

Positive gains since '83 holocaust

By T. Sabaratnam

Appreciation of the need for a consensual solution to the ethnic problem and a steady movement towards that objective are the most important positive features that have emerged in the ten years since the holocaust of July 25. This is the assessment of Foreign Minister Harold Herat and two Senior government officials who took an active role in the ethnic issue.

The other positive features they consider important are:

India's acknowledgement that finding a solution to the ethnic problem is Lanka's own concern; recognition by other countries of LTTE intransigence; appreciation by the international community of Sri Lanka's difficulties, the absence of any backlash in Sinhala areas; and the growing feeling that a political solution must be worked out.

Foreign Secretary Bernard Tilakaratna, who was Sri Lanka's High Commissioner in New Delhi during the critical years, 1983-1989, said the immense change in India's perception of the problem was an important development. India now sees the Tamil problem as a Lankan problem, he said.

Presidential Advisor Bradman Weerakoon said there now is greater appreciation internationally of

the government's position. The world has begun to see that the government is making an effort to find a lasting solution to the ethnic problem. The world is also getting tired of the LTTE's intransigence.

Internally, there is a definite forward movement, Mr. Weerakoon said. The political parties have realised the need for a consensual, political solution. The era of each party accusing the other of trying to sell the country to the Tamils is over. There is a general acceptance that the grievances of the Tamil people should be redressed.

Mr. Weerakoon said the people have also learnt lessons. There has been no backlash or assault on Tamils. The Tamils are living happily among the Sinhalese. This has prompted Western nations to think of sending back the refugees.

He called the decision of the other Tamil militant groups to rejoin the political mainstream another positive feature.

Mr. Weerakoon said greater devolution and the unit of devolution are the subjects now being addressed. Devolution of powers would have to be improved to reach the level enjoyed by the Indian states. The unit of devolution poses a greater challenge - a

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merged north-east province; separate northern and eastern provinces; some wanting to keep the two provinces separate yet at the same time united, the redrawing of the boundaries.

Minister Herat said the riots and its consequences had damaged the country and its economy terribly. Resources that could have been spent on economic development are now being spent on the war.

Question: How would Sri Lanka be if it did not have the ethnic problem?.

Minister Herat: On top of the world.