

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

INTERVIEW/S.THONDAMAN

'We Can Sort It Out'

Indian-born Saumyamoorthi Thondaman was only 11 when his family moved to Sri Lanka in 1924. As a young man, he became a trade unionist, representing the Indian Tamils whom the British had brought to the island to work the tea plantations. In 1943, he was elected president of the union — now called the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) — and has retained the post ever since. Elected to Parliament three times on the CWC ticket, Thondaman was appointed minister of rural industrial development in 1978 when his party forged an alliance with the ruling United National Party.

Today, at 76, he still holds this portfolio and is the only Tamil in the cabinet. His loyal constituents, the Plantation Tamils, regard him as the man who won them Sri Lankan citizenship, self-respect, state welfare — and the biggest wage hikes in their history. He has played a pivotal role in Indo-Lankan discussions concerning the country's Tamil community and the presence of the Indian Peacekeeping Force. Asiaweek Correspondent Arjuna Ranawana spoke to Thondaman Aug. 1. Excerpts from the interview:

How did you defuse the recent crisis between India and Sri Lanka?

After the July 27 cabinet meeting, there was a consensus that the IPKF should cease to function on the 29th. The situation was so serious, I decided to visit the Indian high commissioner and propose a formula to him. Acting in a personal capacity — not as a minister — I told him I was willing to compromise. There was really only a small gap between our positions. After talking to him, I thought I could also persuade the government to agree to the compromise. And that is what happened. The compromise has saved the situation for the time being.

You say for the time being — but what of the future?

The important thing is that the two

sides are now talking to each other. There had been a lack of confidence. The two governments did not know each other's point of view. We have a new administration in Colombo and there had been no consultations with New Delhi since it came to power [in January]. Now we are talking, now we can sort it out.

But clearly the IPKF has to go. No question about that. But this need not really be a problem if compromises are made. Both India and Sri Lanka are sovereign states — and sovereignty is something they will protect with all their might. Both sides have to recognise that. Goodwill must be created so that the troops may leave.

How can the Tamil problem be solved?

The Tamils have been agitating for their rights for the past 35 years. First they asked for federalism, but the Sri Lanka government — which represents the Sinhalese point of view — said no. Then they asked for a separate state — and they were able to assert themselves and even win devolution [in the Northeastern Province] because of India's help.

But now the Sinhalese see the Indian troops as an agent of the Tamils. That is not really so. The Tigers — who have killed the most Sinhalese, the most Indians and the most other Tamils — are now talking to the government and are ready to assume a peaceful role! That is a major achievement.

We must try to bring all the Tamil groups together. That is the policy of President Premadasa's government. I have spoken to [Northeastern Province Chief Minister Varatharaja] Perumal and assured him that any solution will include his point of view.

How are the talks between Colombo and New Delhi going?

Please don't expect any immediate results. Our team will argue effectively, but they will not take decisions. They will have to return to consult the government. But after the second or third round of talks you will see a solution emerging. Once we find a solution to the problem of the Tamils, then India will have no further interest in Sri Lanka. Then they can go. ■



Greg Girard — Asiaweek

"Let's compromise"