

Q: From the inception you have been struggling for an independent state. Are you willing to renounce that and accept any federal model.?

A: Conditions have not arisen to abandon an independent statehood. The struggle for Eelam is a demand of the Tamil people. In the 1977 elections, people have given a mandate to the TULF to fight for a separate state.

Q: How serious are you about the peace process. There has been doubt about your genuineness?

A: We are sincerely committed to the peace process. It is because we are sincerely committed to peace that we continued a four month cessation of hostilities.

Q: Since you have accepted an interim administration under the Sri Lankan government will you accept the hegemony of the Sri Lankan state?

A: We have not discussed the formalities or the framework of the interim administration . It has to be discussed with the Sri Lankan government . This does not arise since we have not started the peace process.

Q: Will you go to Thailand with this idea?

A: So far on the demand for Eelam we have not decided as yet. We are going to Thailand to discuss the interim administration as proposed by the government.

Q: What about the ban on the LTTE imposed in India ?

A: We want the government of India to lift the ban on the LTTE. We will raise the issue at the appropriate time.

Q: You have been indicted in the Gandhi assassination ?

A: This case is going on. Four persons have been convicted. They are seeking amnesty at the moment. We do not want to make any comments at this moment.

Q: Are you denying involvement in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination?

A: (Mr. Balasingham). I know this is a sensitive issue, not only for you but for us as well. You are raising an issue that happened 10 years ago. We want to have friendly relations with India.

Q: What have you to say about the charges ?

A: This is a "tragic incident." that has taken place ten years back. We cannot comment on the issue.

Q: The Rajiv Gandhi assassination...

A: (Dr. Balasingham) You are trying to dominate the press conference. You have come here when the peace process is on. You are talking of an old incident. Do not dig into the past.

Q: Why should anyone should believe that the ceasefire will lead to peace or why the LTTE will not start fighting back as happened in the past.

A: This is the first time that a third party, Norway, has got involved as a facilitator. We believe that the peace process will work.

Q: There is widespread feeling that the reason you are speaking now is because of the action by the United States against terrorism, after the events in September 11. Do you agree with that?

A: The LTTE has initiated peace moves before the September 11 incident. Furthermore Norway's peace envoy Erik Solheim has been given an assurance that we want a negotiated settlement.

Q: For 25 years you have been adopting a military strategy to achieve your goal, but now you seem to be embarking on a political path. Is the tiger changing its stripes ?

A: Our political struggle began in the form of non-violence. Leaders in the past believed that they can use a non-violent method. Because the non-violent methods were crushed we were forced to take up arms to defend ourselves. We were compelled to take arms. Whenever there was an opportunity we have opted to settle the problem peacefully.

Q: Is there any message you hope to give, by inviting us here today ?

A: There has been lot of misunderstanding about the LTTE. We would like to explain through the international media that the LTTE is committed to peace and a negotiated settlement.

Q: Will you allow other parties to function in the north and what do you feel about the collaboration between the Sri Lankan and US Governments ?

A: We can assure you that other political parties whatever their policies may be, will be allowed to function in the North-East and participate in the democratic political process. As far as the collaboration between the US & SL governments is concerned it is not of our concern to condemn or criticise the current global developments or the position of different political regimes. As far as we are concerned we are determined to fight for the political rights of the Tamils, irrespective of whether Sri Lanka is aligned to America or the Soviet Union or any other world power. We are committed to the emancipation of our own people.

Q: You have apologized to the Muslims but not made an open invitation for their return.

A: We have already apologized to them. If we invite them, there should be some conducive set up for them to live. Our leader will certainly extend an invitation for them to come to the north and live with us.

Q: There are reports about Muslims in the East being harassed. It is reported that they have no rights to the land.

A: We have called the service commanders from the east to discuss the alleged harassment of Muslims. We have called Karikalan for a meeting and asked him what has gone wrong. He has assured us that he has made no such statement and it is a distortion. We believe that the Tamil homeland belongs to the Muslim people and we believe that there is no dispute that Muslims have a right to own land. When Mr. Hakeem comes we will discuss the matter.

Q: You say you will allow political parties to function in the north and east. How can you seriously say so when the LTTE has assassinated Tamil moderates ?

A: We do not want to go into details, as there have been contradictions between Tamil parties in the past. Now almost all the Tamil parties in the north and east are supporting the LTTE. There are some Tamil armed groups that we do not consider as political entities as such, but as mercenaries and they support the Sri Lanka armed forces against the LTTE. So we have requested that the armed groups be disarmed. Now the situation is almost that all parties that contested in the north & east are supporting the LTTE. In future there will be no problems. We will allow the genuine democratic Tamil parties to function in the north-east as democratic entities.

Q: Are you ready to give up your armed struggle and if not why?

A: We will seriously consider renouncing the armed struggle if a solution acceptable to our people is worked out.

Q: Upcountry youth have been in custody for several years, what about these people. But no leaders are taking any action.

A: We have been constantly campaigning for the release of these prisoners. Most of them are suspected LTTE members. They are kept without any trial. We have requested Tamil parties to agitate for their release and we are going to appeal to the government to repeal the PTA.

Q: What are the conditions that you say would be right for you to give up your armed struggle? Can you please explain the impact of the ban on your organization throughout the world?

A: There are three fundamentals. That is Tamil homeland, Tamil nationality and Tamil right to self-determination. These are the fundamental demands of the Tamil people. Once these demands are accepted or a political solution is put forward by recognising these three fundamentals and our people are satisfied with the solutions we will consider giving up the demand for Eelam.

It is true that several countries have imposed the ban due to the malicious campaign by the Sri Lanka government against the LTTE. It is because of these reasons we have appealed to the government of Sri Lanka to de-proscribe our organization before the commencement of negotiations. Once our organization is de-proscribed we will campaign in the rest of the world to get the ban lifted in the rest of the world.

Q: Will Mr. Pirabakaran accept any responsibility under the Interim administration?

A: We haven't started any dialogue about an interim administration. When that arises I will think whether to accept any responsibility or not.

Q: Will you allow Muslim participation in the peace process?

A: Certainly we will allow Muslim representation in the peace process as it is crucial.

Q: You said the Gandhi assassination was a tragic incident. How do you look at other tragic incidents. Are you satisfied with the pace of the peace process. Also what is your greatest military victory?

A: I am pleased with the peace process and also want to compliment Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe for the action he has taken to proceed with the peace process and the goodwill measures taken in the north-east towards normalcy.

Q: There have been incidents in the past that led to your proscription. What would be your message to the other side that would be incidents of the past.

A: (Dr. Balasingham). I have openly said that we want to have friendly relationships with India and that we want a positive participation of India in the peace process. I myself openly requested India to give me a venue so that I can land in India, for two reasons. One is for logistical reasons and the other for medical reasons. I am a transplant patient. I have a serious kidney ailment and if India provides me with a passage or venue to land in any of the cities in Tamil Nadu, I will be pleased. I have to come and consult Mr. Pirabaharan if the peace process is initiated. India's active participation in the peace process is crucial for the Tamil people because India is a regional super power. Since India was not taking any active interest in the process, the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE have requested the Norwegian government to play a facilitatory role. It is not to isolate or alienate India from playing an active role.

Q: Have you directly requested the Indian government?

A: We have requested Norway to make the request. They (India) have not rejected our request, but still it is on the agenda.

Q: Mr. Pirabaharan, you are said to have told your cadres that if you give up the demand for Tamil Eelam, you can be shot. Does that statement stand?

A: That statement stands.

Q: How do you plan to respond to allegations of human rights violations and recruitment of child soldiers now that the LTTE is keen to be an acceptable member of the global community?

A: The allegation that we are recruiting children is untenable and unacceptable. We have decided to recruit people over 18. The people below 18 who came to join us were sent back to their parents and we are collecting letters from their parents. There is no need at this present stage to recruit children. It is impossible for the LTTE to conduct an effective war with children or a baby brigade. We have child welfare centres and orphanages to look after children.

Q: You have been living an underground life and you may be frustrated with the underground life . Is that the reason to come out?

A: We are not the people who are worried about the underground life or a strenuous life . We are prepared to fight for the political rights of our people.

Q: Are you ready to take up a political responsibility?

A: We have been fighting this guerrilla war for the liberation of our people - for the welfare of our people. Therefore we are not concerned about our personal political life. That is a secondary matter where I have not seriously thought about accepting a political position or a political leadership in the future. Even now we are engaged in this press briefing because we are really concerned about peace and a peaceful settlement of the ethnic war. It is our genuine concern for the welfare of our people that has made us get involved in the current peace process.

Q The question is about working within the democratic system. Would Mr. Pirabaharan be ready to do so rather than head a military outfit.

A: The solution is within the democratic, political framework . Our organisation will seriously participate in that process and our cadres will also involve themselves in the political mainstream.

Q: What do you mean by self determination. You say you are fighting for the right of your people based on the right for self determination, therefore, what do you mean by self determination?

A: By self determination we mean the right of our people to decide their own political destiny It can also mean /apply to autonomy and self government. If autonomy and self government is given to our people, then also we can say that the internal self determination is to some extent met. But if the Sri Lankan government rejects our demands for autonomy and self government and continues with repression, then as a last resort we would opt for cessation. That also comes under self determination. So self determination entails autonomy and self government. In an extreme case, in the last resort, it means cessation. Therefore we say, if the Sri Lankan government offers the Tamil people the form of self government and autonomy in recognition of our nationality and also the right to self determination then we will consider that offer. But if the government refuses to give us proper autonomy, proper self government and continue with this repression, then we have no other alternative but to fight for political independence and statehood. That is our perspective.

Q; What will you do if the government finally betrays you or if these talks collapse?

A: As far as we are concerned we have faith in the present government and we will continue to work with this government until a solution is reached. We cannot answer hypothetical questions.

Q: Do I understand you right that the events of September 11 and the international focus on terrorism has not changed your strategy and thinking at all. Have you not had cause to reassess the value of suicide bombing on civilian targets and assassinations in the light of September 11th?

A: We have issued an official statement condemning the incident of September 11th. We strongly condemn this act of violence perpetrated on innocent civilians under the name of a

religion which advocates peace. Since we have adopted a peace process and that now we are committed to peace, we don't want to make any comments about suicide attacks at this stage.

Q: You wanted the government to make a second proposal. What is your formula/vision ?

A: We have made a statement saying that a formula has to be worked out based on the Tamil demand for a homeland, nationality and self determination. We want a framework which recognises this fundamental core issue. It is on that basis that we are requesting the government to put forward a counter proposal and if the counter proposal envisages or embodies these demands and offer a substantive solution that satisfies the aspirations of our people, we will seriously or favourably consider such a framework .

Q: Do you think that the Ranil government can offer such a solution?

A: We don't think Ranil Wickremesinghe is capable of addressing the core issues and offer us a permanent solution at this stage because you know executive powers are vested with the President and his powers are limited to Parliament. It is because of that, that we are suggesting the formation of an interim administrative set up so that we can run an administration in the N/E. The LTTE can participate in an interim administration in the N/E. In the meantime, Ranil Wickremesinghe will have enough space to build up southern Sri Lanka economically. So it will be advantageous for the Tamils as well as the Sinhalese to work out an interim set up for the time being. Once the interim set up is established then we are prepared to discuss the core issue and negotiate for a permanent settlement of the ethnic question. But we wish to insist that Ranil's government is not politically stable or authoritative or powerful enough to take up the core demands of the Tamils and offer us a permanent solution.

Q: Do you think Chandrika Kumaratunga will scuttle the process?

A: We don't anticipate that President Kumaratunga will create any serious difficulties for the peace process. Even if she tries to scuttle the peace process, its up to Ranil Wickremesinghe to ensure that such difficulties doesn't arise and he should act in such a way that this process succeeds.

Q. How do you expect us to believe that you are genuine about pursuing democracy allowing other Tamil parties to survive in this area, when you spent your entire career sending suicide bombers to kill democratically elected politicians. And even today, we're being filmed surrounded by goons. And you have the whole appearance of a military dictator. How do you expect us to take you seriously ?

A: We're going to meet four Tamil political parties the day after tomorrow. These are the political parties, which once upon a time had serious differences with our political organisation. Now the whole scenario has changed and we're inviting them to talk and discuss about various issues. If we are an authoritarian organisation trying to repress other political organisations, there is no need for us to call them and discuss. Similarly we're calling the Muslim leadership and the plantation leadership also. So therefore the times have changed and we are adopting new strategies. Please understand.

The Wannu is an area controlled by the LTTE. There are security issues, there are security concerns. In the past you would have heard that there has been deep penetration groups who have penetrated into this areas and killed several of our senior leaders. So we have intensified our security systems here to protect our leadership. So today Mr. Pirabaharan is attending this conference. You are here, we have to ensure that no acts of violence or any disturbance takes place. Therefore we have allowed the Tamil police officers to guard these areas. So it doesn't mean this security system indicates an authoritative system as such. In Colombo you will have far more intensive security arrangements when such events take place.

Q: There are so many countries. Why did you go far away and choose Norway as a facilitator ?

A: Norway is reputed for resolving international conflicts. Norway has undertaken peace missions in several countries. And secondly, it is the Government of Sri Lanka which opted for Norwegian facilitation and we decided that Norway would be an appropriate facilitator because of its neutrality and it has no strategic interest in this region.

Q: Has Norway facilitated or brought about a settlement with regard to the Palestinian issue. Now the Palestinian-Israeli problem is hotting up. Don't you think that the Tamil problem will also end up in chaos if Norway initiated this peace process.

A: In the peace process there are times when difficulties arise and even peace talks collapse and war breaks out as we have experienced in the past. But that doesn't mean we should give up our pursuit for peace and political settlement. We know the Palestinian problem had got into serious difficulties. But our problem is entirely different. At the same time, we want to use the Norwegian facilitation to engage in the peace process in Sri Lanka and we hope that this peace process will succeed.

Q: Will you (Mr. Pirabaharan) participate in talks in Thailand, because the Interpol representative was in Sri Lanka and he said that the Indian government has requested them to arrest Pirabaharan. So I want to know, in this situation, what is the answer. Will he be there ?

A: Mr. Balasingham will be the Chief Negotiator and he will be participating in the peace process. Even now we're going to talk about the interim administration, not about a permanent solution. When peace talks for a permanent solution take place, we have to think about my participation. At the same time, Mr. Balasingham will visit me now and then from Thailand to consult on the formulation of this interim administration set up. So I'm not going to Thailand to engage in this current negotiation which will be confined only to the formulation of an interim set up.

Q. My question was re Interpol. India has requested the Interpol to arrest. What is your stand ?

A: We don't want to make any comments on that, because we are still waiting for a positive response from the Government of India with regard to at least a passage through India for Mr. Balasingham to come from London and meet me. And I think the Government of India will favourably consider in the coming days by offering a passage for Mr. Balasingham to visit the Wannu. That's all we can say.

Q: Will the peace talks take place after the de-proscription of the LTTE or not?

A: Only after the de-proscription will we participate in the peace process.

Q. Does Mr. Pirabakaran fear America's intervention if the peace process collapses.

A: I don't consider that America will intervene in this conflict, if the present peace process collapses.

Q: Do you mean to say that talks in Thailand will be held only after the LTTE is de-proscribed?

A: Yes, that is our position. We have informed the government, we have told the Norwegians that de-proscription is a necessary condition for the commencements of talks.

Q: Will you settle for a suspended de-proscription ?

A: No. We want to be de-proscribed properly and the Prevention of Terrorism Act has to be properly amended so that we have to be de-proscribed and accepted as the authentic representative of our people, so that we participate in the peace process as the representative of our people with equal status. That has been our official position.

Q: Is the LTTE using the ceasefire as an opportunity to re-arm?

A: It is during the armed conflict that we were able to amass a large quantity of weapons and it is during peace time that we are deprived of that opportunity. During the battle of Elephant Pass we were able to acquire a large quantity of arms worth millions of rupees and also ammunition in large amounts. It is during the peace process that we are deprived of this opportunity.

Q: What does Mr. Pirabakaran consider as the greatest LTTE victory ?

A: I consider the government's attempts to open up the A9 highway by military means. We defeated the armed forces in this military engagement, which is a major success that the LTTE has achieved so far.

Q. Which military general does Mr. Pirabakaran remember the most ? And for what?

A: I don't consider any particular general as posing a serious challenge to the LTTE.

A journalist tries to thank the LTTE for organising this press conference and journalists shout asking him to sit down.

Q. What makes you think this ceasefire agreement will succeed when previous ones have failed?

A: Compared to the past ceasefire agreements this one is different for two reasons. One is that it is facilitated by a third party - the Norwegians. Secondly Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe is seriously and sincerely committed to peace and therefore appropriate conditions are available now for a permanent and stable peace than in the past.