and finally it was agreed to refer the issue to the President.

On 27th May 1989, when Mr. Hameed met the LTTE delegation to respond to queries raised by the Tigers in previous meetings, he assured again us that the President was firmly committed to the removal of Indian troops from the island. Mr. Hameed also said that the President wanted to study details of specific colonisation schemes before taking action to stop them. Mr. Hameed also revealed that Mr. Premadasa favoured a declared cessation of hostilities between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan forces. The LTTE delegates said that they had to consult with Mr. Pirapaharan on the issue of cease-fire. An undeclared cease-fire was already in force since the beginning of the talks, they said. Mr. Hameed told the LTTE delegates that the President was very keen that the LTTE should enter the political mainstream once the IPKF left the island. He further said that Mr. Premadasa was prepared to dissolve the Northeastern Provincial Council if the LTTE pledged to stand for the elections. The LTTE delegates said that they would have to consult the leadership in Vanni before making any commitments on the

issues raised by Mr. Hameed.

The last session of the first round of talks was held on 28th May 1989. It was a winding up meeting to assess the progress of the talks. Both parties agreed that the sessions held so far had opened the doors for greater understanding and appreciation of the issues involved and had laid a firm basis for future negotiations. The two delegations consented that the fundamental problem was ethnic in character and had to be resolved through direct negotiations in a spirit of tolerance and understanding.

Meeting Pirapaharan in the Jungle

On 30th May 1989, Bala and myself, Yogi, Murthy, Jude and our bodyguards were taken to Vanni by Sri Lankan Airforce helicopter to consult with Mr. Pirapaharan. There was on our part also, an aspiration to meet Mr. Pirapaharan and our cadres again to renew old friendships and to share notes on the experiences we had all gone through since the outbreak of the Indo-LTTE war in 1987.

The camp we were heading for was the 'one four' base, Mr. Pirapaharan's headquarters. The Indians had launched a series of operations against the camps in this area. After failing to destroy the LTTE during 'Operation Pawan' in the Jaffna Peninsula, the Indian army turned towards the LTTE bases in the Vanni jungles transforming the area into a sprawling theatre of brutal and bloody war. Massive military operations were carried out with the strategic objective of flushing out and destroying the LTTE guerrillas and their leadership. Thousands and thousands of fresh Indian troops were mobilised to carry out these operations. Special commando units with counter-insurgency expertise were inducted. Armoured vehicles and helicopter gunships were utilised for troop movements and offensive assaults. Tens of thousands of Indian troops spread across the area from as far as Mullaitivu on the Eastern coast to Ottusuddan in Vanni, extending Northeast towards Killinochchi. Widespread and intensive cordon and search operations took place. A large number of civilians were killed in these operations but the main targets - the LTTE - remained protected and active in the deep jungles.

Having failed to dislodge the LTTE in these initial attacks, the

Indian military high command planned further operations. From June 1988, the Indian army launched a series of operations code-named 'Checkmate'. In those operations, the Indian army singled out the LTTE bases in Alampil jungles. A massive aerial and artillery bombardment pounded the area. Thousands of tons of powerful bombs and artillery shells rained down, day and night, on LTTE positions. Yet this intensive campaign proved to be a failure and the LTTE casualties remained surprisingly minimal. In the ground battles, the special commando units of Indian troops, though experienced in jungle warfare, suffered humiliating defeats against LTTE guerrillas. Sri Lankan troops also suffered casualties in the Manal Aru area when, on the 15th April a mixed unit of men and women guerrillas attacked their patrol, killing twenty one soldiers on the spot.

Since Mr. Pirapaharan's well-fortified camps were deep in the jungle it was decided that our helicopter landing zone should be in the Alampil jungles in Mullaitivu, and not at Nederkerni as on the previous occasion. This way, the trekking distance to Mr. Pirapaharan's base camp was considerably reduced. At the landing zone, dozens of cadres were deployed, waiting for our arrival. We were still at war with India and there was absolutely no reason to believe that they would not embark on a military campaign in the area. In view of the anti-Indian stance coming out of the Colombo talks, we were concerned that the IPKF would attempt to exact revenge during our landing in Alampil. Hence the heavy presence of our cadres. Soon after touching down, Sothia - from our old days in Chennai - appeared from the jungle leading a group of armed female cadres as part of the escort detail. Her bearing indicated tremendous growth in confidence. Furthermore, she was by now a battle-hardened cadre having gained experience in combat against both the Sri Lankan and Indian armies. But most of all, she was extremely popular amongst the women fighters and had become a consensual choice as their leader. She had been promoted to the rank of leader of the women fighters. Sothia later died of cardiac arrest after contracting a fatal viral infection, which attacked the heart while she was in the Alampil jungle during the period of occupation by the Indian army. Sothia's death deprived the women fighters of a charismatic personality and talented leader. Sothia's second in command was Sugi, her friend from the Chennai

days when they joined the LTTE together. She became the second leader of the LTTE women fighters.

As we were to soon discover, our flight journey from Colombo to Alampil was far shorter than the walk to Mr. Pirapaharan's jungle camp. We trudged for hours, along camouflaged jungle tracks, across streams and through thick jungle foliage. Bala, affected by his diabetes, was unable to walk the distance and a chair suspended between two poles was arranged for him to sit in while a team of cadres took their turn at carrying it on their shoulders. The cadre in charge of the security detail escorting us to Mr. Pirapaharan's camp on this occasion was the veteran Shankar. Shankar's relationship with the movement and Mr. Pirapaharan dates back to the old days when Mr. Pirapaharan had a small group of guerrillas training in the Vanni jungles. He subsequently spent some time in Canada where he studied aeronautical engineering. Like many Tamils, the 1983 anti-Tamil riots outraged him and he travelled to Chennai to re-join Mr. Pirapaharan and the armed struggle. Mr. Shankar has a long history of battle experience and remains one of Mr. Pirapaharan's most trusted and loyal cadres. In casual conversation en route to Mr. Pirapaharan's base, Shankar advised me not to move off the track we were walking on, and dismissively mentioned that during their frequent incursions into the area, the Indians had liberally planted anti-personnel mines in the area. It would have been easy to freeze in fear on learning of this information, but no purpose would have been served. All our cadres walked on without concern for the danger they were in, so why should I be worried? The risks were the same for everyone, I thought. In such circumstances one mentally prepares and accepts any eventuality, and then goes beyond it. Being afraid would not have helped to avoid the mines; it would have only turned an otherwise pleasant journey into a stressful one. The Indian army had also left their mark in other ways also. Large sections of jungle with broken trees and deep craters - some filled with water - were the legacy of heavy aerial bombardment and relentless artillery shelling of the area.

Pushing on deeper into the jungle, we encountered patrols of cadres on long distance treks to pick up supplies, making us realise that we were deep into LTTE territory. The occasional sighting of armed and camouflaged sentries further indicated that we must have been nearing LTTE bases. Well-fortified sentry points

appeared here and there. We walked on further and further, winding our way into the jungle. Then a glimpse of hut-like shapes appeared through the foliage. Before long we found ourselves nearing a heavily camouflaged cottage. Mr. Pirapaharan had obviously been kept informed of our approach and quickly appeared on the scene after we arrived at the camp. Dressed in jungle greens, but looking none the worse for his year or more of living in the jungle, he greeted us warmly. More like an extended village than a guerrilla camp the surroundings were neat indicating that through their trials and tribulations, Mr. Pirapaharan had sustained the high morale of his cadres. But the neatness of the camp in no way reflected the phenomenal struggle by our cadres and the difficulties they had triumphed over to create it. This expansive complex had been cleared of virgin jungle - leaving only the ancient massive trees for cover - in order to make it habitable. Teams of cadres had worked together, pulling out rocks and digging out deep holes in the ground in search of water. On several occasions, sixty to seventy foot deep wells were laboriously dug only to discover there was no water at that site. The process would then be repeated in a different place until they struck a reliable water supply. In the early days of the camp, regular food supplies had not been established and the cadres survived on one daily meal of rice and dahl, without salt. To overcome this difficulty, it was necessary for the cadres to trek long distances through the mine-infested jungle to open and establish new routes for access to rations. The procurement of rations took anything up to a day's journey, with cadres often having to avoid interception by Indian jungle patrols. Sacks of rice, flour, sugar and other supplies were carried on shoulders on the long journey back to base. The women cadres also took their turns on these dangerous missions. With the jungle tamed and camp made habitable, life had obviously settled into order and routine when we arrived there. The presence of large numbers of bunkers carved out in the jungle floor highlighted the threat from shelling and bombing. Remarkably, casualties from the relentless shelling of Mr. Pirapaharan's camp were minimal. Only two women cadres had died in that base. By drilling into his cadres the discipline of taking and remaining under cover until the artillery barrages halted - even if it meant spending hours in the bunkers without food and water - Mr. Pirapaharan was successful in reducing his casualties. The nature and structure of

our underground accommodation also impressed on us the perils the cadres had been subjected to by the relentless barrages of artillery shelling and aerial bombardment. As a precautionary measure in the event of the Indians shelling the area during our stay in the jungle, Mr. Pirapaharan asked us to stay in a deep underground shelter. We had read about the amazing feat by thousands of Vietnamese guerrillas who dug out kilometres of tunnels and bunkers to facilitate the security and mobility of the Viet Cong during the war of liberation against America. Now we were to see for ourselves an example of such remarkable human endeavour. As we descended into the depths of the earth via precisely cut out steps, we could only marvel at the ingenuity, patience and the collective spirit of the cadres who had undertaken and completed this Herculean task. Our cadres led us down the steps into a room about thirty to forty feet underground. To our utter amazement we could see that this subterranean haven of tunnels and rooms had been chiselled out of the underground rocks in this area of the jungle. Our room had been carved out high enough to stand up in and big enough to move around comfortably. Leading off the room through the narrow tunnel, we came to another smaller room; it was a purpose built toilet. Mr. Pirapaharan's room was even deeper underground than ours. Low lying roofs constructed over the bunkers, and banks to divert water, prevented the monsoon rains from pouring in and flooding the bunkers. Stronger than concrete, this underground granite structure stood up to the heavy downpours of monsoon rains when the entire jungle turned into a muddy quagmire. There was only one problem with this ingenious set up, a difficulty, which had it been at all possible our cadres would certainly have overcome. But on this matter they had no control. Since we were deep into the earth where the sun's heat has no access, the room was absolutely freezing, particularly at night. My bones ached from the cold and I wondered how it could be endured over a sustained period of time. But obviously it had been, and without any ill effects.

Several kitchens had been set up with large eating areas. Some cadres worked at repairing and maintaining the weaponry in an armoury. A small dispensary and hospital had been built. A network of paths connected the various sections of the camp. There was playing area for team games. More poignant was the small, neatly

maintained cemetery where some of the cadres killed in battle, rested peacefully.

The female cadres were active too, having established a huge camp just a few minutes walk from the main base. The usual kitchens, medics centre, tailoring shop, armoury etc were all functioning efficiently. Sections of their camp had been designated for military training and a complete obstacle course had been constructed for this purpose. Contrary to the expectation of many analysts, recruitment to the LTTE had not declined. In fact it was quite the opposite. Many families preferred their sons and daughters to join the LTTE believing that they had a greater chance of survival in the LTTE camps than remaining in the villages exposed to the IPKF's brutality and the forced recruitment campaign of the EPRLF. New cadres were in the process of undergoing training, while others were waiting to begin in the next batch. In a different section of the jungle, some distance away, an advanced training course for senior women cadres was underway. Jeyanthi was in charge of this commando course and she went on to succeed Sugi as the women's military wing leader after the LTTE's return to Jaffna. Amongst this batch of senior women cadres was Vidusa, the present day leader of the LTTE women fighters. Most of these courageous young women went on to fight many heroic battles that became inspiring and legendary stories of their own. Sadly, of this initial advanced commando training course for women only a few are alive now.

We were also happy to see Kittu at the camp. Kittu was arrested and held in custody in Chennai in a round up of LTTE cadres in Tamil Nadu in 1988, just a few days after our escape from India. He was subsequently transferred back to Jaffna, and as a concession to his physical handicap, the IPKF high command freed him from custody. He immediately found his way back to Mr. Pirapaharan and the LTTE cadres in the jungles of Mullaitivu. Kittu was a great morale booster and inspired the cadres when he was in the jungle with Mr. Pirapaharan during this time. Always interested in learning and a great advocate of developing oneself, Kittu spent time giving classes to the cadres and generally showing an interest in their activities. A keen photographer, he took many pictures including those of Mr. Pirapaharan and us during our stay there.

Pottu Amman was also in Alampil. At that time he was

functioning as a field commander in the Jaffna Peninsula. He had been called for consultation with Mr. Pirapaharan. Fully recovered from his injuries, he was actively waging a successful urban guerrilla campaign against the IPKF in Jaffna. Kapil Amman, another senior LTTE cadre with a long history of battles to his credit, and our enduring and loyal friend from as far back as the Chennai days, trekked from Trincomalee jungles to visit us in Mullaitivu.

While I was busy spending time with the women cadres, Bala held deliberations with Mr. Pirapaharan and other leaders. According to Bala, Mr. Pirapaharan was very keen to learn about Mr. Premadasa - his ideas, his strategy and most importantly his views about the Indian military occupation and the Tamil armed resistance. Bala gave him a comprehensive briefing of what had transpired between Mr. Premadasa and the LTTE delegation. From Colombo, Bala had been sending brief coded messages to Mr. Pirapaharan, but now he could provide a thorough assessment of personalities, their mode of thinking, their expectations and their apprehensions. He was able to convince the LTTE leader that Mr. Premadasa was fiercely determined to secure the withdrawal of the Indian troops to consolidate his personal power in Colombo, for which he needed the solid backing of the LTTE. He also told Mr. Pirapaharan that the President was willing to dissolve the EPRLF's Provincial administration if the LTTE entered the Sri Lankan political mainstream and faced elections. Finally the LTTE leadership was told that Mr. Premadasa wanted a cease-fire between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan forces so that he could pressurize India to terminate armed hostilities against the Tigers. Mr. Pirapaharan, Bala said, was favorably disposed to the idea of a cease-fire and an interim political settlement with Mr. Premadasa's government if Colombo was earnest and sincere. On the whole, Bala was given the green light by the LTTE leadership to advance the talks to secure the Indian troops withdrawal and to enter into a political accommodation with Premadasa's administration.

Before we left for Colombo for the second round of talks, Mr. Pirapaharan confided to us that the Indian army had intensified offensive operations against the LTTE with the support of the Tamil National Army, which had become a serious irritant. Annoyed and humiliated by the ongoing peace talks, Rajiv's administration was determined to wipe out the LTTE leadership and their forces. Faced

with a shortage of arms and ammunition, Mr. Pirapaharan requested Bala to seek assistance from Premadasa and sustain the LTTE's armed resistance campaign against intense Indian military onslaughts. There was genuine danger. We felt the chilling atmosphere in the jungle hideouts when the areas were subjected to systematic aerial and artillery bombardment. Confronted by three forces - the Indian, Sri Lankan and the Tamil National Army - the LTTE guerrillas faced the most difficult time in the history to date of their armed struggle. The Sri Lankan military threat could be overcome by entering into a cease-fire agreement with Premadasa. Nevertheless, the Indian troops and the Tamil National Army posed a formidable threat. The LTTE had a fighting force of courageous, highly disciplined, guerrilla fighters. But to engage a formidable conventional military they needed arms and ammunition. At least they had to hold on until the Indians were withdrawn from the Tamil homeland. Apart from the role as the LTTE's chief negotiator, Bala was now given an extremely sensitive task; that of procuring weapons from the movement's hitherto historical enemy.

Acrimony between Delhi and Colombo

While we were enjoying a respite in the Alampil jungles of Mullaitivu with the guerrilla leaders and cadres, new developments took place in Colombo that created severe strains in the relations between Rajiv's administration and Premadasa's regime. The Sri Lankan President, addressing an audience at a Buddhist ceremony in the outskirts of Colombo, announced that he would demand from the Indian Prime Minister, that Indian troops should be withdrawn from Sri Lanka by the end of July 1989. Mr. Premadasa said that he was planning to host the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Heads of States meeting in November that year but he could not do so when a foreign army was occupying Sri Lankan territory. The following day, on 2nd June Mr. Premadasa sent a letter to Mr. Rajiv Gandhi urging him to withdraw the IPKF by July 31st. The withdrawal of the IPKF would enable Sri Lanka to host the SAARC summit in November that year in a climate of tranquillity, Mr. Premadasa wrote. Stating that the presence of the IPKF had become a 'deeply divisive and resentful issue' he argued

that the complete withdrawal of the troops would help to stabilise the situation. Annoyed by Premadasa's demand to pull the troops out within two months, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi did not respond immediately. But the officials of the South Block in Delhi issued statements indicating logistic difficulties in withdrawing several thousand Indian troops within a limited time span as demanded by Premadasa. On 14th June, addressing a public rally in Bangalore, the Indian Prime Minister, referring to Premadasa's demand, said that the IPKF would not be withdrawn until substantial powers were devolved to the EPRLF's Provincial administration and the safety and security of the Tamils were guaranteed. He also suggested further inter-governmental consultation on the issue of troop withdrawal. It was this background of diplomatic acrimony between Delhi and Colombo we arrived in the Sri Lanka capital on the evening of 14th June and were taken to our former place of accommodation - the Colombo Hilton. For the second round of talks we expanded our delegation to include Mr. Lawrence Thilagar, Mr. S. Karikalan, Mr. Sammun Hassan and Mr. Abubakar Ibrahim.

On the morning of 15th June, Mr. Premadasa invited us to his residence 'Suchitra' for a private discussion, which lasted for nearly one and a half hours. He appeared to be disturbed over the statement made by Rajiv Gandhi on the previous day in Bangalore stipulating conditions for the withdrawal of the IPKF. Premadasa argued that India could not lay down such conditions. His logic was that the former President Jayawardene had invited the Indian troops and the present President wanted them to leave and that the Indian government had no choice but to withdraw the troops. He said that Mr. Gandhi had not yet replied to his official communication and instead had made a public statement stipulating unacceptable conditions that had generated fear and confusion among the people that the Indian army might remain forever in the island. Mr. Premadasa suggested that the LTTE should declare a cessation of hostilities with the Sri Lankan armed forces so that he could urge India to terminate all hostile armed operations against the Tigers and withdraw the troops since their main obligation to establish peace under the Accord had been secured.

The first two sessions of the second round of peace talks that took place on the 16th and 19th of June between the LTTE

representatives and the Sri Lankan Ministerial delegation focussed primarily on the mounting diplomatic confrontation between Sri Lanka and India over the question of troop withdrawal and the issue of forced recruitment of Tamil youth, particularly students in the Northeast, for the Tamil National Army under the name of Civilian Volunteer Force (CVF). Two new Sri Lankan Ministers, Mr. Festas Perera, Minister of Power and Energy and Mr. Monsoor, Minister of Trade and Shipping were inducted for these talks.

During the first session, Mr. Hameed, as the head of the Sri Lankan delegation, gave a detailed exposition of the developing diplomatic estrangement between India and Sri Lanka. In Mr. Hameed's analysis, Mr. Premadasa's insistence on the withdrawal of the IPKF was predicated on his firm conviction that the presence of the Indian army on the Sri Lankan soil was the causative factor for the war in the Northeast and the insurrection in the South. As the Accord had become defunct and the political situation in Sri Lanka had totally reversed in which the parties in conflict (LTTE and Sri Lanka) were engaged in peace negotiations to find a political solution, the IPKF had no role to play, Mr. Hameed explained. Since Mr. Premadasa wanted to host the SAARC summit in November, he demanded the quick withdrawal of the IPKF by the end of July. The demand had created serious problems for India, Mr. Hameed said. He also explained that it would be logistically impossible to re-deploy thousands of troops and the war materials within two months. India was stipulating pre-conditions to gain time to avoid a humiliating troop withdrawal that would seriously undermine Rajiv's election chances in December, Mr. Hameed further said.

Mr. Hameed enquired from the LTTE delegates their perception of the current situation. While accepting Mr. Hameed's exposition of the situation, the LTTE delegates argued that Rajiv's administration was also concerned about the future of EPRLF's Provincial regime. The Northeast Provincial Administration was the only remnant of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and that it would collapse like a pack of cards when the IPKF left the island, the Tigers said. Rajiv wanted to keep the IPKF until a strong paramilitary force was formed to protect the EPRLF's fragile administration, LTTE delegates argued.

The session of 19th June was primarily devoted to the issues of

the EPRLF's paramilitary force and the question of cease-fire between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan security forces. The LTTE delegates complained that the Indian military authorities in collusion with the EPRLF's Provincial administration were involved in a programme of mass conscription of Tamil youth for the Civilian Volunteer Force. During the preceding week 4,500 young men, mostly school going teenage boys, had been rounded up by the EPRLF's armed men and taken by force to various Indian army camps in Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai in the Eastern Province. This had become a problem in Tamil areas and thousands of anxious parents had been converging on Indian army camps pleading for the release of their children. The LTTE delegation enquired as to the Sri Lankan government's position on this issue. The Sri Lankan Ministerial delegation agreed that under the terms of the Accord there were no provisions for the creation of an armed force for the Provincial administration of the Northeast. Mr. Hameed assured us that the President would take up the issue with the Indian Prime Minister.

Discussing the issue of declaring a truce between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE, the Government delegation urged the LTTE to declare a cessation of hostilities unilaterally which would be reciprocated by Sri Lanka at a later date. The LTTE delegation argued that there was already an informal, undeclared cease-fire in force between the Tigers and Sri Lankan forces since the commencement of talks. It would be proper for both the parties to declare a bi-lateral cease-fire to impress upon the international community that the protagonists of the conflict were observing peace and negotiating for a political settlement. In such an evidently congenial atmosphere there was no need for an external power to maintain a peacekeeping army, the Tigers felt. The Ministers said that they would consult the President on the issue.

On 20th June, Mr. Gandhi responded to the letter written by Mr. Premadasa on 2nd of June. Though couched in diplomatic jargon Mr. Gandhi's letter praised the great achievements of the IPKF in establishing peace and normalcy in Tamil areas at the cost of heavy losses. Reminding Mr. Premadasa that Sri Lanka should be mindful of its responsibilities and obligations under the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, Mr. Gandhi suggested discussions to draw up a mutually agreed schedule for the withdrawal of the IPKF and for

the full implementation of the Accord. To the annoyance of Mr. Premadasa, the Indian Prime Minister insisted that the implementation of the Accord and the withdrawal of the Indian troops should be 'parallel exercises'.

It became very clear from Mr. Gandhi's strongly worded letter that Indian troops would not be withdrawn by the end of July as demanded by Mr. Premadasa. India wanted to secure and stabilise the Provincial regime of Varatharaja Perumal before withdrawing its forces. But the methods adopted by the Indian military administration to do this made the Tamil people resentful. To escape forced conscription, the student population in several areas stayed at home. A substantial section that were arrested and forcefully trained, deserted their posts and joined the LTTE. Knowing very well that the forced recruitment of unwilling, disgruntled Tamil youth would not be a match for the battle-hardened Tiger guerrillas fiercely committed to a cause, the Indian army and the EPRLF nevertheless continued their conscription. Though Gandhi demanded more devolutionary powers for the Perumal administration, the Sri Lankan government systematically diluted all the administrative powers and even blocked the funds reducing the North East Provincial Council to a permanent state of bankruptcy.

Confrontationist Course

Angered by the hostile response from Mr. Gandhi, Mr. Premadasa sent a message to the LTTE delegation through Mr. Hameed that the Tigers should formally declare a truce with the Sri Lankan forces. Accordingly, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government jointly declared a bi-lateral cessation of hostilities. It was made public through a joint press release on 28th June.

Pleased with this development, Mr. Premadasa sent a brief message to Mr. Gandhi on the 29th informing him that peace had been established between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan forces and the negotiating process was continuing, to settle political issues. Mr. Premadasa also urged the Indian Prime Minister to instruct the IPKF to terminate all offensive actions against the LTTE which might 'tend to prejudice' the ongoing political negotiations.

On the following day (30th June) Mr. Premadasa received a

brief reply from Mr. Rajiv Gandhi. Written in a hostile, sarcastic tone, the letter played down the significance of the LTTE- Sri Lanka truce and demanded the surrender of arms from the LTTE. To quote the relevant paragraphs of the letter:

“The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement provides for a cessation of hostilities between the Tamil militant groups and the Sri Lankan forces and also for the Sri Lankan forces to stay in barracks in the North-east province. Both these were achieved on 30th July 1987. Thus, there has already been an effective cessation of hostilities between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE. I am glad that the LTTE has now formally conceded this reality.

We hope that the formal agreement of the LTTE to cease hostilities clearly implies their commitment to the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka and to renounce violence and to respect democratic processes. We trust that, consequent to giving up violence, LTTE will resume surrender of arms through the Sri Lankan government - a process that had started on 5th August 1987 and is not yet complete. Unless the LTTE have undertaken to handover their arms and to renounce violence not only towards the Sri Lankan Government but towards the other citizens of the Northeastern Province, their announcement of cessation of hostilities would be meaningless”.²

Rajiv’s letter clearly implied that Delhi did not want to enter into a cessation of hostilities with the LTTE. India wanted all obligations of the Accord to be fulfilled before considering that. Those obligations were included in a set of demands totally unacceptable to the Tigers. They were (a) surrender of arms, (b) giving up their struggle for self-determination and accepting the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka, (c) renouncing violence against other citizens, (meaning the EPRLF paramilitaries). In the letter, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi had also requested clarifications from the Sri Lankan President on the issues he raised.

The Colombo peace talks on 2nd July between the Sri Lanka government delegation and the LTTE concentrated on the controversial letter written by the Indian leader. Responding to the queries

raised and the demands stipulated by Rajiv, the LTTE delegates expressed regret that India had ignored and trivalised the bi-lateral cessation of hostilities declared by Sri Lanka and the LTTE. Mr. Gandhi's claim that the Accord had ensured an effective cessation of hostilities between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE guerrillas was factually wrong and misleading, the Tigers argued. The truce envisaged in the Accord had not been effectively implemented. There had been several clashes between the Sri Lankan troops and the LTTE fighters - there were considerable casualties on the Sri Lankan side. The Indian armed forces had miserably failed to contain such violence though they undertook the responsibility of supervising peace between the parties in conflict.

Insofar as a cease-fire between the IPKF and the LTTE was concerned, Mr. Gandhi had stipulated two conditions, the Tiger delegates argued. One was that the LTTE should resume surrendering arms and the second was that it should renounce violence against all other citizens of the Northeast. The disarming task of the IPKF was a total failure. The very de-commissioning process transformed into a bloody war; into a protracted war and the IPKF turned into a killing machine and thousands of innocent Tamils perished in the process. Since the peace talks had been initiated by the Sri Lankan President, a dramatically new situation had arisen and India should face that objective reality. The negotiations between the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE were taking place unconditionally without the obligatory constraints of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The question of possession or de-possession of arms was now an issue between Sri Lanka and the LTTE and had to be resolved through the negotiations between the parties in conflict. Therefore, the LTTE delegates suggested that the Sri Lanka Government should impress upon India that the question of the responsibility of resolving the issue of arms lay with the Government of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the Tiger delegates urged the Government to register strong protests with Delhi over the building up of a powerful military machine in the name of Tamil National Army. Under the cover of a disarming process the IPKF was actively involved in a massive militarisation programme in the Northeast, the Tigers charged. With regard to the second demand, the LTTE was prepared to extend the cease-fire to 'all citizens of the Northeast if India gave a guarantee that the IPKF and its

quisling armed groups cease violence against the Tigers', the LTTE delegates said. The Tigers were also prepared to enter to the democratic political process. But it was only possible if the Indian armed forces, occupying the Tamil homeland, were totally withdrawn, the Tigers declared. The government delegation assured the LTTE that President Premadasa would take up the issues raised by the LTTE with the Indian Prime Minister.

In his letter 4th July, Mr. Premadasa categorically told Mr. Rajiv Gandhi that it was the sole responsibility of the Sri Lanka government to provide safety and security for all citizens within Sri Lanka and that the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord did not give any mandate to India for protective powers over Sri Lankan citizens. Arguing that India had failed to disarm the LTTE for the last two years, Mr. Premadasa pointed out that the Tigers were involved in political negotiations with Sri Lanka and would give up their weapons once the Indian armed forces were withdrawn. Any claim of mandatory role for the government of India or its armed forces within Sri Lanka under the Accord, Premadasa warned, would constitute a 'serious interference in the internal affairs of a friendly sovereign country'.³

The hostile tone and content of the letter indicated that Mr. Premadasa had taken a confrontationist course with Rajiv's administration in seeking the withdrawal of the Indian armed forces from Sri Lanka. Mr. Gandhi also adopted an equally antagonistic position. Responding to the Sri Lankan leader, Gandhi, in his letter of 11th July, reminded Mr. Premadasa that there was a signed agreement between the two countries and India had obligations under the Accord as a guarantor to ensure the safety and security of the people of the North-east. He also criticised Sri Lanka for not implementing the devolution to the Northeast council as promised. Insofar as the withdrawal of the Indian forces was concerned, Mr. Gandhi reiterated that the withdrawal schedule should be worked out through joint discussions along with 'a simultaneous schedule for the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord'.⁴ In the concluding paragraph of the letter, Mr. Gandhi took a swipe at Mr. Premadasa for making public all correspondence between them in violation of the standard diplomatic practice of 'maintaining confidentiality of official correspondence between Heads of State'.⁵

Rajiv's obstinacy and his uncompromising attitude made

Premadasa furious. He realised that writing letters to the Indian Prime Minister and urging him to withdraw the Indian forces was of no avail. In desperation Mr. Premadasa adopted another strategy. Assuming the role of the supreme commander of all the forces in the island, including the IPKF, Mr. Premadasa issued an ultimatum to the officer commanding the IPKF Lt. Gen. Kalkat, demanding that the Indian forces should be withdrawn by the end of July or ordered to barracks. This ultimatum in the form of a legal document was delivered to Lt. Gen. Kalkat on 23rd July at Trincomalee. In response, Gen. Kalkat had sent a warning to Premadasa that the IPKF would be forced to take offensive action if Sri Lankan forces came out of their barracks. Thus Mr. Premadasa's brinkmanship strategy did not work.

Request for Armed Assistance

Following Premadasa's ultimatum, the Indian armed forces intensified their offensive operations against the Tiger guerrillas in the Northern Mullaitivu jungles. In another move, the EPRLF leader Varatharaja Peramul announced that the Tamil National Army would commence operations against the LTTE along with the IPKF. He also declared that he would declare a separate state of 'Eelam' if Premadasa's administration failed to implement the obligations of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. It was these critical developments, which formed the backdrop to Bala requesting Mr. Hameed for an urgent meeting in his hotel room to discuss the possibility of armed assistance from the government for the LTTE to face the military threat posed by the Indian forces and the Tamil National Army. Mr. Hameed came to our room around 9p.m on that day and relaxed in the lounge chair as usual, puffing his long Cuban cigar, listening patiently to what Bala had to say. It was a delicate subject and dangerously controversial too. Using both Tamil and English Bala explained the reality and the gravity of the ground situation, particularly in the Mullaitivu theatre of war. The LTTE was running out of ammunition and the IPKF had inducted heavy concentrations of combat troops along with contingents of Tamil paramilitaries in the jungles of Mullaitivu, Bala told Mr. Hameed. Angered by Mr. Premadasa's aggressive diplomacy the Indian army and the

Tamil mercenaries were determined to destroy the Tamil Tiger guerrillas and their leadership. The exposing of atrocities by the IPKF during the Colombo talks and the demand for their withdrawal by the Sri Lankan President had seriously embarrassed Delhi and their fury was now turned against the LTTE. Was it possible for Mr. Premadasa, asked Bala, to provide arms and ammunition to the LTTE to defend themselves against the current joint assault by the IPKF and the Tamil National Army?

Mr. Hameed reflected deeply and said that it was a serious and delicate matter. Even if Premadasa decided to help the LTTE, the Sri Lankan military establishment might oppose it, Mr. Hameed cautiously observed. Mr. Premadasa's commitment to securing the withdrawal of the IPKF would never be realised if the LTTE, the only patriotic force that was resisting external occupation, were decimated, Bala pointed out. Finally, after a lengthy discussion Mr. Hameed agreed to convey our request to the President. The following night, Mr. Hameed came along with General Attygalle, the Defense Secretary, to our hotel. They told Bala that the President was willing to help. Since the matter was very sensitive and controversial it had to be handled with extreme confidentiality. The army would be outraged. But it could be done covertly, the General said. Attygalle wanted a list of requirements. Bala and Yogi contacted Mr. Pirapaharan through our communication channel and produced a list of weapons. Within a week, a substantial quantity of arms and ammunition was delivered to the Tigers through a bordering Sri Lankan army camp in Manal Aru (Welioya) sector in the Mullaitivu district.

As the D-Day (end of July 1989) for the withdrawal of the IPKF as demanded by Mr. Premadasa approached, there was a realisation in Colombo that the evacuation of the Indian forces could only be secured by mutual deliberations as Delhi wanted, rather than by threats and ultimatums. Premadasa swallowed his pride and yielded to the notion of negotiations with Rajiv's administration. Subsequently, a powerful Sri Lankan delegation consisting of Mr. Ranjan Wijeratne, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. A C S Hameed, Minister of Higher Education, Mr. Bernard Tilakaratna, Foreign Secretary, Dr. Stanley Kalpage, Sri Lankan High Commissioner in India, Mr. Bradman Weerakoon, Presidential Advisor on International Affairs, Mr. Sunil De Silva, Attorney

General, Mr. W T Jayasinghe, Secretary to the Cabinet and Mr. Felix Dias Abeysinghe, Secretary to the Committee for Peace, was dispatched to Delhi on 29th July. The Sri Lankan delegation had several meetings with the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. P V Narasimha Rao, the Minister of External Affairs and Mr. K C Pant, Minister of Defence. The discussion concluded on August 4th. The Indian and Sri Lankan delegations discussed four main issues. Firstly, the preparations of a schedule for the withdrawal of the IPKF from Sri Lanka. Secondly, the cessation of military operations against the LTTE. Thirdly, a review of the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement, and fourthly, the safety and security of all citizens of the Northeastern Province.

After the successful deliberations in Delhi the Government of India agreed to withdraw the IPKF stage by stage in accordance with a schedule. India assured the Sri Lankans that every effort would be made to accelerate the de-induction process of the IPKF to be fully completed by 31st December - which was still after the SAARC meeting. Delhi also agreed to suspend offensive military operations by the IPKF from 20th September. The Sri Lankan side promised that steps would be taken for the expeditious implementation of the devolution process facilitating effective functioning of the North Eastern Provincial Council. Both the parties decided to set up a 'Security Co-ordination Group' comprising of the Sri Lankan Minister for Defence, the Sri Lankan Defence Secretary, and the Commander of the IPKF and the Chief Minister of the North Eastern Provincial Council. This group would be in-charge of the law and order in the Northeast ensuring the safety and security of all citizens in the province.

Mr. Premadasa was pleased with the agreement between Delhi and Colombo. During a private meeting at his residence, the President told us that he emerged triumphant in the diplomatic tug of war with Rajiv Gandhi and that the fate of the IPKF was sealed. Though the Sri Lankans had pledged to enhance EPRLF's Provincial administration with more devolutionary power, Mr. Premadasa had his own scheme of things. The LTTE team was also pleased since their political strategy of securing the withdrawal of the IPKF from the Tamil homeland had now become a reality.

Having secured an agreement with the Government of India ensuring the phased withdrawal of the Indian forces within a

schedule, Mr. Premadasa was now confronted with the critical dilemma of how to fill the political space once the IPKF left the Tamil homeland. Though he pledged to Gandhi that Perumal's Provincial administration would be reinforced and consolidated with adequate devolutionary powers and a police system, Premadasa was well aware that the EPRLF's regime would vanish into thin air when the Tigers marched out of their jungle hide-outs into the urban centres to fill the vacuum left by the Indians. Though he admired LTTE's courage, determination and devotion to a cause, he was fiercely opposed to the Tamil demand for a homeland and self-determination. As the withdrawal of the Indian troops commenced, Mr. Premadasa's ideas and schemes became very transparent. In private sessions Mr. Premadasa emphasized that a permanent solution to the ethnic conflict could only be found within the unitary constitution of Sri Lanka. Since the Indians started leaving the island the time had come for the LTTE to take practical measures to enter into the political mainstream, he said. With the overwhelming support of the Tamil people, the LTTE could sweep to power in the Northeast through elections. He advised the LTTE delegates to form a political party and register it with the Elections Commission.

LTTE's Political Party

Mr. Hameed also told Bala during his private sessions, that Mr. Premadasa had become suspicious of the LTTE's ultimate intentions. Some Ministers had cautioned the President that the LTTE would not seek a solution within the constitutional structure, but was committed to the creation of an independent Tamil state, Mr. Hameed said. Mr. Hameed advised us that it would enhance the image of the LTTE, both locally and internationally, if the Tigers stood for the Northeastern Provincial Council elections and won. Unless the LTTE leadership agreed to this scheme it would be extremely difficult for the President to dissolve Perumal's administration and pave the way for the transfer of power to the Tigers. Bala told Mr. Hameed that the LTTE leadership was favourably disposed to the idea of forming a political party. The Tigers were also willing to participate in the Provincial elections to prove to the



Velupillai Pirapaharan as a young guerrilla fighter.



LTTT's training camp in Kalathur, Salem, Tamil Nadu during 1984-85.



A dialogue with Chandrika Kumaratunga and her husband, Vijaya Kumaratunga in early 1986,
at the LTTE political headquarters in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.
Left to right, Ossie Abeygunasekara, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Lawrence Thilagar, B. Nadesan and myself.



A meeting with the former Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, 28 July 1987 at his residence in New Delhi.
Left to right: Mr Gandhi, Mr Pandurutti Ramachandran, myself and Mr Pirapatharan.



LTTE's negotiating team with the former Sri Lankan President, R Premadasa in 1989. Left to right, Thilagar, Adele Balasingham, myself, Mr Premadasa, Yogaratnam Yogi, Paramamoorthi, Lawrence and Sajith Premadasa.



Myself and Tamilselvan welcoming the government delegation on the morning of 13 October 1994, at the open grounds of the Jaffna University. Left to right, Mr Lionel Fernando, Mr R Asiwatham, Mr K Balapatabendi and Mr NL Gooneratne.



Sri Lanka government's negotiating team led by Mr Balapatabendi and the LTTE delegation led by Mr Tamilselvan at the entrance to the LTTE's political head office in Jaffna, October 1994.



LTTTE leader, Mr Pirapaharan meets the Norwegian Special Envoy, Mr Erik Solheim for the first time, at Malavi, Vanni, northern Sri Lanka, 31 October 2000. The late Colonel Shankar is seen on the right.



LTTT leader signs the historic Ceasefire Agreement, 22 February 2002.



Adele and myself land by seaplane on Iranamadu tank, Killinochchi, 25 March 2002 to be received by Sea Tiger Commander, Soosai and Mr Tamilselvan.



Mr Pirapaharan escorts Adele and me from the shores of Iranamadu tank.



The Tamil Tiger leader addresses an international media conference in Killinochchi, northern Sri Lanka, on 10 April 2002. I am seen here assisting him. Tamilselvan is seated to my right.



Adele and I meeting the peace envoys at the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, Oslo, July 2002.
From left to right, Mr Vidar Helgesen, Mr Jan Petersen, Mr Erik Solheim and Mr Jon Westborg.



Professor Peiris and I at the beginning of the first session of peace talks at Sattahip, Thailand.



Planting the 'Tree of Peace' at the Rose Garden Hotel premises in Thailand on 2 November 2002.
Myself, Mr Vidar Helgesen and Professor Peiris at the event.



Meeting the former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Mr Ranil Wickremesinghe on 25 November 2002
at the Oslo Donor Conference.
Left to Right, Mr Erik Solheim, Mr Vidar Helgesen, Mr Wickremesinghe and myself.



The Japanese Special Envoy, Mr Akashi, escorting me to the sixth session of peace talks at Hakone, Japan.
Adele, Mr Vidar Helgesen, Mr Tamilselvan and Mr Erik Solheim are seen in the picture.



Mr Pirapaharan and myself welcome the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Mr Jan Petersen, at the LTTE's political head office in Killinochchi, 11 May 2004.

Sinhala majority as well as the international community that they were the sole and authentic representatives of the Tamil people, Bala said. He also told Mr. Hameed that the LTTE was also suspicious of the ultimate intentions of the Premadasa administration. He queried as to whether Mr. Premadasa would be able to dissolve the North eastern Provincial Council, withdraw the Sixth Amendment to the constitution, confine the armed forces to the barracks and allow a peaceful transition of power to the LTTE. Mr. Hameed's response was positive. He said that Mr. Premadasa could be convinced if we were prepared to enter the democratic political mainstream.

Bala had already sought the approval of Mr. Pirapaharan and other leaders when we visited the LTTE's jungle headquarters in Mullaitivu for the formation of a political party. Having spoken again to Mr. Pirapaharan through our communication network, Bala got the endorsement for the name of the party and the office bearers. All that remained was to write the party constitution. Drawing on his previous studies of political party constitutions, Bala drafted the document while I helped him with the editing and typing. The political party was named the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT). Mr. Mahendraraja (Mathaya) Deputy Leader of the LTTE was given the role of the President of the party and Mr. Yogaratnam Yogi was made the Secretary General. The constitution provided the basis for a genuine democratic party allowing for the representation and participation of all sectors of the populace. A copy of the constitution was handed over to the Election Commissioner for registration. He registered the party and reluctantly approved - after consulting the President- the Tiger emblem as the symbol of the People's Front of Liberation Tigers.

Mr. Premadasa was very pleased that the LTTE had formed a new political party indicating their willingness to enter the political mainstream. He urged the LTTE delegates to participate at the All-Party Conference he planned to hold to discuss various issues facing the country as a whole. It was also a move to bring the LTTE into an open political forum as a registered political party to demonstrate to the country a significant political outcome of the peace talks. The LTTE delegates agreed to participate in the inaugural meeting as 'observers'. The All-Party Conference was convened on 12th August with around one hundred delegates from

twenty-six political parties. Mr. Yogaratnam Yogi, as the representative of the PFLT, attended the conference as an 'observer'. Mr. Premadasa's inaugural speech dealt with his vision of conflict resolution providing an exposition of his famous three 'C's'. The conference discussed all issues apart from the main issue - the ethnic conflict - and soon fizzled out as a result of a distinct lack of consultation, compromise and consensus.

As pledged in the joint agreement between Rajiv's administration and Premadasa, the de-induction of the IPKF started in early October 1989. It was a slow process. When the Indian troops began to pullout in stages, district by district, the Tamil National Army occupied their camps and consolidated its positions. Firstly, the Indian army vacated their positions in Amparai and Batticaloa in the Eastern Province. Panicked and confused by the possibility of a major offensive assault by the LTTE on Tamil National Army (TNA) positions in the Eastern Province, Perumal's administration escalated its ruthless policy of mass conscription. EPRLF cadres forcefully picked up every able bodied young man in the streets, from their homes and schools in a bid to boost the manpower of its militia with the aim of protecting its fragile, teetering regime. This desperate move by the EPRLF to cling onto power by unnecessarily sacrificing a large number of untrained recruits with no combat experience earned Perumal the wrath of the Tamil people. The LTTE leadership was placed in a very delicate situation. Hoping to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, Mr. Pirapaharan sent an urgent message to the Sri Lankan President through Bala that the Sinhala armed forces should not get involved in the confrontation between the LTTE and the TNA. He also announced an amnesty to all the armed cadres of the TNA if they surrendered. Following this, in the early part of November 1989, the LTTE guerrilla forces swept across the Eastern Province, first in Amparai and in the following weeks into Batticaloa, over-running with ease all the military bases of the TNA. Thousands of young TNA recruits surrendered to the advancing columns of Tiger fighters. Only the hard core EPRLF cadres resisted. All those who had surrendered were immediately released to their relieved parents in the Eastern districts. Some of those who surrendered joined the LTTE.

With the collapse of the Provincial administration in the East, Mr. Perumal made desperate appeals to Mr. Gandhi and

Mr. Premadasa to intervene and prevent the LTTE guerrillas from taking over the administration in the districts vacated by the Indian army. Faced with a general election and charges of corruption in the Bofors scandal, Mr. Gandhi preferred not to act on Perumal's request. Although Mr. Premadasa was aware of the situation, he was more concerned about the delay in the withdrawal process. He suspected that the delay in the de-induction of the IPKF was a calculated move by Delhi to allow space for Perumal to regroup and re-organise and to consolidate his crumbling military machine.

Having dislodged the Tamil National Army from the Amparai and Batticaloa districts, the LTTE set about consolidating its authority in the area. Bala, Yogi and myself flew by Airforce helicopter to Batticaloa town to participate in the national Heroes' Day. Mr. Pirapaharan had sanctioned 27th November as a national day to honour the martyred LTTE cadres and 1989 was the first anniversary occasion. Chosen in commemoration of Shankar, the first LTTE cadre to die in the struggle, Heroes' Day has become the most important day on the LTTE national calendar. Since its inception in 1989, Heroes' Day has been expanded from a one day function to cover a period of one week of events culminating at 6p.m on the 27th November with families gathering at the war memorial cemeteries and the chiming of bells across the territory.

To celebrate this day of national upsurge we set off from Batticaloa to travel to Pottuvil in the Amparai district. On the route to Amparai, the people's relief and joy that the Indian troops had vacated the district was apparent. Ecstatic crowds flagged down our convoy of vehicles and garlanded the LTTE cadres and our journey ended up taking twice as long as we had planned. As we travelled through the area, people rushed out of their houses congratulating us and expressing their appreciation that the negotiations had finally succeeded in getting the Indian troops out of their homeland. Throughout Amparai, from one town to the next, were dotted memorial shrines and the red and yellow of the LTTE flag fluttered, and groups of people gathered to celebrate Heroes' Day. Large crowds turned out to hear the LTTE leaders tell them the struggle for their rights was not over and would continue on a different level. In Akkarapattu and Thirukovil on the Eastern coast near Batticaloa town, school children left their class rooms and raced to join the large crowd waiting to see and listen to the LTTE

cadres and their leaders. People queued at the meeting places hoping for an opportunity to express their appreciation by garlanding the LTTE cadres with jasmine flowers.

During our private sessions with Mr. Premadasa, he expressed a genuine desire to meet the LTTE leader Mr. Pirapaharan. He told us that none of the Sinhala leaders had ever met the man and therefore held distorted views about the Tiger leader. He said he wanted to talk to Pirapaharan to understand him in depth and establish a working rapport with him. In his vision, personal relationships based on empathic understanding were crucial in politics. Mr. Premadasa admired Pirapaharan for his military ability and his courage and determination to confront formidable forces. He wondered how a young boy from humble origins rose to become a popular, legendary guerrilla leader. To his disappointment, we had to impress upon the President that Mr. Pirapaharan could not come to Colombo for security reasons. When we were in the Mullaitivu base camp Bala told Pirapaharan that Mr. Premadasa was very keen to meet him. Pirapaharan suggested that we should take Mr. Mahendraraja, his deputy, on our next trip to Colombo and introduce him to the President. It was for that reason Mathaya came to Colombo in December 1989 and met Mr. Premadasa in his private sessions. Kittu also came to Colombo, but for a very different reason.

In early October, we made our second visit to the Mullaitivu jungles to meet and consult with Mr. Pirapaharan. During the course of the visit, Mr. Pirapaharan conveyed to Bala his wish to send Kittu to London for treatment for his amputated leg. On hearing of the decision to send him abroad, Kittu was obviously of two minds. Undeniably he aspired for a suitable prosthesis to be fitted, which would help him with his walking and mobility. But he was a man emotionally attached to his cadres and his homeland and the prospect of separating from them was an obvious source of distress to him. Kittu flourished in the environment where he could teach his cadres and encourage them with their interests and he often initiated new projects for them to engage in. And so, as the day for his departure grew nearer, he became quieter; as did many of his cadres. And I think one of the most pitiful sights I can remember seeing is this legendary guerrilla fighter crying on Mr. Pirapaharan's shoulder the day we were to take him out of the

Alampil jungle. His cadres carried him in a chair on their shoulders - in similar fashion to the manner they had carried Bala earlier - to the waiting helicopter. In classic Kittu style, he put on a brave face for his cadres during the trek out of the jungle, expressing his affection for them in the jokes he was cracking.

Soon after his arrival in Colombo, we escorted Kittu to the British High Commission. After discussions with the British Ambassador, Kittu's entry visa to the United Kingdom was authorised. But Kittu had one serious matter to attend to before his departure to London. When Kittu went to the Mullaitivu jungles after being released from IPKF custody, he became separated from his medical student girlfriend, Cynthia. Now he was anxious to be reunited with her. On his request she travelled from Jaffna to Colombo to meet him. Shortly afterwards they decided to marry. Kittu's mother rushed from Valvettiturai to Colombo to attend the ceremony. Cynthia's parents were already in Colombo. And so, on October 25th in one of the rooms of the hotel where the LTTE team was accommodated during the talks, the registration of the marriage of Kittu and Cynthia took place. A few days later Kittu flew to London and Cynthia joined him after travel arrangements were made.

Meeting Karunanidhi in Chennai

In India's December 1989 general elections, the Congress party was defeated and Rajiv Gandhi stepped down. Mr. V P Singh became the new Prime Minister. For V P Singh's administration, Rajiv Gandhi's involvement in Sri Lanka was a serious diplomatic disaster. Mr. Singh was anxious not to perpetuate the legacy of Rajiv's blunder, but rather wanted to establish good relations with Sri Lanka and other neighbouring nations. Realising that there was a deliberate delay in the process of de-induction of the IPKF, Mr. Singh ordered the Indian troops to pullout before 31st March 1990. This development signalled the accelerated demise of the collapsing Provincial administration of the EPRLF. Panicked by this turn of events, Mr. Perumal dashed to Delhi and Chennai (Madras) to plead with the Indian leaders not to withdraw the Indian army from Sri Lanka. The new Prime Minister, Mr. Singh,

who wanted to adopt a non-interventionist, friendly relationship with Sri Lanka, rejected Mr. Perumal's request. Finding no sympathy in the new administration, the EPRLF leader rushed to Tamil Nadu and urged the Chief Minister Mr. M Karunanidhi to help him to protect his Provincial administration. Mr. Karunanidhi, who was openly critical of the behaviour of the Indian army against the Eelam Tamils, advised Perumal to enter into an agreement with the LTTE and hand over the Provincial administration of the Northeast to the Tigers. Perumal begged Mr. Karunanidhi to play the role of mediator and work out a settlement. It was in these circumstances Bala received an urgent telephone call in the hotel room from the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Mr. Karunanidhi - who Bala had known personally during our stay in Tamil Nadu - urging him to come to Chennai as soon as possible. He did not disclose what the matter was, but only hinted that it was very urgent and important. Bala could not refuse the request from the powerful Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and agreed to go. Having obtained permission from Mr. Pirapaharan and Mr. Premadasa, Bala, myself and Yogi flew to Chennai within a couple of days.

In Chennai we were accommodated at the Port Trust Guest House amidst tight security. The Chief Minister and his nephew Mr. Murasoli Maran visited us three times during our stay. Mr. Karunanidhi enquired whether or not the LTTE would share power with the EPRLF if the Northeastern Provincial Council were reconstituted. He said that the EPRLF leadership was prepared to offer half the seats of the Council, paving the way for equal participation of the Tigers in the Northeastern Provincial administration. Bala explained to the Chief Minister that the LTTE was prepared to face fresh elections and it should be the people of Tamil Eelam who had to choose their representatives. He gave a detailed picture to Mr. Karunanidhi about the brutal crimes committed against the Tamil people by the armed cadres of the EPRLF in collusion with the Indian occupation army. Perumal's administration, Bala argued, was despised by the Eelam Tamils for its misdeeds. EPRLF assumed power through fraudulent elections and functioned as a puppet regime of the IPKF. Because of the intolerable atrocities committed by the Indian army and the EPRLF's paramilitaries, the Tamils wanted the Tigers to assume power. If fresh elections were held in the Tamil homeland, Bala convinced the Tamil Nadu Chief

Minister, the LTTE would sweep to power. Mr. Karunanidhi finally endorsed LTTE's position and did not press for a joint administration. During the meetings, Bala also gave a detailed assessment of the situation in the Northeast. Mr. Karunanidhi looked deeply perturbed. Apart from the closed-door meetings with the Chief Minister, we also met several LTTE supporters and Tamil Nadu leaders such as Vaiko (Mr. Gopalasamy) and Mr. Veeramany. A press conference was held before we left Chennai at the end of our five-day visit.

By the beginning of 1990 Premadasa's government had effectively suppressed the JVP insurrection in southern Sri Lanka. The war in the North had also come to an end with a stable cease-fire between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE. The Indian army had ceased its campaign and the de-induction process was accelerated to catch up with the schedule set for the end of March. The LTTE was consolidating in the areas vacated by the IPKF. Sri Lanka was, by and large, stabilised.

The peace talks in Colombo were now confined to private sessions between the President and the LTTE. Mr. Hameed was a regular visitor to our hotel and continued discussions on issues related to a political solution. Since the LTTE had committed itself to participating in the Provincial elections the issues that dominated the discussions were the repeal of the Sixth Amendment to the constitution and the dissolution of Perumal's Provincial administration; two critical issues that had become a bone of contention between the LTTE and the Premadasa regime.

The Sixth Amendment to the 1978 Constitution was an infamous piece of legislation that upholds the unitary structure of the Sri Lanka state and forbids the right to secession. It was promulgated by Jayawardene following the 1983 racial riots to placate the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists. Under this draconian law, anyone who advocates or encourages secessionist politics calling for an independent Tamil state is liable for serious punishment, including the loss of civil rights and forfeiture of property. This legislation requires all elected members of government institutions i.e. Parliament, Provincial Councils, Municipal Councils etc. to provide an oath of allegiance to the unitary state. The LTTE delegates had categorically told Mr. Premadasa and Mr. Hameed that under no circumstances would they take an oath of allegiance to the

unitary state. This legislation was oppressive and stifled the fundamental freedom of political choice and expression, the Tigers argued. The LTTE was firmly committed to the principle of self-determination, a legal right to which the Tamil people are entitled. The right to self-determination enunciates the freedom of choice of a people to determine their political status, a right that does not preclude secession, the LTTE delegates observed. Unless the Sixth Amendment - that forbids the right to choose one's political destiny - was repealed the LTTE would not enter the democratic political mainstream and participate in the elections, the Tigers told Mr. Premadasa.

As a Sinhala nationalist committed to a unitary state, Mr. Premadasa was unhappy with the LTTE demand. Yet at the same time he did not want the peace talks to collapse over this issue. He promised the Tigers that his government would repeal the Sixth Amendment if that were the only alternative left to him to bring the LTTE to democratic politics and solve the ethnic problem. Yet in his heart he knew that repealing the Act was impossible since it required two-thirds majority in Parliament - which he did not have. Furthermore, he knew that the Sinhala-Buddhist forces would be up in arms. Mr. Premadasa was in a dilemma. I could see some strains on his face whenever Bala raised the issue of repealing the Sixth Amendment.

The LTTE delegates also insisted that the Northeast Provincial Council should be dissolved without delay, arguing that the EPRLF was not the choice of the Tamil people but was installed by the IPKF as a puppet regime and that it had no legitimacy to run the administration in the Northeast. The Tigers urged Mr. Premadasa to dismiss the Provincial Council and hold fresh elections so that the LTTE could demonstrate its popular support to the world. Mr. Premadasa was reluctant to commit on this issue since he faced serious political and legal problems over the dissolution of the Council. The 13th Amendment had entrenched clauses that prevented the President from dissolving the Provincial Councils at his whim, unless there were specific reasons to do so.

The two issues raised by the LTTE had brought the talks to an impasse, but neither of the parties was inclined to take a confrontationalist course. The relationship between the LTTE and Premadasa's administration was warm and friendly. Mr. Hameed ensured that

nothing happened between the protagonists that would endanger the newly formed relationship that had been built up with patience and indefatigable effort.

Conference in Vaharai

In the meantime, after quitting Amparai and Batticaloa, the Indian forces withdrew from the Northern districts of Mullaitivu, Vavuniya, Mannar and Killinochchi. A substantial number of Indian troops continued to occupy the Jaffna Peninsula and Trincomalee districts. While the military wing of the LTTE was engaged in overrunning the TNA's positions in the Northern districts vacated by the IPKF, the political wing of the LTTE - the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT)- began to extend its party structures in the Eastern districts of Batticaloa and Amparai. The inaugural conference of the PFLT was held in the coastal town of Vaharai in the Batticaloa district between 24th February and 1st March 1990. Bala, Yogaratnam Yogi, Murthy, other cadres, and myself went to Batticaloa town by Sri Lanka Air Force helicopter and from there, traveled to Vaharai to participate in this historic conference. Senior LTTE political cadres, both men and women, were flown in from all the districts of the Northeast and assembled in Vaharai, a place famous for its natural beauty and tranquillity.

Relieved that the war with India was finally over and the Indian troops were on their way out of the Tamil homeland, the congregated PLFT delegates were in a festive mood. The choice of Vaharai Rest House - ideally located on the white sands overlooking the sea - for the inaugural conference added to the general good spirits amongst the delegates. Deliberations at the conference lasted for one week during which time important resolutions pertaining to crucial national and social issues were passed. On top of the list of resolutions was the commitment to abolish the social injustices and discriminations based on the caste system and the emancipation of women was to be included in the PLFT working program. More specifically, the women delegates demanded that action should be taken to halt the exploitation, suffering and humiliation that women are subjected to as a result of the practice of dowry. A great deal of

delegates' attention focused on organising the PLFT throughout the Northeast. It was agreed that steps would be immediately taken to involve and mobilise the people's political participation in the PLFT, and the setting up of party structures from the grassroots village level all the way up to provincial level in every district.

As the final stage of the troop withdrawal of the IPKF approached, Mr. Perumal, as the Chief Minister of the Northeastern Provincial Council made a controversial move. On 1st March he introduced a resolution converting the Northeastern Provincial Council into a Constituent Assembly with an objective of drafting a constitution for an independent sovereign Tamil state to be called Eelam Democratic Republic. This desperate step was perceived in Colombo as a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). Mr. Premadasa was outraged. But, since the Indian troops were on the verge of leaving Trincomalee district he did not take any action against Perumal. He waited for the completion of the de-induction of the IPKF. On the 24th March, a week earlier than scheduled, the last of the Indian troop contingents left the docks of Trincomalee harbour. Mr. Perumal and other leaders of the EPRLF fled to India with the last of the Indian jawans.

With the departure of the Indian army, the LTTE took control of almost all the districts of the Northeast. The LTTE leadership wanted legitimacy for their administrative control over the Tamil homeland. It was under these circumstances the LTTE delegates met the President and urged him to dissolve the Provincial Council and to hold fresh elections. We told Mr. Premadasa that UDI by Mr. Perumal provided a valid reason for the dissolution of the Council. What was required was an amendment in Parliament, which could have been easily secured by Mr. Premadasa's ruling party. But the President wavered. It was now abundantly clear to the LTTE that Mr. Premadasa was deliberately delaying fulfilling his promises. Mr. Premadasa was only too aware that if fresh elections were held, the Tigers would be swept to power and install a legitimate administration in the Tamil homeland. Mr. Premadasa feared that such an eventuality would provide the LTTE with international legitimacy and would encourage it to seek more powers of self-government.

LTTE's Strategy and Premadasa's Agenda

During these times I enquired from Bala in private conversations as to whether it was against the committed policy of the LTTE to seek an alternative to political independence and statehood. Bala replied that there was no contradiction in the LTTE's political strategy. He explained to me that the ultimate objective of the LTTE was the creation of an independent state based on the right to self-determination of the Tamils when all possible alternatives for co-existence with the Sinhala people were experimented and failed. He said that the LTTE was deadly serious about facing the Provincial Council elections in the Northeast if Premadasa cleared the hurdles i.e. dissolving the Council, repealing the Sixth Amendment and holding fresh elections. For the LTTE, it was a radical experiment to test the feasibility of co-existence. By seeking this alternative, the LTTE would not lose anything. If the Tigers won the elections they would transform the concepts of Tamil homeland and Tamil nationhood into concrete realities, which were their declared political ideals, Bala clarified.

Mr. Premadasa had a different agenda, a scheme of his own for tackling the LTTE. Accordingly, he delayed the dissolution of the Council and postponed the prospects of a fresh election. He showed little inclination on the crucial issue of repealing the Sixth Amendment, arguing that securing a two-thirds majority in Parliament would be an impossible task. Ultimately, the private sessions with Premadasa now served little purpose in practical politics. With great patience we listened to his lengthy sermons on one people and one nation where all communities could live in peace and harmony under the tripartite principles of his famous three 'C's.

Mr. Premadasa's secret agenda began to reveal itself when Mr. Hammed paid a visit to our hotel room for a private session with Bala and opened a discussion on de-commissioning the LTTE. It was a very hot day in mid-May. The discussion also reached high temperature, as the subject of the discussions was very sensitive. Mr. Hameed said that he was articulating the concerns and anxieties of the President. "Mr. Premadasa wants free and fair elections in which all parties and groups, including the EPRLF should be

given the opportunity to participate in the elections. This is not possible as long as the LTTE possesses arms and is exerting a dominant position in the Northeast. Therefore, the surrender of arms by the LTTE is a necessary factor to hold fresh elections. This is the view of the President and also some Ministers, particularly Ranjan Wijeratne”, Mr. Hameed said softly but firmly. Bala enquired as to why the President did not raise the issue of arms when he met the LTTE delegates during his private sessions. Bala also complained that since the departure of the IPKF Mr. Premadasa was holding private sessions with other Tamil groups hostile to the LTTE. He explained to Mr. Hameed that the possession of arms should be viewed as a crucial element of a security arrangement for the Tamil people in the Northeast. The LTTE would be responsible for this security system if permanent peace was established through a permanent political solution. To maintain this security system and law and order, the LTTE should have trained security personnel possessing arms. The LTTE had the manpower, materials and experience to provide an effective security system for the Tamil people, Bala told the perplexed chief negotiator. “It is premature to raise the issue of de-commissioning of the LTTE when your President is not prepared to remove the obstacles for the fresh elections, i.e. dissolving the Council and repealing the Sixth amendment. Furthermore, the Provincial Council itself is not a sound basis for a permanent solution. The LTTE decided to face the Provincial elections as an interim arrangement, not as a permanent solution. We wanted peace and harmonious co-existence with the Sinhala people. We wanted to create democratic institutions and participate in democratic political practices. We will co-operate with the Government to hold free and fair elections providing the opportunity for all groups and parties to participate in the elections. Once we become the elected representatives of the people, we can negotiate for a permanent solution that will involve the crucial issue of a security arrangement for the Tamil people”, Bala explained. Mr. Hameed suggested the formation of a Provincial police system as an element of the Provincial administrative structure transforming the guerrillas into police officers. “Even if that were possible, the LTTE would need more men and more arms to raise a police force of ten thousand men for the Northeast”, Bala said. In that case, Bala told Mr. Hammed sarcastically, the President had to

provide even more arms to the LTTE police force. Thus, the discussion that started out on the issue of disarming the LTTE ended with the notion of re-arming the Tigers. Mr. Hameed looked dejected when he left our hotel room.

We knew that Mr. Premadasa was on a confrontationist course. He was not favourably disposed to the idea of repealing the Sixth Amendment that would relax the rigid constitutional hold on the unitary status of the Sri Lankan state. Premadasa favoured a solution within the unitary state model. As a strong nationalist he was opposed to any alternative models to the unitary polity. Having crushed the JVP rebellion and secured the withdrawal of the Indian troops, Premadasa faced a new dilemma. How to deal with the LTTE? It was still possible to embrace them peacefully in the democratic political mainstream for which he had to repeal the infamous Sixth Amendment. The other alternative was confrontation: military suppression of the LTTE. His hardline Ministers and the military establishment favoured the latter. And he was yielding to their pressure.

Discussing various options, Mr. Premadasa had before him at that critical conjuncture, Mr. Bradman Weerakoon, a close confidante and advisor to the President commented, "His fourth and final option could have been straight out of Machiavelli or more likely in his idiom, Kautilya - that was, that after the IPKF was out of the way and out of the country, he would turn the refreshed and renewed Sri Lankan forces on the weary LTTE, rout them completely, eliminate Pirapaharan and re-establish 'law and order, good governance, peace and prosperity' over the Northeast and the whole of Sri Lanka. I am inclined to think that in his final grand design this last option would have been very appealing".⁶

As Weerakoon aptly perceived, Mr. Premadasa chose the military option of eliminating the LTTE. Yet he did it in a devious manner as if the LTTE had broken the negotiations and started the war. Without any warning he authorised the Sri Lankan armed forces, hitherto confined to barracks in the Northeast since July 1987, to move freely about and assert the authority of the state. The army high command, confident after recent victories against the JVP rebels, adopted a belligerent attitude and confronted the LTTE. Several incidents occurred, particularly in the East, which violated the ceasefire agreement and provoked the LTTE beyond patience.

By the end of May 1990, fresh contingents of troops and additional police were moved to the Eastern districts to strengthen and fortify military bases and police stations. As the troops began to intensify patrolling in the cities and towns, tension mounted between the Sinhala armed forces and the LTTE fighters. There were several ugly incidents of military harassment of our guerrilla fighters. An incident occurred near an army camp in Batticaloa where two senior LTTE cadres were disarmed by army personnel and forced to kneel on the tar road in the scorching sun for several hours. There was a massive crowd watching. Unable to withstand the humiliation, one of the fighters swallowed cyanide and died on the spot. The soldiers beat the other fighter unconscious. As the incidents of harassment and persecution increased, the Tiger leadership realised that the Sri Lankan armed forces were deliberately provoking them to cause a confrontation. The desperate attempts made by Bala - who was in Colombo at the time - to impress upon the President to restrain the government forces was of no avail. We learned later from Mr. Hameed, that Mr. Premadasa had given orders to the military high command to systematically fill the vacuum created by the departure of the IPKF. His instructions were to take full control of the Eastern districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai to be followed by the Northern region. Premadasa was well aware that Eelam War II was inevitable and he prepared the armed forces for that eventuality.

The straw that broke the camel's back was a minor incident of harassment of a Muslim woman in the Batticaloa police station on 10th June. The LTTE's interference - by questioning the police behaviour - led to an armed confrontation between the LTTE fighters and the police. The fighting that erupted between the Tigers and the police escalated into a wider conflagration between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces in the Tamil areas of the Northeast. A full-fledged war had resumed. In a desperate last minute effort to secure a cessation of hostilities, Mr. Hameed flew to Jaffna on 11th June. I went along with Bala and other cadres to receive Mr. Hameed outside the Pallaly Air Base. Before Mr. Hameed reached the point of rendezvous some undisciplined Sri Lankan soldiers opposed to peace fired at his vehicle. Nevertheless, Mr. Hameed met Mr. Pirapaharan and other LTTE leaders. His efforts to arrange a truce ended in fiasco since the Sri

Lankan forces in the Eastern districts were determined to prosecute the war. Apart from Mr. Hameed, the President and his hardline Ministers were not inclined towards peace. As the war resumed with brutal intensity, Mr. Ranjan Wijeratne, the Deputy Minister of Defence thundered in Parliament "Now I am going all out for the LTTE. We will annihilate them".⁷ Thus ended the ill-fated negotiations between the LTTE and Premadasa administration.

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