

OP/ED

# LTTE's Swiss honeymoon ends

The honeymoon seems to be over for Sri Lanka's economic refugees in Switzerland, with the Berne Government prepared to send back asylum seekers.

A Sunday Times investigating team visited Switzerland last week for a first-hand look at the deep-rooted issues and answers.

The Sri Lankan Cabinet is studying the agreement with Berne to send back the refugees.

The on-the-spot report from our team:

In the immediate months following the infamous 1983 July anti-Tamil riots in Colombo and elsewhere, countries like Switzerland opened their frontiers to a wave of refugees from Sri Lanka.

They waived them through passport control even if they had forged documents. They looked the other way when these refugees slipped through its borders with Germany, Italy and France. These refugees recounted horror stories, some true, some fiction which nevertheless sent a chill down the spine of the otherwise compassionate Swiss officialdom, as public opinion swelled against what they called 'Genocide' by the major Sinhalese dominated Government in Sri Lanka.

The refugees had to pay their way through, nevertheless. Airlines cashed in on what they termed 'ethnic traffic'. Job agents prepared the bogus passports which the refugees were asked to lose, even if it was by eating it, or flushing it down the aircraft toilet.

Almost all of them were young men escaping either the arrests by the Army or the compulsory draft by the Tamil guerrilla groups, or both. Angry with the often wild propaganda these youth indulged in, the Colombo government called them economic refugees merely looking for jobs in the West. The Swiss took a different view. These youth were asked to apply for political asylum, and were released to the famous Swiss hotel industry which by then were chronically deficient of waiters and cooks.

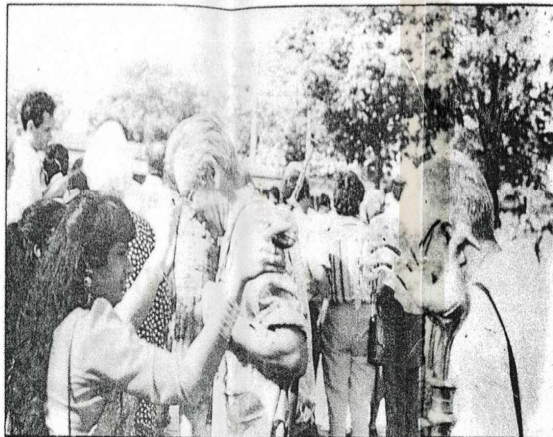
While the Sri Lankan government was then desperately looking for the support of western cabinets, including that of Britain's Margaret Thatcher, her journalist daughter, Carol, wrote after a visit to Switzerland:

"Neither do the Swiss like working in the hotel business, and so they don't. Today 'Swiss Service' is more likely to mean Yugoslav, Portuguese or Sri Lankan... With the employment choices that a highly developed country offers, the Swiss favour white-collar jobs instead of the often dirty work and unsocial hours involved in the hotel and catering trade".

The outgoing Swiss Director of Refugees, Peter H'Arbenz points out that some Sri Lankan refugees would have saved, not merely earned, upto Swiss Francs 50,000 (Rs. 1.2 million) in these years working in the hotel trade.

Today, ten years after that fateful July 1983, the tables have been turned. The Swiss Government has spearheaded a move to arrest the influx of asylum seekers, and they have begun with the Sri Lankans. Official estimates put at least 22,000 Sri Lankans being in Switzerland whose population of foreigners is over 15 per cent of the national population of six million. There are nearly 30,000 Yugoslavians there, but with the crisis in Bosnia, they will not be asked to go home yet.

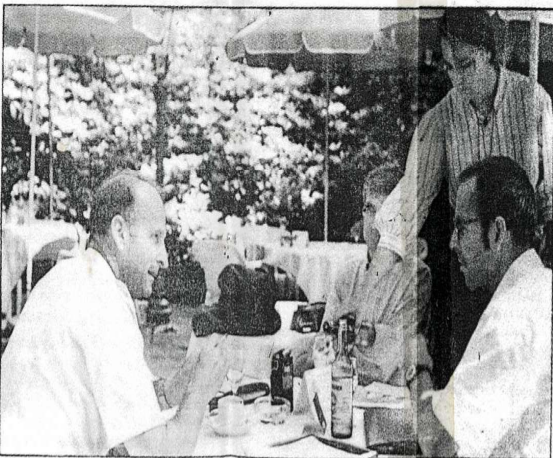
"We see what's happening in neighbouring Germany", says Arbenz. "We don't want racial troubles in Switzerland. We are giving a signal to the Sri Lankans



Blessing: the Swiss people are being greeted warmly



Born in the country: will they be naturalized Swiss?



Interview: Peter Arbenz speaks to Swiss journalist while Swiss Ambassador to Colombo (centre) looks on

## Berne - Colombo Agreement

Highlights of the Agreement between Switzerland and Sri Lanka now before the Cabinet in Colombo.

- \* Respect for the safety and dignity of the returnees.
- \* The two countries will decide the number of returnees.
- \* UNHCR will be invited to act as liaison between the returnees and the two countries.

- \* The Sri Lankan authorities will provide each returnee the addresses of the Swiss Embassy, the UNHCR and Sri Lankan authorities if the returnees wish to bring to the attention of such authorities any particular problems faced by them.
- \* No returnee will be forced to proceed to "uncleared areas" against his or her free will.
- \* Assistance which could be given to the returnees.

under the new Swiss 'last-in, first-out' policy. Others have been there so long they are already complaining of discrimination, in Switzerland.

One of them bemoaned that as a cook in the university he gets Swiss Francs 3,000 per month (Rs. 100,000)

rich. I boarded this boat and was welcomed aboard the vessel with a glass of Swiss wine and a masala vadai to go with it.

At the village the Mayor was at hand to grace the lunch laid out. He told us that there is no specific

He is an arch-typical story of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugee in Switzerland. Claims to have paid Rs. 85,000 to a job agent in Colombo after being released from the Boossa camp in 1986. Now he makes a living by strumming his guitar five days a week in restaurants in and around Zurich.

Krishna's friend is Sri Ganesh Anandan from Uduppiddi. He came to Switzerland in 1991 and works in a cafe at a village called Forst. "I was not a terrorist", I was a civilian, "he insists and shows off a denture which he says was the result of an Army riflebutt, during interrogation.

As we docked back in Zurich, the grand finale awaited the Helvetas and picnic. A pottu planted on the foreheads of the 'Bleeding Hearts' by pretty Jaffna-born damsels followed by a sarong-clad nagasalam band that led them along the cobbled streets of Zurich in a noisy procession.

The same evening in the Swiss capital of Berne, Refugee Day was marked by an open-air show and carnival-like stalls at a square right opposite the building of the Federal Parliament normally used as a fruit-pola.

The LTTE had its own stall selling pictures of Prabhakaran, Kittu, Sea Tigers etc. Its play depicted the atrocities committed by the IPKF. It was indeed their day.

A significant feature was that only the LTTE had a stall at these celebrations. No other Tamil organisation was present for whatever the reason. Equally, the LTTE having rubbed their one-time sympathisers, the Western governments on the wrong side - in no small way thanks to Indian government pressure, has now worked themselves into being a kind of Non-Government Organisation (NGO).

In neighbouring Austria where there was a UN conference on Human Rights, NGOs were permitted a floor below where government representatives were holding forth. The LTTE was there in a big way distributing pamphlets and red balloons with the LTTE emblem.

The wheel has indeed turned for the Sri Lankan Tamils in Europe where racialism is again raising its

THE SUNDAY TIMES INVESTIGATION

## Refugee Office Director states the reasons

Peter H. Arbenz, a General in the Swiss Army, is the Director of the Federal Office for Refugees in Berne. He is the man who is piloting the programme to send back Sri Lankan Tamils from his country.

The Federal Office for Refugees is a very important office in the Swiss Federal Government and Director Arbenz occupies the hot seat. Shortly, he will be leaving to take up a job that will draft new immigration laws for Switzerland following the influx of more and more asylum seekers, including over 22,000 from Sri Lanka.

P. Arbenz is well-known as the one man who is in touch with the LTTE's Paris based spokesman Thilagar and the official who saw that Kittu was given a place to stay when both Britain and France kicked him out.

'The Sunday Times' interviewed Director Arbenz on the Inter-City train between Zurich and Berne. Excerpts from the interview:

### The Sunday Times: Why are you asking Sri Lankan Tamils to leave Switzerland?

Arbenz: The biggest colony of Sri Lankan Tamils in Europe outside Germany are in Switzerland. With racial tensions in Germany, more and more are slipping into Switzerland. 17,000 Sri Lankans have yet to have their asylum papers decided. Many more are living underground. We want to stop internal immigration of such people in Europe. Switzerland does not want to be a basin for asylum seekers. We can't give Sri Lankan Tamils special privileges.