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*Pravada* in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

## GIVING PEACE THE TOP PRIORITY

As we go to press with this issue, somewhat delayed by the extended holidays in April, the politico-military situation has again changed, and changed in significant ways.

Another offensive military operation has been launched in the North. Code named Riviresa II, this operation has as its objective the wresting of the other two divisions of the Jaffna peninsula - Thenmarachchi and Vadamarachchi - from LTTE control. The news from the front is very scanty; the censorship was so tightly operated that, in the first few days, it was even difficult to know from where the army had started on the offensive. It is now clear that the army has, within a week of the operation, taken control of the eastern half of the Thenmarrachchi division, adjoining the Valigaman division which it had taken earlier. The area taken includes Kilali, from where the LTTE ferry service across the lagoon to Kilinochchi started.

The number of direct confrontations between the army and the LTTE appears to have been small. There have been hit and run attacks of the guerilla type but no battles. One needs must conclude that the LTTE has decided, as a matter of strategy, to withdraw to the Wanni.

But there is one significant difference from the first Riviresa operation.

The people of Valigamam abandoned their homes and fled from the advancing army. Behind their exodus lay two reasons: first, their fear of the Sri Lankan army, based on earlier recollections of its brutal behaviour; second, a conscious decision by the LTTE

to force the people to flee the area, so as to deny the government a political victory, to belie the government claim that it was liberating people from the grip of the LTTE.

One will recall the bitter disputes about the exact numbers that fled Valigamam. Some relief organizations claimed that the number was about 500,000. The government tried to show that it was much less; however, it has now accepted, according to a report submitted to the UN Human Rights Commission's April meeting, that the number of persons displaced from Valigaman was 350,000. All these first fled to Thenmarachchi; about half remained there, either with kin or in makeshift shelters. The other half were ferried to the mainland, primarily to the Kilinochchi area. The conditions of life there for the displaced are known to be very bad.

The LTTE tried to continue with the same policy in the face of the new offensive. It tried to persuade, cajole or threaten the people of Thenmarachchi and Vadamarachchi to leave their homes and go south to Kilinochchi. But the response of the people was totally different. They stayed in their homes. And as the offensive continued, the people of Valigamam started to return to their homes. The number of persons who have thus returned now exceed 100,000.

The political implications of this return are important. Prof. G. L. Pieris and Gunadasa Amerasekera, two persons at different extremes of the political spectrum, have said that the people of Jaffna have voted with their feet. But what have they voted for? Amerasekera argues, or rather states with no supporting arguments, that they have repu-

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*Editors*  
**Charles Abeysekera**  
**Jayadeva Uyangoda**

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diated the LTTE, the demand for a separate state and also the demand for regional autonomy. Prof. Pieris would settle for a repudiation of the LTTE; he would also see it as an expression of the willingness of the Tamil people to continue living as citizens of a restructured Sri Lankan state.

We see it from a different perspective. The people of the North, particularly Jaffna, have long been the pawns of war. They have been human shields and have been shunted back and forth to suit the aims of a strategy that does not take their safety into account. This time, the options before them were all bad: go to Kilinochchi, live under the control of the LTTE in appalling conditions or stay in their homes under army control and hope that the government's promises of rehabilitation under a civilian administration would be soon honoured. They chose the second alternative and thereby dealt the LTTE a serious blow. The anguish of Tamils at the capture of Jaffna, to which Fr. Emmanuel refers in his article, may, in this view, be considered an over-reaction.

What they have really indicated by their action is that they are prepared to believe in the government's promises. These promises include rehabilitation, reconstruction to erase the ravages of war, a swift reestablishment of civil administration, and most important, an end to war through the implementation of reforms for regional autonomy. It is this total package for which the people of Jaffna have voted with their feet.

This situation opens up new possibilities for the government and indeed, casts new obligations on them. They have to indicate to the Tamil people, through the returnees to Valigamam, that they do intend to live up to their promises. They must deal with the problems of rehabilitation and reconstruction promptly. They must also ensure a swift reestablishment of the civil administration. It probably does the soldiers good to be shown distributing largesse to the returning refugees and handling various other civilian tasks. But these images do no good in terms of the larger objective, which should be the restriction of the army to strictly security related work and the reversion of all other tasks to the police and to civilian authorities.

The government can also involve the people themselves in the work of rehabilitation and encourage the growth of autonomous organizations among them. This will be an indication also of the government's commitment to democratic practice. Giving a voice to the people of Jaffna, who have long been condemned to silence, will also be a significant step towards restoring democratic practices among the Tamil people.

The government is also obliged to make good on the political package. It must now endeavour to push the package through Parliament and the people quickly. And with no dilution of its provisions, rather enhancing it to at least include mechanisms for power sharing at the center.

There is also another window of opportunity opening up for the government. Having demonstrated, much to the satisfaction of Sinhala nationalists, its ability to wage war, the government can now restore peace to the top of the agenda. This means some

reduction in the intensity of the war and moves towards resuming talks with the LTTE. Direct talks between the government and the LTTE were always necessary to finally end the fighting; the question was one of timing. And the time now looks opportune.

Various statements put out by the LTTE through its foreign offices imply that is now prepared to talk, and is not laying down impossible conditions like the withdrawal of the army. There are also other indications. We refer our readers to the speech made by a Mr. Rudrakumaran at a seminar in Norway, reproduced in this issue. He is actually addressing himself to the shape of a negotiated political settlement, a combination of regional autonomy and power-sharing at the center. It has been rumoured that this speech reflects current LTTE political thinking.

Of course, any fresh negotiations must focus on a political settlement. And since the LTTE is no longer operating a quasi-state in the Jaffna peninsula, it is no longer necessary to involve it in talks about rehabilitation and reconstruction. What is necessary is a process that can involve the Tamil people, the LTTE and other Tamil political parties in determining the shape of a desirable political settlement.

The government now has again the opportunity to make peace and a political settlement its priority.

If this opportunity is to fully optimised, there are also some other measures the government must take. It must lift the censorship and allow journalists access to Jaffna. It must allow visits by other groups such as those interested in relief and rehabilitation. It must allow NGOs to operate freely. Above all, it must take the political package to the people; there probably is some degree of ignorance about the details of the package and its potentialities for regional autonomy. The people need to be made aware of the proposals and drawn in to the discussion. Then the government can confidently live up to promises of peace, political settlement, democracy and transparency.

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