

An exchange of letters with the Sri Lankan military

9 April 2004

The World Socialist Web Site received a letter from the Sri Lankan military on January 14 claiming that the article “Sri Lankan general on high-profile trip to India” posted on the WSWS on January 6 misrepresented the visit made by Sri Lanka’s Chief of Defence Staff L.P. Balagalle to India last December. After carefully reviewing the article, the WSWS replied to the military rejecting the allegation. Below are the letter and reply by K. Ratnayake, who is a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board.

The Editor,

World Socialist Web Site,

WSWS story captioned “Sri Lankan general on high-profile trip to India” (6 Jan. 2004)

1. Your kind attention is drawn to the above news feature where Chief of Defence Staff and Commander of the Army’s recent trip to India has been misinterpreted and inaccurately reported.

2. Chief of Defence Staff and Commander of the Army Lt. Gen L. P. Balagalle visited India on a proposal made by the Government subsequent to an invitation extended by the Chief of Army Staff India when Ministry of Defence was under the Government.

3. Her Excellency the President only endorsed the Government proposal submitted to her in her capacity as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.

4. The WSWS story is therefore misleading and creates a wrong and distorted version since it explicitly gives the impression that Lt. Gen Balagalle in his capacity as Presidential envoy undertook this assignment on his own.

5. It is appreciated if this clarification is also prominently carried in your Website as early as possible. Further clarifications and details, if needed can be obtained from the Directorate of Media, Army Headquarters.

6. Your cooperation in this regard is very much appreciated.

Signed by,

AKS PERERA WWV RWP RSP,

Colonel,

Military Spokesman

Dear Colonel Perera,

Having carefully reviewed the issues raised in your letter of January 14 to the *World Socialist Web Site*, we find that your claims regarding our article “Sri Lankan general on high-profile trip to India” are without foundation. We therefore reject your allegation that our story “misinterpreted” or “inaccurately reported” the visit by Chief of Defence Staff Lieutenant General L.P. Balagalle last December.

The only issue of substance raised in your letter hinges on two claims. The first is that General Balagalle visited India “on a proposal made by the government subsequent to an invitation extended by the Chief of Army Staff India when Ministry of Defence [in Sri Lanka] was under the government.” The second is that “Her Excellency the

President only endorsed the Government proposal submitted to her in her capacity as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.” On this basis, you conclude that our story is “misleading and creates a wrong and distorted version since it explicitly gives the impression that Lt Gen Balagalle in his capacity as Presidential envoy undertook this assignment on his own.”

Having investigated the actual sequence of events in detail, it appears that the real purpose of your letter is to obfuscate what took place. It is true that the initial invitation for General Balagalle’s trip was extended when the Sri Lankan Defence Ministry was under the control of the United National Front (UNF) government. It emerged from Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s own trip to India last October. General Balagalle’s visit was scheduled for early November and formally approved by the President in her capacity as commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

But events dramatically changed on November 4. President Chandrika Kumaratunga unilaterally and undemocratically seized control of three key ministries, including defence. According to a number of media reports, General Balagalle’s planned trip was postponed as a result of the political standoff between the president and the government. The trip was rescheduled when the president, not the government, had control of the defence ministry. It took place over four days beginning on December 8.

As de facto defence minister, the president had responsibility for planning this high-level visit, which involved discussions with the Indian defence minister, external affairs officials and military chiefs. Even though it impinged directly on Sri Lankan government policy, there is no evidence that Kumaratunga, Balagalle or their representatives discussed the trip or sought the approval of any relevant government ministers.

To confirm what in fact took place, we raised the matter with three senior ministers.

On February 19, one of our journalists attended a press briefing at the government media centre and asked former defence minister Tilak Marapona whether the government’s consent had been sought for Balagalle’s visit to India in December. He replied: “I don’t know. After I was removed from the post of defence minister, I didn’t look into any matter in that ministry.”

On February 22, a WSWS reporter went to the UNP special convention at the Colombo Town Hall Grounds and asked Foreign Minister Tyrone Fernando the same question. Fernando replied that the foreign ministry had only been “informed” of the trip.

On February 25, we questioned cabinet spokesman G.L. Peiris at a press conference. He declared: “No. Such government approval was not needed, because the ministry of defence was then under her [the president]. The chiefs of armed forces were working under her. She could ask any defence official to make such a visit.”

From these replies, it is clear that the government and its ministers had no hand in approving or organising the trip. In fact, the president and the defence establishment were acting independently, and even without the knowledge of the government, on a range of issues. Well before our story was published, several articles appeared in the Colombo media pointing this out.

As we noted in our article, Iqbal Athas, defence correspondent for the *Sunday Times* wrote on December 21: “It is prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is coming to know of decisions taken on defence matters from the media. In fact, he told his confidantes that since the subject of defence was taken over, there had been no formal official briefing for him or to any of his nominees....”

What was involved in Kumaratunga’s failure to brief the government was not simply a matter of formal protocol. These events took place in the midst of a deep political crisis in Colombo and a bitter dispute between the president and the government over its alleged failure to safeguard national security in negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

It is significant that while you criticise our alleged inaccuracies regarding the procedure for Balagalle’s visit, you do not object to a more serious point raised in our article, namely: that “the trip revealed the extent to which the upper echelons of the Sri Lankan military are playing an openly political role in the conflict” between the president and the government. While the military made no open declarations of political support for the president, it was far from being a neutral bystander.

In fact, President Kumaratunga herself commented to the *Financial Times* on November 14 that the military had actually urged her to take action. “When I got official reports from the navy on the [security] situation and the army and I kept telling the PM [Wickremesinghe] he was doing nothing about it... they [government ministers] would say ‘how did you get this information?’ and they kept dismissing it. But the army and the navy were getting very restless and kept telling me: ‘Do something about it.’”

On November 4, in what can only be described as a constitutional coup, Kumaratunga seized three ministries; prorogued parliament for two weeks, dispatched troops to key installations; and prepared to impose a state of emergency. It is well known that she only backed off after Washington, New Delhi and other countries applied political pressure. India’s Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee spoke to the president for two hours on November 7, requesting that she do nothing to jeopardise the so-called peace process.

General Balagalle undertook his visit to India in the aftermath of these events. Details of the trip demonstrate that it was anything but a routine ceremonial affair or simply a fact-finding mission. While General Balagalle was not formally speaking as a presidential envoy, he certainly acted like one. He briefed the Indian press and the defence establishment on the security situation in Sri Lanka and the LTTE’s activities—in other words, on the main issue in the dispute between the president and the government.

General Balagalle’s remarks amounted to a justification for the president’s actions and were widely reported in the Indian and international press. An *Agence France Presse* report published in the *Island* on December 9, for example, cited his comments at a media briefing in Kashmir: “They [the LTTE] are getting ready. They are keeping their options open. They are recruiting people. They are collecting arms and ammunition. Importing from outside. Illegal shifting. ...We are also getting ready in case something goes wrong.”

There is no question but that these were politically sensitive and

partisan statements, which would not have been made by the UNF government or its ministers. The substance of the discussions in India was controversial and related directly to Kumaratunga’s criticisms of the government.

In press conferences in India and Sri Lanka, General Balagalle revealed that he had been negotiating defence ties with India, including upgrading Palaly airport in Jaffna, providing transport facilities for the Sri Lankan army, joint patrolling by the Indian and Sri Lankan navies and the sharing of intelligence. All of these measures were aimed at strengthening the Sri Lankan military against the LTTE.

General Balagalle also discussed expediting a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) between India and Sri Lanka, which has far reaching implications for trade and foreign policy as well as defence. While the government and its ministers were not involved, the president was. The *Sunday Times* reported on December 14: “President Kumaratunga is learnt to have asked Lt. Gen. Balagalle to discuss with Minister Fernandes and Indian officials matters relating to the Defence Co-operation Agreement.”

Following these discussions, Kumaratunga dispatched a second delegation to New Delhi on January 15 to expedite the DCA. The delegation included General Balagalle, Defence Secretary Cyril Herath, and Nigel Hatch, a presidential legal advisor, but no one from any of the ministries under the government’s control—not even the foreign ministry.

The only explanation for what took place is that General Balagalle was acting as a “virtual presidential envoy” to India without consultation with the elected government of the day. Our measured warning about the political role being played by the military was, therefore, an entirely legitimate and timely comment.

Yours sincerely,

K. Ratnayake,

International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site.



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