



President seeks secret pact with LTTE in the face of imminent war

Excerpts from the Sunday Leader article of 25th June 2006

Desperate call

And mind you, to top it all, the Co-Chairs were also asking the President to recommit to the agreements reached in several rounds of talks from 2002, with an aid blockade the consequence of failure.

Thus, under siege all round and completely flummoxed, President Rajapakse made a desperate call Tuesday morning to the Uthayan newspaper office in Colombo, a media organisation that came under brutal attack few moons ago in Jaffna, now believed to be at the hands of a paramilitary group linked to the state.

It is through the channel of this newspaper the President hoped to sideline Norway and reach out to the LTTE directly and made no bones about it that Tuesday.

The telephone call which emanated from Temple Trees first asked for Chief Editor N. Vidyakaran and when the sub-editor who answered the phone inquired who the caller was, the operator politely said the President wishes to speak with the Editor.

And moments later Rajapakse was on line turning on his charm, asking Vidyakaran how he was keeping.

With the pleasantries out of the way, President Rajapakse told Vidyakaran, the country was facing an imminent war with both the LTTE and the army poised for attack and that urgent steps needed to be taken to prevent such an eventuality.

"Both the LTTE and the army are preparing for war and the people and I are caught in between. We don't have to work through Norway, why don't we deal directly?" the President told the Editor who was momentarily nonplussed.

However, Vidyakaran was quick to gather his wits and inform the President such sensitive matters cannot be discussed over the telephone, only to be told by Rajapakse to see him at 4 p.m. the very day to discuss the proposal.

With the stage thus set, Vidyakaran and his brother-in-law, E. Saravanabhavan, who is also the publisher of the Uthayan Group of Newspapers, made their way to Temple Trees at the appointed hour and were met by the President who was in the company of his Media Director Lucien Rajakarunanayake. Two women staffers also sat in on the discussion, which was joined halfway through by President's Secretary Lalith Weeratunga.

And no sooner the meeting started, the President said the security situation was getting out of hand and it was important for the government and the LTTE to work together to prevent the outbreak of war.

The President said just as much as the LTTE was preparing for war, so was the army and it was the civilians and he who were sandwiched in the middle and called to pay the price for the deteriorating situation.

The economy will be severely affected if war breaks out and all the people will suffer, Rajapakse also said.

President's proposal

Having said that, the President told Vidyakaran and Saravanabhavan, if the LTTE and the government can agree to put an end to all violence for two weeks, they could make a fresh start and develop the rapport from thereon.

"We don't have to do it through Norway or be dependent on them, we can deal directly," the President went on to say.

Rajapakse further said he was in a strong position to meet any challenge but wanted to avoid bloodshed, hence the offer to the LTTE.

Not stopping at that, the President said if civilians are killed by the LTTE, he will find it difficult to control the army and there would be more chaos and it was therefore to the advantage of both parties to come to an agreement.

Having listened to the President, Vidyakaran said he will communicate the proposal to the LTTE and revert.

Added Vidyakaran, "Your Excellency, I told Mr. Balasingham before coming for this meeting what you said on the phone about you being sandwiched between the army and the LTTE. He laughed and asked me to tell you that you are the army. That you cannot be caught in between because you are the Commander-in-Chief and the Defence Minister and your brother is the Defence Secretary."

Taken by surprise, the President quickly shifted gear and broached the issue of prior contacts he had with the LTTE both before and after the presidential election and inquired what went wrong.

The President made particular reference to the Airport Authority Chairman Tiran Alles, who he said was the intermediary used to keep a dialogue going with the LTTE and told the Uthayan duo, he had even acted on the Tigers' request when it came to certain appointments.

"Tiran was dealing with a person called Pooannan and I had in mind a particular person for the RADA chairman's post but at the LTTE's request I did not make that appointment," the President declared.

However, Vidyakaran burst the President's bubble stating that issue was earlier discussed with Tamilselvan and he had denied the LTTE made any request with regard to such appointments.

"Tamilselvan said Pooannan only deal with administrative matters such as those involving the kachcheri and he has no say in political decision making," Vidyakaran said.

Misled

Surprised, the President said Alles had brought him several messages from the LTTE earlier but with Vidyakaran insisting there was no such contact maintained with the LTTE at a decision making level, Rajapakse conceded he may have been misled.

The discussion shed further light on Rajapakse's style of operation when Vidyakaran also reminded him of the reasons for the failure to keep a dialogue going with the LTTE to the exclusion of Norway in the backdrop of the failed Geneva talks.

Said Vidyakaran, "You will remember sir that before the Geneva talks, you called me and Minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle for a discussion. At that discussion you told Minister Jeyaraj while official talks take place at the table, to keep an unofficial dialogue going with Mr. Balasingham through me. Then when talks ran into trouble in Geneva, Jeyaraj contacted me three times and wanted to meet with Mr. Balasingham saying he had a message from you. But Mr. Balasingham said he cannot meet with Jeyaraj since it will get Pirapaharan very angry. Later, maybe after consultations, he agreed to meet and they met at Mr. Balasingham's room for almost two hours."

Added Vidyakaran, "At the end of the meeting, Minister Jeyaraj asked Mr. Balasingham how they can continue to maintain direct contact. Mr. Balasingham said Vidyakaran is in Colombo and if there was a need to contact him or Mr. Tamilselvan, to tell me. But you did not follow up and we thought you were using some other channel. Mr. Balasingham also said after speaking to Mr. Jeyaraj that he had nothing in his head."

After listening to Vidyakaran's explanation, the President said they should make a fresh start and to inform him of the LTTE's decision to his proposal for a two week ceasefire.

He said the LTTE should inform him at the earliest what they expect from the government's side in exchange for an agreement by the Tigers to stop all attacks for two weeks.

But the President had one other message for the LTTE with a carrot temptingly attached and that was in relation to the Karuna group.

Said the President, "Tell the LTTE not to ask for the disarming of the Karuna group straight away and have them thrown on the road. Then the LTTE will kill them."

Responded Vidyakaran, "But the LTTE will insist on that. The Karuna group will have to be taken out of the north east theatre. That will be their basic demand."

Having dangled the carrot, the President toyed with Vidyakaran stating they could consider such options after the initial two week trial run is agreed to and enforced.

The President further said he will ensure that during the two week period there will be no attacks by the Karuna group.

LTTE stance

The loud thinking at the meeting was for the Karuna group to be initially confined to barracks and then systematically disarmed if the deal between the President and the LTTE runs smoothly.

Confident he had a deal in the making given the carrot on offer, the President was to also brief the security council of him meeting with the newspaper duo.

The following day, Wednesday, June 21, Vidyakaran made contact with Tamilselvan and communicated the President's proposal and was told he will speak with the LTTE leadership and revert in a couple of days.

But the LTTE leadership when informed of the President's proposal scoffed at it as an attempt to drive a wedge between the organisation and the international community in general and Norway in particular.

The thinking of the LTTE leadership was that with Rajapakse getting isolated internationally due to this failure to honour the agreements reached in Geneva, he was looking to use the LTTE as the cat's paw to wriggle out of the tight corner by opening a direct dialogue to the exclusion of Norway.

Further, the LTTE took the view Rajapakse was merely trying to buy time for a military offensive and would therefore not deal with him directly.

In fact, Pirapaharan had expressed surprise to Tamilselvan that President Rajapakse could adopt such childlike strategies to get Norway out of the peace process.

Nevertheless, how the JVP for all its breast-beating rhetoric sees the President's move to deal with the LTTE directly and secretly when it has called for the organisation to be banned remains to be seen.

Oblivious to the Presidential moves to sideline Norway, the facilitator was attempting to salvage the security situation and prevent all out war by using its good offices with the LTTE.

Deadlock

Towards this end, Ambassador Hans Brattskar met with Tamilselvan on Wednesday and urged the LTTE to reconsider its position on the SLMM monitors from EU countries, stressing the devastating impact the organisation's decision will have on the CFA.

Unable to break the deadlock, Norway has decided to speak with the government as well on the issue and give its response on June 29, which itself may be decisive.

Interestingly, at the time Brattskar met Tamilselvan, the LTTE Political Wing Leader was already in the know of the President's move, having been told by Vidyakaran, but chose to keep it to himself.

What Tamilselvan did do however was tell Brattskar the LTTE had the fullest confidence in Norway's role as facilitator and that they would not agree to deal through any other agency or individual.

And the LTTE's thinking on the President's proposal also came to be reflected in the Sudar Oli editorial written by Vidyakaran himself the same Wednesday, which stated thus, inter alia, "We need a leadership that is receptive to diverse thoughts and that can, in the light of those views, execute its discretion with courage for the larger interest of the country. That is what the country lacks and the present stalemate in the peace process is due to that."

The editorial goes on to state as follows: "It is appropriate here to refer to the statement made by LTTE Leader Pirapaharan immediately after Mahinda Rajapakse became Executive President last November - 'Mahinda Rajapakse is said to be a pragmatist. Let us wait and watch how he proceeds towards peace.'"

Then comes the punch paragraph - "What needs to be addressed here is to find out whether the President is a chauvinist or not, whether he is committed to a negotiated settlement of the ethnic issue or not, whether he is in a position and in a conducive political environment to arrive at a reasonable decision or not. The answer obviously would be, 'No!'"

And the final paragraph of that editorial summed up the LTTE's response to the President in these terms: "Since the government media and the government spokesmen relate reports submitted by authorities justifying acts of violence let loose by the security forces and paramilitary groups, the President does not have the benefit of access to realities there. As a result, the President is groping in the dark being unable to grasp the core issues. That is the present sorry plight."

Mind you, that editorial was written by Vidyakaran just 24 hours after the meeting with the President and within an hour after communicating Rajapakse's proposal to Tamilselvan.

Childish manoeuvre

And you don't need to be a rocket scientist to, on the reading of it, understand the LTTE thinking on the President's proposal - even to Rajapakse the message was loud and clear.

But what the President has done through this childish manoeuvre is once again signal to the international community his word cannot be trusted, considering all the commitments he made to the various diplomatic heads of his abiding commitment to the CFA and agreements reached through Norwegian facilitation.

No doubt even the USA and Japan, two countries that have bent over backwards to accommodate the President's view point, would be aghast at this manoeuvre and Rajapakse has to be a man of kindergarten thinking if he thought such a ploy would not reach the ears of the Co-Chairs.

And now Rajapakse will also have to explain his ploy to both the JVP and UNP, with it very likely they will raise issue on the secret deal, a failure though it may have been.

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