

Norwegian-sponsored peace initiative in Sri Lanka meets with sceptical reception

A correspondent
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A one-day visit by Norwegian Foreign Minister Kunt Vollebaek to Colombo on February 16 has set the stage for a round of negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) aimed at ending the country's 16-year war in the North and East. Tentatively the talks are expected to take several months to begin and last for no more than a year.

Vollebaek met his Sri Lankan counterpart Lakshman Kadirgamar as well as holding separate discussions with President Chandrika Kumaratunga and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. He had met with one of the LTTE's key leaders Anton Balasingham in London before arriving in Sri Lanka. His visit was preceded by a fact-finding mission in January by Leiv Lunde, Norway's State Secretary for Development Cooperation and Human Rights, who met with the government, the opposition and various Tamil parties.

But no one has expressed any great optimism that an end to the war will be found. An editorial in the Sunday Times on February 20 entitled "Here We Go Again" indicated the mood of scepticism and despondency in ruling circles. The article pointed out that the war had reached a stalemate but that "keeping the war afloat is good business for too many". It noted that "too much blood has been shed" and that a third party was probably necessary to start talks, but then cast doubt on the record of Norway, alleging it had close relations with the LTTE.

Even as Vollebaek was in Colombo, bitter fighting was taking place in the North. Government officials reported that at least 44 combatants-seven Sri Lankan army soldiers and 23 LTTE fighters-had died in clashes on the Jaffna peninsula and at Parathan.

Both sides are intent on bolstering their military position prior to any talks. As well as continued fighting in the disputed areas in the North and East, the LTTE is believed to be responsible for a series of bomb attacks in

the South of the country. The latest attack occurred last Friday when a suicide bomb attack and gunfire on a busy street in Colombo narrowly missed a motorcade of cabinet ministers. At least 23 people were killed and 46 others wounded.

At the same time the Peoples Alliance (PA) government launched a new national campaign on February 1 to supply 15,000 new recruits to an army hard-pressed by casualties and desertions. Its latest budget included a major increase in military spending of nearly 25 percent and orders have already been placed for sophisticated new weaponry with various US arms manufacturers.

In the past 17 years, more than 60,000 people have died and hundreds of thousands have become refugees inside and outside the country. According to the Institute of Policy Studies, a non-government organisation, 1,168 billion rupees or \$US16.5 billion was spent on the war between 1984 and 1996, directly and indirectly.

Kumaratunga was first elected in 1994 largely on the basis of ending the war. But her government, which includes the Communist Party (CP) and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), rapidly intensified the war after talks with the LTTE broke down. As a result the casualty rates over the last six years have been even higher than under previous conservative United National Party (UNP) governments, leading to widespread disaffection. The February recruitment campaign ended with only 1,176 out of the target of 15,000 recruits.

Significant sections of big business are also opposed to the war. In its January 2000 issue, the business magazine Lanka Monthly Digest (LMD) commented: "Ask any economist, banker, entrepreneur, or stock broker about how the economy is doing, and they will tell that it is doing badly. Ask for the reason, and the unanimous answer is: THE WAR. Foreign investors don't want to come here because of it."

The major powers also appear to be backing the

Norwegian move to initiate talks aimed at ending the war. The Indian magazine Frontline noted in March: "It is also realised that Norway is not acting unilaterally but has the tacit support of most Western nations connected with Sri Lanka... [T]here is an emerging consensus backed also by the United States to push intensively for peace in Sri Lanka."

An article entitled "Lanka Needs a Peace Process" appeared in the Wall Street Journal in January calling for the US to be more active in the negotiations. Meghan O'Sullivan, a research associate at the Brookings Institute, argued: "As no single country would meet with the approval of both Colombo and the Tigers, the United States should take the lead in organising a group of countries willing to help both sides prepare for negotiations. Such a group should include Norway, a country with a substantial Tamil population, and India, Sri Lanka's largest and most important neighbour."

But despite the pressure both in Sri Lanka and internationally, the Kumaratunga government is torn between opposing factions and has no clear strategy for ending the war.

On the one hand she has increasingly pandered to the military establishment and to right-wing Sinhala chauvinist elements who are adamantly opposed to any negotiated settlement to the war and demonstrated outside the Norwegian embassy in Colombo on February 18. Nalin de Silva, a leader of the Jathika Chintanaya (National Ideology) group, which indulges in anti-Western demagogy and eulogises the ancient Sinhala kingdoms, has spoken out against Norway's involvement.

On the other hand Kumaratunga relies on the LSSP and Communist Party (CP) to contain the growing hostility among workers and the oppressed masses who have had to bear the brunt of the war. The LSSP and CP have both hailed the Norwegian initiative completely uncritically. LSSP leader Batty Weerakoon and CP General Secretary Raja Collure have urged the UNP to come to an agreement with Kumaratunga to solve the crisis.

At the heart of Kumaratunga's "peace plan" is a proposal to devolve limited powers to the country's provincial governments, including in the predominantly Tamil areas in the North and East. For the last five years the government has blamed the opposition for the ongoing war, as the UNP has not agreed to support the necessary constitutional changes. But following the presidential elections at the end of last year, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe announced his party would support the constitutional changes.

Nevertheless, the entire process is bogged down in inter-party rivalry. The planned devolution package is connected to proposals to abolish the country's powerful executive presidency and no agreement has been reached as to how that should take place. Kumaratunga, who just won another five-year term as president, wants to abolish the presidency at the end of 2005-her period of office. The UNP wants it abolished much sooner. Talks between the two parties on February 18 were postponed and only went ahead last week.

But even if agreement should be reached between the government and opposition on the nature of changes to the Sri Lankan constitution, there is no guarantee that the LTTE will give up their demands for a separate state and accept such a scheme.

Whatever the outcome of this process, none of the parties have any solution to the pressing social issues confronting workers and urban and rural poor in Sri Lanka. The central aim is to broker an agreement between the Sinhala and Tamil ruling classes to end the fighting and shore up bourgeois rule by dividing the working class along ethnic lines-either through a devolution package or a separate Tamil state. As big business in Sri Lanka has made so abundantly clear, the object of any peace deal is to establish the basis for an influx of international capital and the intensified exploitation of the working class.

See Also:

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