

South Asia

Interview

"I have no doubt that India will act"

Sri Lankan foreign minister **Lakshman Kadirgamar** spoke about the likelihood of peace moves and India's role in any such negotiations to **Waruna Karunatilake** in Colombo. Excerpts:

How would the LTTE's military gains in Jaffna affect any future peace negotiations?

It's clear the LTTE is trying to manoeuvre itself into the best possible bargaining position. Paradoxically, this is not such a bad sign if their aim is the negotiating table. To try and secure the best possible position en route the table is an old tactic. My feeling is, in some ways, the net is closing around them. I don't mean militarily, but that there's more awareness globally. The LTTE's going to find many countries breathing down its neck. How they handle it will be interesting to watch. I don't feel they can turn a blind eye to it.

What's Colombo's perception of India's possible role?

I don't think we should expect the impossible from India. In Sri Lanka there's a mood in favour of India coming in, doing something. Don't lie low, forget the IPKF, start all over again and so on all that's easily said. But it's a highly complex problem for India. Don't forget it's a democracy, they'll have to debate about it in Parliament. Then, bear in mind the armed forces' bitter memories of IPKF. Add to it the Tamil Nadu factor, which has its own dynamics.

So, I would be content if India does what it's doing now. That is, reaffirm loud and clear, notwithstanding the past, that it wholeheartedly supports our territorial integrity. Don't forget it's a position very much in India's interest, not

a divine stand taken out of some grace or favour. I don't see them budging from it. Secondly, for a variety of reasons, India makes no bones of its opposition to the LTTE. I'm very pleased to see that, apart from the Centre, we have the very significant and clear stand taken by Mr Karunanidhi. I have no doubt that in appropriate circumstances — and that's something one can't predict today — India will take necessary action to meet its stated position... (that is) if it feels Sri Lanka is seriously threatened. I can't predict what that action might be, but we can be sure it'll be a well-considered one. There are also other factors such as the Trincomalee (harbour) offer. India now has had time to digest events. I feel it's sounding international opinion, bearing itself up for assuming a role, even if it's thrust upon it by events.

In the short term, do you think there is a chance for peace negotiations?

Yes. But my optimism is not based on any change of heart on the LTTE's part. I believe Prabhakaran is still obsessed and driven by his dream of a separate state. To him that's absolutely the be-all and end-all of existence. But with all that, the awareness of realities must surely dawn on him. He must learn he can't obtain and maintain a separate state in the face of so much opposition. So I believe the LTTE is getting ready for the inevitability of negotiations. Not the desirability mind you, but the inevitability. It makes tactical sense that they would want to secure as much land as possible and they would also like to set the time-frame.

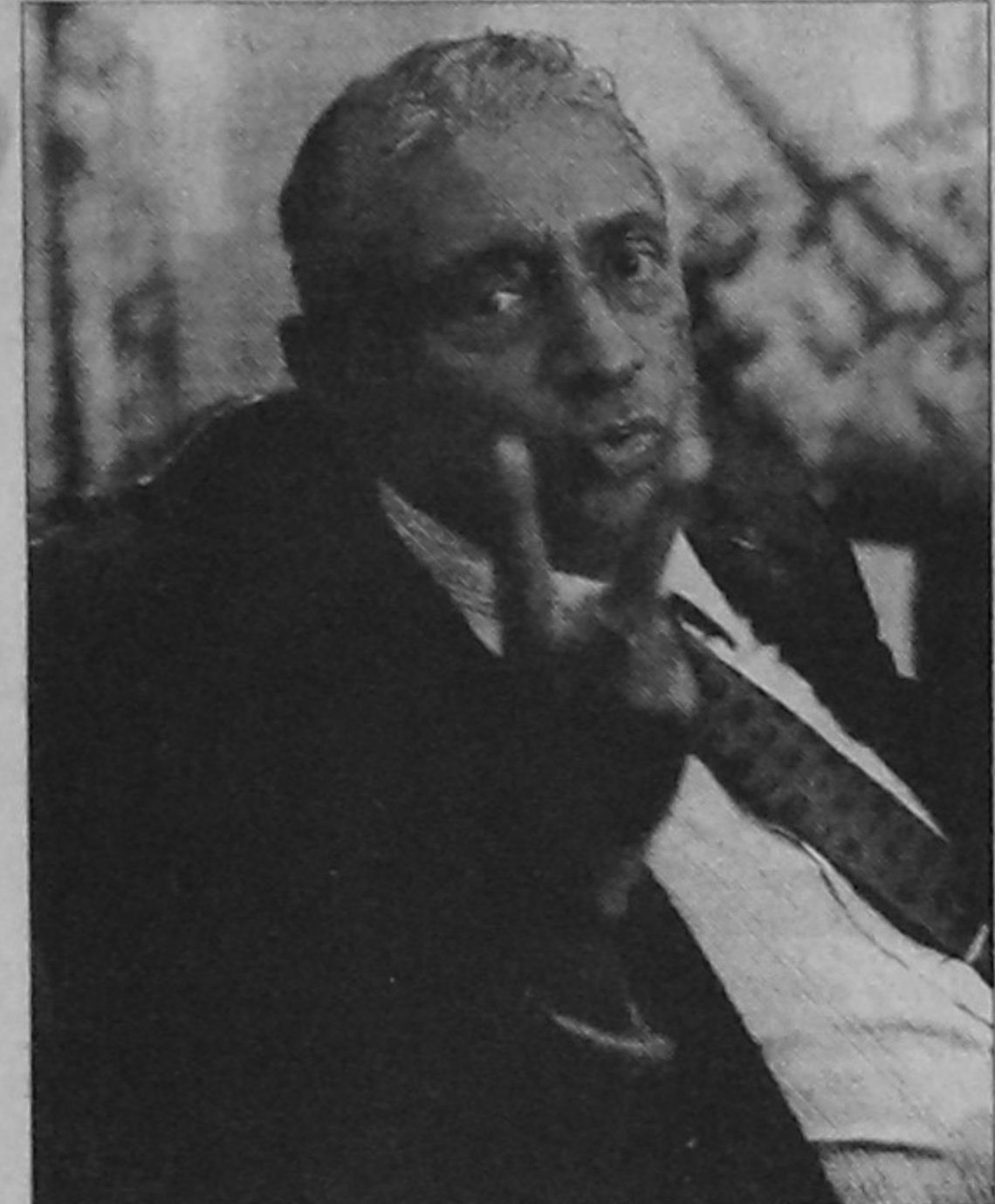
Do you feel India has to play a key role or are you looking towards Norway to perform it?

Norway has made it plain that they are willing to be the facilitator. But if events dictate otherwise, they will gracefully withdraw or play a secondary role. In other words, Norway is not taking an egoistic position on this. Therefore, in the event of India wishing to play a role, Norway will create no problems at all.

How would you respond to an Indian offer to facilitate talks with the LTTE?

I have verified that Jaswant Singh did actually say something to that effect on TV. Of course, there is still a world of difference between his saying something to the media and officially indicating it to us. Now, should we take account of the fact that he said it on TV and therefore respond to it? That's something we are reluctant to do — it is not a good way to conduct diplomacy. The point is, should we wait for an official inclination or should we make an official inquiry? Of those options, making an official inquiry on the basis of what he told Star TV does not appeal much to me. I would rather prefer diplomatic channels. These channels are open and are working. So, fairly soon, we should be able to articulate a position.

Courtesy: Outlook of India



Saarc

Re-activating the Unloved Organisation

Holding summits is necessary for the South Asian body to advance. Powerful states must not poison the Saarc spirit with their hostility and inherent suspiciousness, which makes it difficult to create a powerful trading bloc, writes **Ekram Kabir**

THE Saarc Secretary General Nihal Rodriguez's visit to Dhaka was quite an opportunity to zoom in on the regional body's prospects. His observations provided some serious food for thought as far as the region's priorities are concerned. His optimism proves that "despite delay in holding the 11th Summit, the informal system of consultation among its members as a matter of routine and tradition shows that the regional organisation is still functioning."

Nihal Rodriguez sounded quite sure about the future of the organisation, which is unloved by its two obvious powerful member-countries — India and Pakistan. He was in Dhaka for consultations with government officials as part of his efforts to give the organisation a fresh encouragement after the summit scheduled to be held last in November in Kathmandu was postponed due to reported objection by India to sit with Pakistan's present head of state. He felt that the organisation holds tremendous potential, particularly in addressing the common issues of poverty alleviation, illiteracy, and removing tariff barriers for promoting intra-regional trading.

Saarc is now focussing on core economic issues. This, despite the apparent slow pace, proves that member-countries feel that economic problems are core issues which should be addressed immediately for the benefit of their own people and for the entire South Asia. Rodriguez was quoted as saying, True, the Saarc has brought to-

gether countries, which, in combination, offer a wide range of opportunities for development. South Asia is already the powerhouse for manpower to the Middle East and to the burgeoning economies of Southeast Asia. It would not be unfair to say that labour inputs from Saarc nations provided the boost these economies needed in order to reduce labour costs and to remain competitive.

Holding summits is necessary for the South Asian body to advance. The 10th summit, held in Colombo in July 1998, was a landmark event. Saarc's efforts to boost economic development through regional cooperation was taken a step further when all member-states agreed to finalise a treaty regime on the South Asian Free Trade Area (Safra) by the year 2001. The completion of the Third Round of Trade Negotiations under Safra, and decision to commence the fourth round are also noteworthy in this regard. On the social front, efforts are underway to draw up a Convention on Regional Arrangements for the promotion of child welfare in South Asia. A draft on Regional Convention on combating trafficking of women and children for prostitution has already been finalised and is expected to be signed at the 11th summit. One of the most important decisions taken on the social agenda of Saarc in Colombo was the agreement by Saarc leaders on the necessity for Saarc to develop a social charter which would focus on drawing up targets with a broad range to be achieved across the region in the areas of poverty

eradication, population stabilisation, empowerment of women, youth mobilisation, human resource development, promotion of health and nutrition and the protection of children.

Other events of significance include the completion of the comprehensive review of Saarc undertaken by the Group of Eminent Persons (GEP) as well as the finalisation of the recommendations of the Independent Expert Group on IPA. Together these recommendations provide a useful blueprint for addressing the challenges ahead as we march forward. The action plans on media and information, and on telecommunications adopted by the information ministers and the communication ministers respectively, also reflect the commitment of member-states to further promote people-to-people contact within the region.

But it is also true that indefinite postponement of the 11th summit seems to question the future of the seven-nation grouping. What poisons the Saarc spirit is the low-grade hostility and inherent suspiciousness in the relationships between India and Pakistan. Their relationship makes it difficult for developing the organisation into a powerful trading bloc.

The postponement of the summit signals that India-Pakistan "as usual" strains are spilling over into Saarc. This certainly is an injustice to the region at large. On the other hand, the present balance of forces within Pakistan and its history suggests that the Chief

Executive of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, has entrenched himself, and with the passage of time, the whole world have started to do business with Pakistan. It is not a sacrifice on India's part to do the same!

The situation is very tricky for the Saarc and its future seems to be at peril, because Pakistan's military leader does not seem to be in a hurry to leave — that is why India does not want to start a dialogue — and if India decides not to talk to him at all, then the summit might remain postponed indefinitely. This scares the other member-nations. Again, what if India asks: "Who does the General represent — the brigade commanders, or the people of Pakistan?" India may well say that it is the brigade commanders and argue that it joined the Saarc when there was at least a semblance of democracy in all the seven nations.

Well, if Pakistan's former military strongman Zia-ul-Haq's facade of democracy and Nepal's Panchayat Raj system are any semblance for "democracy", then India certainly does not have a strong point not to join the scheduled summit, putting the future of the sub-continent association at stake. However, it would be too early to write off the position of Saarc. The body has a chequered history of summits. Inconsistencies, for example, the 1991 summit in Colombo had to be deferred for a month, because Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuk expressed his inability to attend. The King reportedly did so at India's behest because the then

Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao was unhappy with Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa's action in unilaterally asking Indian troops deployed in Lankan north and east, under a bilateral pact, to leave. And in 1993, the Dhaka summit was almost cancelled as India objected to the hostile attitude of Pakistan and Bangladesh towards New Delhi over the demolition of Babri mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu zealots.

Again, when the late Bangladeshi president Ziaur Rahman first raised the idea of regional cooperation in 1980, the response was not very enthusiastic because most of the countries had bilateral problems, especially with India, the predominant regional power.

Now, South Asian nations are faced with this prickly test of their resolve to promote regional cooperation as India and Pakistan bicker over the timing of the next Saarc summit. After the 10th summit in Colombo on July 29-31 last year, amid nuclear tension, South Asia's outlook is again faced with instability and seems unpredictable. India and Pakistan are again at each other's neck, blaming each other for everything that goes wrong.

There are two opposite views

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The South Asian nations together can build a bright future for themselves if they can stay away from the internal conflicts that keep propping up now and then. They have to move away from geopolitics and focus more on pressing issues that need immediate attention (poverty, political instability, widespread disease and epidemics, women trafficking etc). Regional leaders must not give up the task of thinking creatively and innovatively, either out of fear, incompetence or animosity. They should not waste any opportunity to hold the scheduled Saarc summit.

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