

Manmohan Singh declines Sri Lanka's invitation, says he's too busy

India has officially told Sri Lanka that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is unable to accept the invitation to attend the island's 60th independence day celebrations Feb 4, because of prior commitments.

'We were told that the prime minister's schedule did not permit him to be in Sri Lanka on Feb 4,' Ravinatha Ariyasinha, director general of communications in the Sri Lankan foreign office, said Sunday.

'However, the commitment to pay a bilateral visit during the course of 2008 remains. It is basically a scheduling issue. We will have to discuss other dates,' Ariyasinha told IANS.

Earlier this week, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama had told the media that Sri Lanka was not looking at February or any particular month or date for Singh's visit.

'We want the Indian prime minister to pay a bilateral visit since no Indian prime minister has paid a bilateral visit in the last 20 years,' Bogollagama said.

The last time there was such a visit was in July 1987, when the then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi was in Sri Lanka to sign the India-Sri Lanka Accord to end the ethnic conflict in the island. Since then, Indian prime ministers have come, but only to attend SAARC summits along with other heads of South Asian governments.

Although 'prior commitments' is the stated reason for Singh's keeping off Sri Lanka on independence day, political observers and media reports say that the real reason is New Delhi's displeasure over the unending violence in Sri Lanka; the unilateral abrogation of the ceasefire agreement with the Tamil Tiger rebels; and the inability of the government to bring out a devolution package to solve the ethnic question.

Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee had told a news agency in [New Delhi](#) Jan 4 that India favoured a political and not a military solution to the Sri Lankan conflict.

Mukherjee's remark was significant in the context of the Sri Lankan government's unilaterally withdrawing from the truce pact, which it had signed with the Tamil Tigers under the aegis of peace broker Norway Feb 22, 2002.

According to a statement issued by five Nordic countries, which had provided truce monitors to Sri Lanka, the truce had saved as many as 10,000 lives in the first three years of the pact when it had largely held. Since then, casualties and displacement of the population, mainly minority Tamils and Muslims, had mounted to an estimated 4,500 dead and 300,000 displaced.

The Mahinda Rajapaksa government had, however, argued that the truce pact deserved to go, because it had only encouraged the Tamil Tigers' belligerence and given them undue power at the cost of Sri Lanka's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

And it was, at any rate, a 'non functioning' agreement since the unilateral withdrawal of the Tigers from the talks process in April 2003 and the escalation of an undeclared war since then.

Having concluded that there could be no meaningful political talks with the Tigers without first defeating them militarily, the Rajapaksa government not only stepped up the military operations on land, sea and air, but annulled the truce pact.

Sri Lanka had been trying hard to convince the world that it had no option but to take the steps it took, but the Western powers and the UN expressed dismay rather than support.

In this context, a visit by the Indian prime minister to attend the independence day celebrations as the chief guest, would have boosted the morale and the international standing of the Rajapaksa regime.

P.K. Balachandran (© IANS / India eNews)