

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

## President Wijetunga and the Ethnic Conflict

**P**resident Wijetunga, according to a number of interviews given to various journalists within a few days of assumption of office, has a very naive and simplistic vision of the ethnic situation in the country. There is no ethnic conflict in the sense of a conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. These two communities live in peace and amity side-by-side in the South. They work together in the same offices in both the public and private sectors; they have no quarrels with each other.

What does exist is a terrorist problem; its origins lie in some misguided Tamil youth who have taken to arms and refuse to act constitutionally. This problem must be dealt with at a military level.

We are not naive enough to take this expression of Mr. Wijetunga's own perceptions as the declared policy of the government. In fact, it was very soon negated by the Prime Minister who spoke, in Delhi, of the government's readiness to enter into negotiations with the LTTE to work out a political solution. However, what is somewhat alarming is the encouragement it has given to a resurgent Sinhala nationalism.

Leader writers in the *Divayina* were ecstatic. Here at last was a political leader, a President, who had not fallen prey to the multi-ethnic rubbish. He was perceptive enough to recognize the true nature of the crisis facing Sri Lanka - a terrorist threat designed to pollute the Sinhala-Buddhist culture of the nation. To President Wijetunga's picture of the amity between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in the south, they added one more instance: the Sinhalese and the Tamils had their accounts in the same banks.

They described the Presidential perception in terms that were reminiscent of Buddhist theology; he had the correct knowledge and had chosen the correct path.

Mr. Gunadasa Amerasekera, in a centre page article in the *Divayina* was even more explicit; President Wijetunga's perception of the crisis was described by him in the same words used to describe the Buddha's vision; he called it "samma ditthi" - correct view. So, unfortunately, the expression of the President's views, done so lightly and naively, serves to enhance the anti-democratic crusade of the Sinhala nationalists.

## How Secure are Tamils in the South?

**T**he picture of peace and amity drawn by the President was rudely shattered by the indiscriminate arrests

and detention of Tamils in Colombo in the aftermath of the assassination of the late President Premadasa and stories of continued LTTE infiltration into the South. Contrary to accepted norms, houses and residences were searched at night by armed police. Tamils who could not satisfy the police of their identity were taken into custody; that their place of residence had been earlier registered with the police did not seem to matter. There was no knowing what particular proof of identity would satisfy the police; documents that satisfied one police party were not sufficient for another. The victims of this dragnet were primarily young men and women, some women with infants in their arms.

That the great majority of those taken into detention were released after two or three days points merely to the indiscriminate nature of the whole exercise. Such operations and arrests are not only a source of physical harassment to the particular victims but also the source of fear and trauma to the whole Tamil community living in the south. They also belie the picture of peace and amity that the President has tried to draw.

## Public Scandals and Private Protests

**J**ournalists periodically report outrageous acts of various kinds that catch the public eye. Alarming reports of flagrant violations of human life by unknown assassins, stealthy operations of mysterious death squads, unexplained disappearances of women, men and children are ghastly enough to create public outrage. Reports of odious acts perpetrated by public figures and their henchmen surface at an alarming rate. Stories of crass nepotism, family bandyism occur with unacceptable frequency. Scandals of illegal commissions, kick-backs and bribes pollute public life; these range from the airbus deal through property deals to benefit highly connected persons to special arrangements for cut flower transport by air. Allegations of deals designed to benefit those in public office or in state corporations have shattered public confidence in the probity of officials.

The continuing occurrence of scandals of varying degrees of odiousness and disgrace have rocked the public conscience. The biggest scandal of all, however, is that there is no public outcry, no organized public reaction; when we should expect a storm of public protest, what we get are only weak ripples of resentment. The ripples die away within a few days; we are then ready for the next scandal.

But why? Why is there no sense of moral outrage that would drive people to action?

**P**