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

UNDERSTANDING APRIL 19

The question of 'Peace or War' has once again entered Sri Lanka's politics. The possibility of the so-called 'Third Eelam War' breaking out was the topic of conversation for many days. Will the peace process give way to another round of war, belying all hopes for a negotiated settlement?

The much-awaited fourth round of talks between the government and the LTTE took place in Jaffna on April 10 and 11. The government's consistently conciliatory approach to the peace process in general and its capacity to be flexible at a time of impending crisis has provided the basis for new hopes that may put the negotiation process back on track.

Three months had elapsed since the third round of talks. Since then the two parties had been unable to find common ground either on the agenda or the date for the next round of talks. The LTTE had indeed set out the issues which they considered needed immediate decision by the government and had set a deadline of April 28th for their implementation.

The four issues to which the LTTE drew attention were indeed long standing and had not been attended to in the hiatus between the third and fourth rounds of talks. These were (i) the removal of the embargo of items of non-military significance that were necessary for civilian life; (ii) the removal of restrictions on fishing; (iii) the removal of the army camp at Pooneryn; (iv) freedom of LTTE cadres to move in the East with their weapons.

The first two issues relate directly to the alleviation of the conditions of life in the North; the government was inclined to accede to these requests. The other two issues were of military significance and had to be looked at in terms of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement which provided that neither

side should attempt to affect the other's military capability during the pendency of the agreement.

The arguments brought forward by the LTTE in support of the demand for the removal of the Pooneryn camp are diverse and at various levels. At the first level, it is argued that the removal is necessary to enable the free use of the Sengupiddy road by civilians. The government then offered to withdraw the defence lines of the camp 600 meters away from the road and to give an undertaking to the effect that civilian passage along the road would not be subject to any check.

The level of argument is then shifted. Jaffna is surrounded by a string of army camps which constitute a stranglehold; what is being asked is the removal of one camp and that the newest as a token of the government's sincerity. The freedom of armed LTTE cadres to move in the east also became an intractable issue.

However, the government was prepared to be flexible on these two issues. It promised to review the question of Pooneryn in three months time or the commencement of political talks, whichever was the earlier. In the case of armed cadres in the east, it was prepared to discuss this in the context of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement.

These responses were however not acceptable to the LTTE which called them evasive and non-committal. This position was reflected in the LTTE letter of April 18th which announced their withdrawal from both the negotiating process and the agreement on the cessation of hostilities.

Hostilities were resumed on the very next day. On 20th of April at 12.30 am, LTTE frogmen/women blasted two gunboats of

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the Sri Lankan navy effectively ending the Cessation of Hostilities that had lasted for more than three months. With this tragic turn of events Sri Lanka seems poised at the threshold of yet another round of bloody violence.

A pertinent question to be asked at this point is: why is it that the LTTE preferred this particular turn of events and pushed for the resumption of hostilities? The political rhetoric of the LTTE, found in their newspapers, radio broadcasts and letters exchanged with the President of Sri Lanka offers some glimpse into the thinking of the LTTE leadership. A cluster of issues emerges in a scrutiny of the LTTE literature. The LTTE claims to have lost faith in Chandrika Kumaratunga's peace initiative, since Chandrika, after becoming President in November, is alleged to have given primacy to the interests of the military. Another major point of contention of the LTTE is Chandrika's alleged policy of deception wherein she, after making promises to help alleviate the difficulties of the day to day life of the people in the North, merely used those promises, instead of implementing them, to create a favourable international climate to secure economic aid. A basic message that the LTTE has communicated to the people in Jaffna since January this year is that

there is no difference between the past Sinhalese leaders and Chandrika. According to LTTE press comments, all leaders in Colombo are motivated by Sinhala chauvinistic and militaristic aspirations; the difference that Chandrika had made was to change the language a little bit. The LTTE's 'exposure' of 'Chandrika's hidden agenda' appearing in the Jaffna press in March — judging by its analysis, arguments, tone and tenor — clearly indicated that a vast perception gap had developed between the two sides.

Objectively looking at the LTTE's own analysis of events prior to April 19th, one may wonder whether any of their arguments could constitute a reasonable enough basis to justify a unilateral military action which has put into jeopardy the entire peace process. Not even the most ardent Southern admirer or detractor of Chandrika would say that Chandrika was trying to deceive the LTTE into a peace trap with military strategic considerations in mind. Yet, still more baffling is the fact that these arguments, some of them trivial, have ultimately acquired a cumulative strength in the minds of the LTTE to induce them into the conclusion that the negotiation process should be re-shaped by actions on the military front.

It would perhaps be useful for us to look at the LTTE's actions from their own perspective so that this seemingly inexplicable behaviour of the LTTE could be understood. At least till January this year, the LTTE's response to the government's peace initiatives appeared to be positive and cordial. When Mr. Prabhakaran signed the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement with President Kumaratunga in the first week of January, the relations between the two sides were cooperative and accommodative. Mr. Prabhakaran signed the COH agreement even though he had and continues to have differences with the President about its scope and conditions. However, in mid-January, things perhaps went wrong. Signs of mutual distrust began to appear in the now well-known haggling over the agenda and dates of the fourth round of talks. When the much awaited fourth round of negotiations did take place in Jaffna on April 10 and 11, the LTTE probably had made up their mind to adopt a posture of hard bargaining.

To explain this turn of events in mid-January, one can perhaps conjecture that the basic differences of the two parties concerning the fundamentals of the peace process began to surface after the COH agreement was signed and implemented. For the government, which at that time had a relatively brief time frame for constitutional reforms — the July 15 deadline —, political talks on substantive issues con-

cerning a settlement had to begin rather early. This approach to the time frame of political talks and its eventual outcome can be seen as having even determined the government's negotiation agenda as well as its desired pace of negotiations. The LTTE obviously had a different time-frame, agenda and pace for talks. While the government repeatedly insisted, in its communication with Mr. Prabhakaran, that political talks should go parallel with talks on the normalization of life in the North, the LTTE advocated a two-stage theory of peace negotiations. They saw the normalization of life in the North ("addressing the consequences of the war") as a prelude as well as a precondition to political negotiations ("addressing the causes of the war"). When the government insisted that political talks should begin without delay, the LTTE would have felt not merely irritated, but also that the President was deliberately attempting to undermine its larger political agenda.

Without resorting to any conspiracy theory of politics, and of course giving some benefit of the doubt to the LTTE, one can see a huge existential dilemma appearing before the LTTE leadership. Starting political talks, in order to find a political settlement to the ethnic question so that it could be implemented in just a few months time, would have meant for the LTTE a total transformation of its politics, behaviour, attitudes and relations with Tamil society. A guerilla organization turned into rulers of a quasi-state, the LTTE's comprehensively militarized politics and mind could not withstand the pressure coming from the frightening possibility of an early peace treaty. Actually, it is a fear of the peace process, which has been going on so well, that seems to have governed the strategic calculations of the LTTE leader.

This conclusion is well substantiated by the sheer triviality of LTTE's arguments that have been put forward to rationalize their action on April 19.

This, in turn, encapsulates the dilemma of the government. President Kumaratunga has recently stated that the government's peace program will continue 'with or without the LTTE.' The LTTE, through its arbitrary and capricious behaviour has also earned much international condemnation. The setback suffered by the negotiation process, which President Kumaratunga personally initiated last year, has also added to the political credibility of the government, primarily because the government is now seen by the public, here and abroad, as having managed the crisis with maturity while upholding its commitment to the goal of peace.

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