

# DailyMirror

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## We will give what Tamil people want, not what LTTE demands

*Minister of Constitutional Reform and Ethnic Integration, D.E.W. Gunasekera was on the panel of constitutional*

*experts which drew up the Constitutional package offered to the LTTE in 2000, under the Chandrika Kumaratunga Presidency. Agreeing that that package delivered maximum devolution, the Minister speaks to Hard Talk about the fresh initiative of President Mahinda Rajapaksa to come out with a new set of devolution proposals.*

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### HARD TALK *By Shakuntala Perera*

**Q:** Rudrakumaran, legal advisor to the LTTE, recently claimed that the "United Sri Lanka" concept cannot be accepted as a pre-negotiation parameter and that it runs contrary to the current international practice, and to the law of self-determination.

**A:** He is a spokesman for the LTTE. You can't expect any different from him.

**Q:** The question is on what basis future government negotiations with the LTTE would move?

**A:** We need to keep all doors open for negotiations. We simply need to do more to satisfy the Tamil people. We must not wait till peace is achieved for that process to begin. There are so many other ways to start on meeting the needs of the people. We should accelerate the development work in the North and the East. We have completely neglected the needs in these areas. Growth has suffered greatly due to this.

**Q:** Wasn't it the continuing war situation that hampered development in those areas?

**A:** Even with the war development can continue. The LTTE is only exploiting our failure to meet the needs of the people there. This is where the LTTE has scored. One main solution is bringing back two languages into implementation. We will start that in all government offices immediately. This was the root cause of the problem. After 19 years we will implement this to facilitate ease of operation.

**Q:** Aren't the Sinhalese people in the East also suffering due to the language problem and in every other province due to slow development processes?

**A:** Yes. Sinhalese people in areas like Trincomalee and Ampara suffer because everything in the North and East is done in Tamil language. We need to remedy this process. Development in predominantly Sinhala areas is also affected. It's true that not only the North and the East is affected.

**Q:** You continue to be optimistic about the LTTE's commitment to peace. How would you describe their continued violation of the ceasefire agreement?

**A:** I am optimistic simply because there is no way out. As the President said the only alternative to peace is peace and not war. From experience of the problem we know that the only final solution is in meeting the grievances of the Tamil people. I'm not saying that the LTTE are the sole representative of the Tamil people, but they are the warring party, so there is a need to negotiate with them.

**Q:** But in a scenario where the LTTE refuses to negotiate what do you do? At the last meeting planned in Oslo they did not even sit for talks.

**A:** If the LTTE is not ready for talks the government has the responsibility to find a solution. This is why the government decided to appoint an expert committee under the All Party Conference to look at a political solution that we can offer to the Tamil people. If we can get consensus from within the Southern political parties and bring a political formula that meets the needs of these people we can go ahead and solve this problem.

**Q:** Given that they have rejected every approach by successive Sri Lankan governments towards such an approach, and has thus led to the breakdown of those processes, how can you be sure that this time will be different?

**A:** What is necessary at this point is that we understand what the needs of the Tamil people are and not what the LTTE demands. Our foremost focus should be that. If we can come to an agreement on that, we can build from there and achieve peace. The only difference with the LTTE is that they want separatism, which is out of the question! But even the LTTE says that they can't look at agreeing to anything when there is no consensus in the Southern political parties. This is true. This is why we are trying to get consensus through the APC.

**Q:** But the UNP is having they're own reservations about offering support to the APC initiative. How confident are you in meeting that obstacle?

**A:** I can't say I am confident of UNP support. But the fact

remains that a majority of the people want a solution and not war. And it is the People's Alliance and the UNP that account for 90% of the votes. If the UNP plays truant we can't maintain the momentum.

The expert committee is formed of experts and politicians. It is what the experts draw up that will be forwarded to the politicians for agreement. The main criteria for the framework, is maximum devolution outside of division. Sovereignty will be maintained. I believe resolution can be achieved within that framework.

**Q:** Don't you feel that the UNP is a crucial element to pushing any political proposal through?

**A:** The UNP is absolutely necessary. That is both my personal as well as our Party's conviction. We must draw the UNP in to this process. Otherwise there can't be a solution. We need the UNP as much as the Tamil people. This is a national question which should be placed over all other issues. The life of the country is at stake. President can't solve it alone. If the UNP agrees that there is a problem then they must join in finding a solution.

**Q:** Then how healthy is it to buy off its members and antagonize the main opposition?

**A:** These are petty issues. Fourteen members crossed over from our government and led to the fall of the Chandrika Kumaratunga government. Who was behind it? Ranil Wickremesinghe. There are concerns within the UNP that it is because they can't protect their own members that they are crossing over. One member had said that if they are unable to contain it more members will cross over. It may not be morally correct. But the main question is that the two parties can and must try to find a solution.

**Q:** Former President Chandrika Kumaratunga offered one of the widest forms of devolution through her constitutional package of 2000. The LTTE still rejected it, so how can you ensure acceptance this time around?

**A:** What happened was that the UNP blocked it. That is why that initiative went back. All parties in the House, including the Left parties agreed except for the UNP. We had the highest acceptance for that proposal except from the UNP. That is precisely why there needs to be consensus within the Southern polity to any political solution of the government.

**Q:** But the fact remains that even if the South comes together the LTTE will still reject the proposal.

**A:** Let the LTTE reject it. We don't have to worry about them. The responsibility is with the government to meet the needs of the people through a political solution.

**Q:** Yet earlier you spoke of the need to negotiate with the

LTTE as they were the warring party. Even with a peace process on and a Ceasefire in operation the LTTE refuses to negotiate. Is the government confused about what to do?

**A:** The LTTE wants a separate state. But does it mean we agree to that? No. Fifty three percent of the Tamil people live with the Sinhalese people outside of the control of the LTTE. Sixty three percent of the Tamil speaking people also live outside. They have chosen to live under President Rajapaksa and not Prabaharan. There is more happening in that community that there is to see. These people want a solution not separatism. Let us move maximum devolution which will bring a qualitative change in their lives.

When that happens it's not necessary to address the LTTE. They are warring yes, but we can win over the Tamil people. There are already contradictions within the LTTE and even some elements against the movement. The LTTE's role is declining all over the world. They are losing with the International community, India and they're own people abroad. They have reached the maximum they could and now there is nowhere else to go. They can't go further. This is the best time to bring the Tamil people in to the equation with a solution.

**Q:** Are you saying that the government is ready to ignore the LTTE factor to the problem?

**A:** I don't believe that they are the sole representative of the Tamil people. I reject that notion. If there was a proper election the Tamil United Liberation Front would win the Tamil votes. They are just silently watching.

This is why we must approach the people. We are unable to bring the LTTE to a political equation not the people. Such a solution will completely paralyze the LTTE and sharpen the contradictions within.

Even Tamil National Alliance members ask us for a solution. They can't talk because if they do they will be killed. This is a fascist movement. The LTTE are quite different to the Irish Republican Army or any such movement.

**Q:** Then what was the rationale behind the government's decision to facilitate the visit of IRA Deputy Leader Martin Mc Guinness last week to negotiate with the LTTE?

**A:** I don't know the rationale behind that move.

**Q:** You were part of the group that engineered the Chandrika Kumaratunga political package. Do you feel that President Rajapaksa should build on that or go for a completely fresh approach?

**A:** That proposal will certainly be taken into account by the expert panel. It will be studied in depth. Like that devolution and power sharing in the centre will be the

basis for the political solution. UNP senior Ministers like K.N. Choksy joined and we added their concerns.

But later the UNP rejected it. We will look at maximum devolution outside of separation. There are different degrees of federalism. When we put the word 'united' in the 1972 Constitution the country became divided! Mere words won't make them one or the other. It is application that is important. Let political scientists call it what they want. But what is necessary is that it meets the people's aspirations. If the words are an obstacle let's drop them.


**Q:** There is criticism against the Indian model of federalism which the government is keen on taking on.

**A:** We need not go after any model. Even the Indian model has its negative as well as positive aspects. Their Constitution has also gone through much change. We can draw from particular features of that Constitution. But we need to build our own system.

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