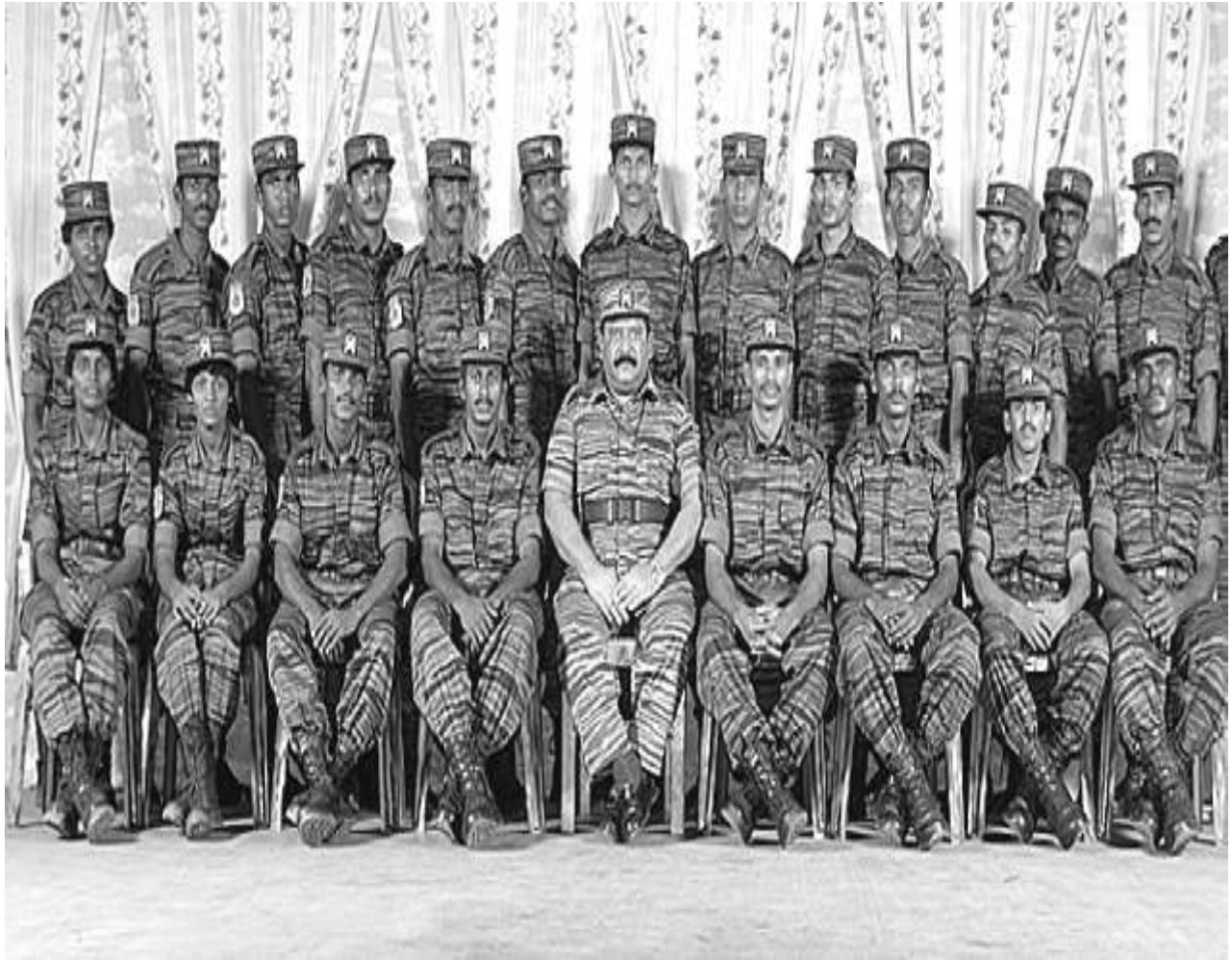


Growing Despair

Given the impetus provided by globalisation and high growth rates throughout South Asia, Sri Lanka seems perfectly capable of aiming for 10 per cent-plus growth rates. The only rider is that the political climate needs to be conducive, comments *Virendra Gupta*



LTTE photograph before an air attack on a Sri Lankan military base

Human Rights Watch, highlighting in a recent report the worsening situation in Sri Lanka, says that the government has resorted to unlawful killings, abductions and other serious human rights violations directed mainly against ethnic Tamils. The security forces, it says, have subjected the civilian population to indiscriminate attacks and obstructed the delivery of humanitarian aid, resulting in the displacement of over 300,000 people in the last one year. The past year has witnessed escalation of violence from both sides.

Chances of early resolution of the ethnic strife appear remote. The focus now is on military consolidation for a likely showdown. Despite the

growing impatience of the international community with terrorism, the LTTE has still not publicly distanced itself from it.

While the devolution issue has received considerable attention in the media, the equally important issue of the status of the Tamil minority in the country has not. The constituency of moderate Tamils continues to remain marginalised. The 'Sinhala only' policy has given rise to widespread disaffection and frustration in the Tamil community. Tamils in the army and the police account for less than one per cent; their representation in the higher echelons of government bureaucracy as well as the judiciary is also woefully inadequate.



Regarding devolution, the debate is essentially in black-and-white terms of 'unitary versus federal' status. There is a fairly broad consensus within and outside the country that a separate Ealam has to be ruled out.

The process of the All Party Representatives Committee (APRC) stands almost suspended. Over forty meetings spread over a year have failed to produce a consensus draft, since the

approach of all the competing groups is all-or-nothing. The biggest challenge for the government is to facilitate the evolution of a credible devolution package.

There is widespread apprehension that the government is working on a military solution. Encouraged by impressive gains scored in the East, the security forces have intensified the military offensive in the North. Media reports say that the government is fine-tuning its military strategy to engage the LTTE in a low-intensity conflict, which could drag on for several years. But, the LTTE being well entrenched in the

North, government forces might find the going tough there.

After the exit of Mangla Samaraveera from his party and the formation of SLFP (M) (Sri Lanka Freedom Party (Mangla), President Mahinda Rajapakse's political difficulties have accentuated. He also has to contend with the clout of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Increasing vulnerability in parliament could well force Rajapakse into the hardline camp of JVP (Janata Vimukthi Perumuna) or JHU (Jathika Hela Urumaya). At the same time, the present juncture presents him an opportunity to take a bold step to revive the peace process.

The conflict is adversely telling on the economy. The slowdown is in the tourism sector. With growing concern in the West over human rights violations in the country, there could be a question mark on Sri Lanka's export of readymade garments as well, which is a major source of foreign exchange for the country. The question is not whether Sri Lanka will continue on a growth path of 6 to 7 per cent but whether it has realised its full potential. Given the impetus provided by globalisation and high growth rates throughout South Asia, Sri Lanka

seems perfectly capable of aiming for 10 per cent plus growth rates. The only rider is that the political climate needs to be conducive.

As regards prospects of a settlement of the ethnic conflict, government circles are questioning Norway's impartiality, given the presence of considerable Tamil diaspora in that country. The government is also suspicious of the western countries' advocacy of human rights issues.

There is also increasing clamour, from almost every quarter, that India needs to play a proactive and 'above the surface' role, given the unique leverage it enjoys. President Rajapakse himself has given expression to that feeling, calling upon India to play an 'important' role in resolving the conflict. However, the continuing intransigence by both parties to the conflict makes any entanglement by India inadvisable for the present. The time for intervention, both by India and the international community, may come in the event of deterioration in the security situation and corresponding deepening of the humanitarian crisis, which seems likely in the future. For the present, India's interests will be better served by continuing with quiet diplomacy, engaging all the parties concerned. ■