

Thackeray: I am proud of LTTE

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Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray today condemned Sri Lankan military action in Jaffna and said he was proud of the Tamil Tigers.

"I am for LTTE. I am proud of Tigers," Mr Thackeray said in the course of his address to the first national convention of party. He made these comments to impress upon delegates from 18 States including Tamil Nadu that even though his movement for sons-of-the-soil in the late '60s had led to anti-south Indian riots, he was not against the Tamils.

He said, "I condemn whatever is happening to the Tamils in that island. He traced the genesis of Indian involvement in the ethnic strife and blamed Mrs Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv for letting down the Tamil people. "I am proud of the Tigers for the gallant manner in which they are fighting.

He said the Indian Government could intervene to their aid but it would just not do that. "I am helpless. I am not in power," Mr Thackeray said looking in the direction of Tamil delegates.

Mr Thackeray used his support for the Lankan Tamil cause in his 30-minute address in Hindi to geographically broadbase himself and his party. "We have never been anti-Tamil as Karnataka has been vis-a-vis sharing of Cauvery waters.

He said he had never called for creation of Maharashtra for Maharashtrais. "I had only asked for justice for local people.

The Sena leader was interestingly apologetic about jingoism in public for the first time. He sought to explain how expulsion of Bangladeshis from Bombay did not include Bengalis.

These statements from Mr Thackeray and other party leaders at the two-day convention here underscore the changing semantics of the party's politics. The meeting attended by over 300 delegates was significantly held exactly a week after its coalition partner, the Bharatiya Janata Party, held its three-day Mahaadhiveshan at Mahalakshmi Race Course.

The Sena effort to organise itself at a national-level is being viewed in political circles as a calculated move to tap the Hindu hardliners who might have felt let down by the dilution of Hindutva by the BJP. A random survey of the delegates revealed them to be erstwhile members of either the BJP or Bajrang Dal.

Mr Subash Desai, Shiv Sena secretary, who briefed newsmen alongside Mr Thackeray said that the senior leaders of Shiv Sena had surveyed the organisational position of the party in various States and decided to plan various wings of the Sena in other parts of the country as well.

Mr Desai said Shiv Sena had made inroads in States like Jammu, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar and Delhi and the respective pramukhs had expressed confidence that the party would secure Lok Sabha seats there. He said the Sena had decided to participate in the political, social and cultural affairs of the country wherever it has its presence.

The Rajya Pramukh Parishad passed seven resolutions, among other things to press the demand for holding Lok Sabha polls in February 1996. Two resolutions were adopted on Kashmir opposing any move to grant autonomy to the border State or other concessions proposed by the Prime Minister.

The second resolution said the Sena was against Assembly elections in Kashmir till all Hindu families, who were forced to migrate out of the valley were offered a fearless and safe return.

Mr Uddhav Thackeray said talks on seat adjustments for the Lok Sabha polls in Maharashtra were yet to be held and the final decision would be taken by the party supremo. However, he indicated that there was considerable change in the previous seat agreement and the Sena was likely to contest about 20 to 25 seats.

Briefing newsmen on the concluding day of the Sena's first ever national level meeting, Mr Thackeray said as per the reports submitted by party pramukhs from various States, the Sena has become stronger even outside Maharashtra and there are fair prospects of it fielding candidates in at least 100 Lok Sabha constituencies. These claims would be verified by senior Sena leaders visiting the States and a report submitted to the party supremo for his final decision.

However, he said the Shiv Sena did not want to harm the interests of the BJP.