

LTTE calls for new talks with Sri Lankan regime

Wije Dias

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The leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has called for new talks with the Sri Lankan government aimed at ending the 15-year war the Sri Lankan state has waged against the Tamils of the North and East of the island.

V. Prabakaran appealed for 'peace talks' to be convened under the auspices of one or more third parties in a speech November 26 marking Mavir or Great Heroes' Day, which falls on his birthday. Prabarakan also suggested, for the first time since the LTTE repudiated its support for the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, that the LTTE might be willing to accept a settlement that did not result in the establishment of a separate Tamil Eelam state, carved out of the North and East of the island..

On previous Mavir Days the LTTE has mounted major military attacks. The People's Alliance government of Chandrika Kumaratunga braced itself for more of the same this November 26, ordering a security clampdown on all parts of the island. Instead, Prabarakan announced the LTTE's readiness to resume negotiations on a new constitutional structure for the island and to accept mediation by Britain and/or other countries that have been arming and financing the Sri Lankan regime.

'We have not closed the door for peace,' declared Prabarakan. 'We are open to the civilised method of resolving conflicts through rational dialogue. Since the Sinhala leadership lacks the political will and sincerity to resolve the problem, we favour third party mediation.'

In his speech, Prabarakan deplored 'the massive financial and military assistance provided to Sri Lanka by foreign countries,' but then signalled that the LTTE is willing to have one or more of these countries broker a 'peace' settlement. Previously the LTTE has said it would accept mediation only by a party not implicated in the Sri Lankan regime's war against the Tamils.

A number of imperialist powers, including the United States, Australia and Japan, have been pressing the Colombo regime and the LTTE to return to the bargaining table. But it is Britain, the island's former imperial overlord, that occupies the front rank in the diplomatic manoeuvring and which, with the LTTE's apparent blessing, is now set to broker a new round of negotiations.

On a recent visit to Sri Lanka, Derek Fatchet, Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in Tony Blair's Labour government, declared: 'There may be scope for third party mediation in Sri Lanka's ethnic issue, but the British government has not received any invitation in this regard.'

Military stalemate

The LTTE's offer of a new round of talks comes at a time when

much of the Sri Lankan press is writing of a military stalemate. It is now more than 18 months since the Sri Lankan military launched its *Jayasikuru* (Victory Assured) military offensive aimed at opening a land route to Jaffna, the principal northern city. Since May 1997 Sri Lankan military and political leaders have repeatedly declared victory was at hand. Although government troops did, at the cost of great casualties, succeed in capturing various strategic towns, they have been unable to deliver a crippling blow to the LTTE's guerrilla army. Last Sunday Anuruddha Ratwatte, the deputy defence minister and chief architect of the government's war policy, and the heads of the Sri Lankan army, navy and air force all narrowly escaped death when they came under heavy mortar attack while touring Oddusudan, a town which had been recaptured from the LTTE just two days before.

The People's Alliance regime has not yet given its definitive answer to Prabarakan's offer of talks. In winding up the debate in Parliament on the Foreign Ministry's budget allocation, the Minister of Foreign Affairs declared, 'We must fight the LTTE and marginalise them before any talks with them.' Politically, the PA has staked much on its ability to cow the LTTE into submission. Elected in 1994 on pledges to secure peace and stop the dismantling of Sri Lanka's rudimentary social welfare system, the PA has mounted the war's largest and bloodiest campaigns, while citing the war as reason both to slash public services and suppress democratic rights in the South.

International and Sri Lankan capital are pressing for a quick and favourable response to the LTTE offer. They fear that the PA's war policy is bankrupting the state treasury and stoking popular discontent.

Commenting on Prabarakan's speech, Lalith Kotalawala, co-ordinating chairman of the Joint Business Forum, said it was in line with the thinking of the business community. In October, the chambers of trade, industry and commerce had sponsored a conference to promote a 'bipartisan approach between the PA and the UNP [United National Party] to the ethnic conflict,' including an offer of negotiations to the LTTE.

For his part, UNP and parliamentary Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe told Reuters, 'This is a major move by the Tigers and it is a very positive one to which the government must respond. The LTTE at the moment is not considering a separate state and we have never seen an offer like this before.'

Even the *Island*, a newspaper notorious for its promotion of Sinhalese chauvinism, declared in its editorial on November 30, 'Every peace loving citizen cannot but be happy that this offer had come from the LTTE which to date has remained intransigent and bent on a separate state.... The government has to consider this carefully and try its best to respond positively. For nothing will benefit the country more than a negotiated settlement of the conflict which

has bled the country white.'

International capital fears soaring war expenditures will drive Sri Lanka into state bankruptcy. Recently the International Monetary Fund's residential representative Anton Op de Beke complained that the fiscal results of 1998 were 'disappointing' and that 'the 1999 budget has not brought Sri Lanka any closer to ... structural adjustment'--i.e., to meeting the IMF's prescriptions for the ratio of state expenditure and national debt to GNP.

Last August the PA government had to make a supplementary allocation of 5 billion Sri Lankan rupees for the military. The 1999 budget increases military expenditure to 57 billion rupees, almost a quarter of the total state budget. As a result, the budget deficit is increasing and this at a time when Sri Lanka is coming under increasing pressure due to fallout from the East Asian economic crisis. Demand and prices for tea, rubber and other Sri Lankan exports have fallen sharply..

LTTE seeking to curry imperialists' favour

In his November 26 speech, Prabakaran indicted the PA regime of President Chandrika Kumaratunga for intensifying the oppression of the Tamils and warned that the PA is 'determined to escalate and continue the war.' The LTTE's top leader stated, 'We do not believe that Chandrika, who has become the author of the most blood-stained chapter in the history of the Tamils, will bring peace to the country by resolving the Tamil national issue by peaceful means.'

Insofar as its goes, Prabakaran's analysis of the PA regime and its determination to maintain the subjugation of the Tamils is correct. But this raises two vital questions: Why did the LTTE support the election of the PA in 1994? To whom is the LTTE looking to compel Kumaratunga to take up its offer of talks?

The bourgeois nationalist LTTE has always based its politics on manoeuvring with sections of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie, the Indian ruling class, imperialism, and before the collapse of the USSR, the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy. Today the LTTE looks to the IMF, infamous around the world for its role in impoverishing the masses, and British imperialism--which through its policy of divide and rule and the 1947 partitioning of the Indian subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India sowed the seeds for the myriad of national-ethnic and communal conflicts that today beset South Asia--to prevail on the PA regime to come to terms with it. Needless to say, any agreement produced by such a process will only strengthen the hand of imperialism and the Sinhalese and Tamil bourgeoisie and further embitter national-ethnic relations.

That Prabakaran is looking to third party intervention--i.e., is seeking to curry favour with imperialism--is underscored by this affirmation in his November 26 address: 'So far, not a single voice of rationality is heard from the Sinhala nation against the war. None so far has made a plea to put an end to the war and resolve the problem by peaceful means. From the politicians to the monks, from the intellectuals to the journalists, every one calls for the intensification of the war.'

This is a lie and Prabakaran knows it to be a lie. This past summer the LTTE authorities, in the areas of the Vanni under its control, targeted the Socialist Equality Party for repression, taking into custody four Tamil-speaking members who had been advancing the perspective of a united struggle by the Sinhalese and Tamil masses against the war and for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam. The Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the SEP, has for the past 15 years waged a determined

struggle against the Sri Lankan state's anti-Tamil war, demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan security forces from the North and East.

Now the SEP's struggle is beginning to intersect with the sentiments of the masses. Workers in the South are increasingly acting in defiance of their bureaucratic leaders and refusing to curtail their struggles so as not to imperil the government's war policy. A survey of 2,000 families, 99.5 percent of them Sinhalese, conducted by Colombo University's Department of Anthropology and Sociology this past October showed 77 percent of them against the war. The rising anti-war sentiment is also reflected in the Sri Lankan army's 10 percent desertion rate, with over 15,000 soldiers having deserted during the past three years.

Prabakaran and the LTTE leadership are hostile to any struggle to unite the workers and peasants, Sinhalese and Tamil, against the war. If they insist that the Sinhalese are united in seeking to suppress the Tamils, it is precisely because they want to cover up the class cleavages within Eelam and to prevent the Tamil workers and peasants from discovering their common class interests with the workers and oppressed masses of the South. This is to the advantage not only of the Tamil bourgeoisie, who hope to use the LTTE to gain greater privileges within a new capitalist state structure on the island, but also of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie.

Mass sentiment on the island is moving slowly but steadily towards the political position championed by the SEP and its predecessor the Revolutionary Communist League: The eradication of the national oppression of the Tamils and the establishment of harmonious relations between all the national-ethnic and religious groupings on the islands, based on democracy and equality, will be achieved not through negotiations between parties of the Sinhala and Tamil bourgeoisie, but through the struggle to establish the United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Eelam.

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