

Transcribed abridged Text, from '*Hot Spring*' magazine, November-December 1997

Defiance at Delhi: George Fernandes defies Indian govt. ban on Eelam Tamil Meet

[Note: Words in the bold font, are as in the original.]

The 'International Convention for Solidarity with the Eelam Tamils of Sri Lanka' was scheduled to be held at the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) auditorium in New Delhi on 14 December 1997. Delegates from foreign countries as well as from other Indian states were to be present at the one-day convention. But two days before the meet was to take place Samata Party leader George Fernandes, the convenor of the meet was informed by the Delhi Police that permission to hold the conference would not be given.

The Delhi police had also warned the FICCI authorities that it should not allow the 'misuse' of its premises for 'anti-national activity'.

But George Fernandes was not perturbed. He held a Press Conference on 12 December and announced that the convention would take place, ban or no ban. "FERNANDES MAY FACE ARREST" said a headline in one newspaper. Because of the government ban, the convention proceedings got more publicity in all the newspapers two days later. A beaming Mrs. Jeya Jaitley, the the organizing secretary of the Samata Party publicly thanked Indian Home Minister Indrajit Gupta and the Indian government for creating tremendous press interest in the convention by banning it!

The *Hindustan Times* in its issue of 13 December carried the headline: GOVT., SAMATA LOCK HORNS OVER LANKAN TAMIL MEET, and said: 'The international convention on Sri Lankan Tamils is poised to become a major bone of contention between the Government and Samata Party...

“Pointing a finger at ‘10 Janpath’ for the proposed ban, he (Fernandes) says if it is enforced, the Government of India would be going against the Constitutional Right to Freedom of Expression.

‘We have an opinion as to what happens in Sri Lanka and it cannot be tailored to the requirements of a family. Government can have different opinion if it does not suit the Government or its proxy owners’, he stated.

The *Hindustan Times* report said: “Day before yesterday, in a letter marked ‘secret/most immediate’, Union Home Minister Inderjit Gupta had requested Mr. Fernandes to ‘reconsider’ the decision to hold and participate in the Convention. He pointed out in his letter that LTTE leadership based abroad were trying to ‘re-activate’ their support base in Tamil Nadu in the aftermath of the US decision to declare the LTTE a ‘terrorist organisation’. With this objective in view and at the ‘behest’ of LTTE leadership, the conference was being organised’.

“The Home Minister said ‘reports’ received in this regard also indicated that ‘funds for the purpose are being channelized from the US and Australia-based LTTE leaders, through Mr. Nedumaran.

‘Mr. Fernandes, at the time of releasing copies of the letter to correspondents, had Mr. Nedumaran by his side.

‘Mr. Fernandes, who strongly reacted to the contents of the letter said it was being made out that he was either ‘an overground operator for underground LTTE or being a nitwit.’

‘He said he had been to almost every convention held on the Tamil question as a ‘human rights activist’ since 1983 in India and abroad...Justice Krishna Iyer had been also attending most such conventions and only three days ago had gone to attend such a conference in Geneva...

According to a report in *The Statesman*, New Delhi, “The Samata Party leader also said that the First Secretary of the Sri Lanka High Commission had contacted them and expressed interest in attending the conference because of the nature of issues being discussed and a member of Parliament from Sri Lanka, Mr. J. Pararajasingam had already confirmed his participation.”

With the Delhi Police deciding that discretion was the better part of valour the Convention was held as scheduled, but of course in a different venue – at the spacious lawns of 3, Krishna Menon Marg, the official bungalow allotted to Mr. Fernandes as a member of the dissolved Lok Sabha.

Among the participants at the Convention were Malcolm R. Gracie of Amnesty International, Australia, Gillies Piquois, Member, International Commission of Jurists, France, Joseph Pararajasingam, Member of Sri Lankan Parliament, A.P. Venkateswaran, former Foreign Secretary of the Indian Government, K. Veeramani, General Secretary, Dravidar Kazhagam, Mar Gen.(retired) Ashok Mehta, K.V. Ponniyan of the Tamil Nadu Marxist-Leninist Party, Dr. S. Sathananthan, Secretary, Action Group of Tamils in Colombo (AGOTIC) and Pala Nedumaran of the Tamils’ National Movement, and Dr. T.R. Janarthanan of the World Tamil Forum. Scholar and political commentator Adrian Wijemanne sent a supportive message to the Convention which was read out by Samata Party secretary Jeya Jaitley.

Indian indifference is shameful – Fernandes

Speaking at a Press Conference held on the eve of the Convention, Mr. Fernandes criticized the ruling class of India for their indifference to the plight of the Eelam Tamils. “It is shameful that the Indian government does not have a word to say

against the fate of the Tamils who are at the receiving end of the State sponsored terror by the Sinhala army in Sri Lanka...There are very powerful groups in this country who would not care at all about the Tamils, and they treat Tamils as second-class citizens.”

“Fifty million Tamils in Tamil Nadu are watching the indifference of the Central Government towards their brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka, and they will teach a lesson at the next general elections”, Mr. Fernandes said.