As LTTE issues ultimatum to surrender

US and EU push India to intervene in Sri Lanka

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Amid continued fierce fighting in Sri Lanka between government troops and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), hectic discussions have been underway in New Delhi and Colombo over how to establish a ceasefire and bring the two sides into negotiations. Both the US and the European Union are pressing the Indian government headed by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to intervene more directly into the conflict following a series of LTTE victories on the northern Jaffna peninsula.

On Monday a three-member Norwegian delegation, including the deputy foreign minister Raymond Johanson and special envoy Erik Solheim, visited Colombo for two days of closed-door talks with President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadiragamar and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. Before arriving in Colombo, Solheim visited Washington and is also believed to have held talks with LTTE leaders based in London.

Norway, which has the backing of the major European powers, initiated a diplomatic push in February for a negotiated settlement to the protracted civil war. This became bogged down, but has now been rekindled due to deep concerns in European capitals over the implications of the conflict not only for Sri Lanka but throughout the Indian subcontinent. On May 15, the EU issued a statement calling for both sides to “cease hostilities and begin negotiations,” in particular urging them to cooperate with the efforts of the Norwegian government.

After Colombo, Solheim flew to New Delhi on Wednesday for discussions with Indian officials. Again no details were divulged, but when asked whether India should act in the present situation, Solheim said: “I will never give any advice to the Indian government how and when they should act.” And then he pointedly added: “I agree very much that India's importance is paramount.”

On the same day, the US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering was also in New Delhi to emphasise the importance of India taking the leading role in Sri Lanka. After talks with Indian Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansingh and Defence Minister George Fernandes, both he and the Indians stressed that there had to be a negotiated solution within the framework of the existing Sri Lankan state. India and the US have ruled out any support for an independent Tamil state—the LTTE's key objective. Pickering is due in Colombo for talks with political leaders next Monday.

US concern over the crisis in Sri Lanka was underscored by the dispatch of part of its naval taskforce in the Persian Gulf to the southern Arabian Sea. According to today's *Hindu* newspaper, “The movement of these warships, according to analysts, also corroborated the recent assertion by visiting US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Mr Thomas Pickering, that Washington intended to keep a close watch on the developments in Sri Lanka. Sources here clarified that by nudging its ships closer, the US was not challenging India's primacy in the zone. On the contrary, the US, as indicated by Mr Pickering on Wednesday, would like India and Norway to play a leading role in resolving Sri Lanka's ethnic strife within a ‘regional' framework.”

The frenzy of diplomatic activity comes as the LTTE has issued an ultimatum to an estimated 40,000 Sri Lankan troops on the Jaffna peninsula to surrender by today or face a “bloodbath”. The Voice of Tigers radio said yesterday that the LTTE was poised for a final assault on Jaffna town. The Sri Lankan government has issued no official response but in their public statements, Kumaratunga and her ministers have stated that the army will fight “to the last man” to hold onto Jaffna.

The precise military situation is difficult to gauge, as the Sri Lankan government has brought down far-reaching media censorship under its new emergency powers and no journalists are permitted in the war zone. But from government and LTTE sources it is clear that intense fighting has taken place in the last few days at a number of locations just to the east of Jaffna town, including Chavakachcheri and Chemani. The army reported killing five LTTE fighters in a “cordon and search” operation at Achchuveli just a few kilometres from the key Palali airbase—the military's logistical lifeline to the rest of the country.

The LTTE appears to be opening up a new military front in the east of country. Sri Lankan military officials confirmed that the separatists earlier this week had attacked an army camp and air base at Batticaloa, 300km to the east of Colombo. The army's headquarters inside the town were hit by mortar fire. The fighting in the east is the first since the LTTE began its push to seize control of the Jaffna peninsula, overrunning the key Elephant Pass army base on April 22.

Whatever the exact military situation, the assessment is clearly being made in India, Europe and the US that the LTTE has the upper hand and that the defeat of Sri Lankan army forces may be only weeks or even days away. Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee cancelled a scheduled visit to Bhopal earlier in the week in order to chair a series of meetings of the special Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) on Monday and Tuesday. According to one Indian press report: “The three service chiefs briefed the committee on the latest intelligence inputs on the situation in Lanka. Intelligence reports, a source said, warned that Jaffna could fall by the month end. In fact, alarmist

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reports given by the Indian Navy's detachment units off the coast of Tamil Nadu say that the fall of Jaffna could happen within 24 hours."

Previously the Indian government had ruled out direct military involvement in Sri Lanka and had also indicated that it would not assist in any evacuation of beleaguered army troops from Jaffna. Following the CCS meetings, the Indian government announced that it would be prepared to evacuate Sri Lankan troops from the area provided a ceasefire was in place. Indian armed forces have already dispatched warships and heavy transport aircraft to the south as well as 15,000 troops. In a statement to the Indian press Rear Admiral Vijay Shankar said: "We will be able to move within half an hour if orders come from Delhi."

In an article yesterday, the *New York Times* quoted Sri Lankan President Kumaratunga as saying that the rebels were putting up "a very determined fight" and commenting that withdrawal "does not seem a possibility at this moment". The newspaper then added: "Military analysts and Western diplomats say they doubt that the government can hold on indefinitely even though its troops outnumber the rebels by 6 to 1. The Sri Lankan military has been weakened by a highly politicised command structure, a demoralised rank and file, and planes that don't fly, they say. Mrs Kumaratunga herself acknowledged shortcomings in the military strategy."

There is at least one indication that Norway and India have been embroiled in concretely working out an immediate evacuation plan for the Sri Lankan troops. An article in the Calcutta-based *Telegraph* newspaper on Tuesday noted: "There has been news that the Chandrika Kumaratunga administration had agreed to a ceasefire and it was time for Indian naval personnel to move in and escort the trapped Sinhalese soldiers in Jaffna and move them out to a safer destination... [But] the LTTE was making impossible demands. They were not just demanding Eelam, they were also harping on their rights to the weapons and ammunition left by the fleeing Sri Lankan forces."

The Indian government has been reluctant to intervene militarily at Sri Lanka's request, firstly, because of opposition from Tamil Nadu-based political parties that are a significant component of the ruling National Democratic Alliance and, secondly, because of the Indian army's previous disastrous involvement in northern Sri Lanka in the late 1980s under the Indo-Lankan Accord. On the other hand, however, the Indian ruling class wants to prevent the intervention of other powers in what it considers its own backyard, and fears that the LTTE's successes could encourage separatist movements elsewhere on the Indian subcontinent, particularly in Jammu & Kashmir and in Tamil Nadu.

An intense debate has opened up in Indian ruling circles over what action the government should take. An editorial in the *Hindu* newspaper argued against any direct military involvement, stating: "India has neither a direct military role in, nor a military solution for, Sri Lanka's ethnic war. The resolution of the ethnic war is the primary Indian interest in Sri Lanka. India's help to Sri Lanka in facing the LTTE's aggression, and moral-cum-political support for the political devolution which the President, Mrs Chandrika Kumaratunga, is determined to implement, is the best help India can give."

But a comment last week in the *Deccan Chronicle* entitled "India should intervene in Sri Lanka" challenged what it termed the "national consensus". "If ever there was a time to step in, militarily, if necessary, to ensure long term peace in the region, this is it. The LTTE's recent successes and the Sri Lankan call for assistance have given India the perfect excuse to curb and cripple the growing influence of this organisation and at the same time safeguard the territorial integrity of a friend and neighbour."

In an interview this week in the *Hindu*, Kumaratunga expressed her disappointment over India's failure to provide military aid but added that India could still contribute to the peace process in Sri Lanka by "strengthening the hands of Norway, our chosen facilitator." She said her government was exploring the possibility of taking India on board a joint diplomatic effort involving "several countries" along with Norway.

One of the purposes of the Pickering visit appears to have been to push the Indian government into playing a more active role in Sri Lanka. The *Times of India* commented: "This [the Pickering visit], Indian officials in New Delhi feel, is a way to get India to step in fast. 'The feeling that India is trying to remain uninvolved and is dithering over mediation—or any kind of involvement—is making the US State Department restless,' said an official. It is being speculated that Pickering's visit would hasten the entire process of Indian mediation."

President Clinton's recent visit to the Indian subcontinent indicated that the US was preparing to rely heavily on the Indian government led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) to look after its interests and act on its behalf as regional policeman. Over the last year US and Indian military and intelligence officials have held a number of meetings over "terrorism"—in particular, in relation to Kashmir and Afghanistan.

An article in the *Times of India* yesterday summed up the growing pressures on New Delhi. "Sri Lanka occupies a low priority in the minds of policy-makers in Washington who are today more than ever convinced that they have no real interests in the island other than the 'world order' concern that the strife there is put to an end. But if the Sri Lankan army fails in Jaffna, it is apparent that someone will have to do something about it. By consensus it appears that the 'someone' is India. Geography, history and logistical convenience are pushing New Delhi to a role that it is palpably reluctant to play. But, the American and European policymakers insist, if India wants to play the role of a world power and has ambitions to a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, it has to, at the least, shoulder its regional burdens."

At present, the public discussion indicates that India is to play the role of "mediator" and to assist in the evacuation of Sri Lankan troops from Jaffna. However, a rapid change in either the military situation in Jaffna or the political crisis in Colombo, could see the major powers demanding that India intervene militarily to shore up bourgeois rule on the island.

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