

"I have never mistrusted India"

J R Jayewardena

The barricades and frequent security checks outside his private residence at Ward Place, Colombo's most exclusive residential area symbolise the threat to his life. But there is little tension or fear inside the modest house where a confident Junius Richard Jayawardene, 81, the frail looking President of Sri Lanka receives his guests. While conversing, he monitors the progress of the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lankan accord. As time for the TV news approaches, he ushers guests into the TV room so that he can watch the daily surrender of arms by the Tamil groups. The news over, he expresses satisfaction over the developments.

For over a month, he has kept away from the media. In an exclusive interview with India Today, Senior Editor PRABHU CHAWLA, last fortnight, Jayewardene speaks about the role of the Indian army and his domestic problems. Excerpts:

- Q.** Till recently, you have been pursuing a military option against the Tamil militants. What made you change your strategy and sign an agreement with India?
- A.** We were always for a political solution. But, the terrorists never agreed to it. We knew we wouldn't be able to solve this problem except through a political dialogue. Now, they have also agreed. On our own part, we never gave up the political option. We had discussions at Thimpu, New Delhi and Colombo and these discussions were not military discussions. But the terrorists never even looked at our documents.
- Q.** Do you feel that India has played an important role in bringing the Tamil Tigers to the negotiating table?
- A.** Till recently, India was playing the role of a mediator. Now, for the first time, India has discussed this problem directly with us. India's role in this whole problem has changed from a mere mediator to that of a participant.
- Q.** Do you think that this pact would have come about if the Tigers had not been part of the dialogue?
- A.** I have nothing to do with them. I have never seen Prabaharan.
- Q.** Have you gained anything politically?
- A.** One major gain is that terrorism is over. If the accord is sincerely implemented by these parties - the Indian Government, the Sri Lankan authorities and the separatist groups - peace will return to the island. The violence is over.

Q. Keeping in view the mistrust between the Indian Government and your government, do you think this accord will be implemented seriously?

A. I never had mistrust in the Indian Government. In fact, I never had mistrust in the separatists. What is there to mistrust? They (the separatists) are for violence, they are for murder - what is the kind of mistrust you are taking about in this kind of situation. On the other hand, I have been accused of trusting everyone too much.

Q. If you had trust in India, why didn't sign a similar accord earlier?

A. I don't have a reason myself for this. But the only explanation which I can possibly think of is that it is the first time that India is prepared to tackle this terrorism problem as an active partner with me.

Q. If the accord has led to the end of violence in the north and east, then why has it not been welcomed by the Sinhalese?

A. Violence never lasts long. It has now - died down. There was some opposition to the accord in certain parts of the island. It was activated by the Sinhalese terrorists. During the opposition to the agreement, voiced by the Buddhist clergy and the SLFP, they found that the JVP was taking active interest in the violent activities. Others have backed out of the anti- accord agitation, but the JVP is still continuing.

Q. Don't you think you will find it difficult to sustain this accord if your Prime Minister and minister for notional security are opposed to it?

A. In a democracy you have these freedoms. But when I bring legislations for the accord to Parliament, they will have to support them or they have to leave. I have signed a treaty and under the Constitution, I have the right to make treaties with any country. I need not to get cabinet support or approval for it. But when I have to go to the Parliament for legislative measures, they will all have to support them.

Q. If they don't, What will you do?

A. I will dissolve Parliament.

Q. In the wake of opposition, how are you going to implement the accord?

A. Most of it has already been implemented. The terrorists have surrendered arms. Laws are almost ready for the devolution of powers to the Provincial Council and subsequent elections. The referendum for the merger of the east with the north will take place. For all these, I need parliamentary approval. We will have interim administration for north and east.

Q. But how are you going to sell this accord to your people who consider it a total surrender?

A. I will do it with propaganda in favour of the advantages of the accord. I will use all democratic means to convince the people that this accord is in the best interests of our country. This might be an issue for the next elections but it would have been completed by that time. I am not going to have a referendum on this accord.

Q. What are the economic gains?

A. We have nothing to lose. Peace will return to the country which, in turn, will help in reviving economic activity.

Q. Are you sure that the Sri Lankan people approve of Indian forces?

A. That is immaterial. The only way they can question it is by votes. And that will be clear during the elections. There are ways in the democracy of seeking the people's support for one's actions as President. If we go to the people for every action, then the Government can't function. Unfortunately, the Opposition is not opposing this government by democratic means. They are resorting to violence and this should be suppressed.

Q. What is the specific role given to the Indian peacekeeping forces?

A. They are acting under my supervision and directions and they will carry out those instructions. They have to supervise the surrender of arms by terrorists, maintain law and order with our troops. They have to take part in all peaceful operations.

Q. Will they be present till the accord is fully implemented?

A. Well, that will take a long time. Provincial elections will take place at the end of the year. Till normalcy is restored not only the Indian but also our forces are necessary. But if there is peace, the forces are not necessary. We have enough troops of our own during peaceful times. I would like the Indian forces to remain as long as there is trouble in the north and east.

Q. If you have Indian forces here, why are you asking for American military help?

A. I have asked America, England and Pakistan for help.

Q. What kind of help or assistance have you sought from them?

A. Whatever help they can give. I didn't make any specific reservations. But we have not asked for any military help. They may offer us helicopters, spare parts. I don't need any military assistance but only material assistance from friendly countries. And I have informed India about these as well. One reason for asking those countries for aid is to show the world that I have not only asked India for assistance, but others as well. Mrs Bandaranaike also received assistance from various countries for containing secessionists in 1971. She got MIGs from the USSR, helicopters from the US and aid from the UK and India. I have not done anything beyond that.

Q. Since you are dependent on the West, both militarily and economically, don't you expect problems from them in implementing the accord?

A. Sri Lanka does depend on the West for economic aid, and nothing else. But they can't influence our decisions. I am pro-West even now because there is democracy there. I am for democracy wherever it exists.

Q. But why are you seeking help from anti-India countries like Pakistan and Israel? Will it not affect your relations with India as well?

A. Earlier, I sought help from- all of them I could't have trained my people in India. They were training the terrorists.

Q. How are you going to deal with JVP? Weren't they crushed by Bandaranaike with foreign support?

A. It is very difficult to give reasons for the revival of the JVP. Many people blame me for it.

When I took over, I released a majority of their cadres and leader.

For over five years they were quiet. And I was under the impression that they had accepted the democratic norm of behaviour. They contested the municipal and local elections. They contested the referendum and lost in all these elections. But in 1983, my security informed me that these people are again militarily active. They were preaching violence, I proscribed them. They had a hand in the 1983 riots in Colombo. Since then, they have been working under ground amassing a lot of support. I don't know how they've done this.

Q. With all these problems, don't you feel exhausted at this age?

A. They say the brain never gets tired, only the muscles get tired. I can switch off my powers of concentration. At the moment, I am thinking of you and nothing else. That is the way I am made, I can compartmentalise my problems.

Q. Aren't you thinking of retiring from active politics now?

A. My term will end in 1989. I can't re-contest without a referendum.

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