

Sri Lankan president puts negotiations with the LTTE back on the agenda

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In her speech opening the Sri Lankan parliament on November 9, President Chandrika Kumaratunga gave a cautious but clear signal that her government is moving toward negotiations with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) over an end to the country's 17-year civil war. "We have by no means closed the door to the LTTE, we are ready to have discussions with that organisation," she said.

Kumaratunga reiterated the appeal contained in her second term acceptance speech last December. "I call upon all Honorable Members in this House, whatever party they may represent, to abandon narrow politics, petty differences, jealousies and all other rivalries and join in the urgent and necessary task of achieving peace in our land."

These comments are her first since a Norwegian delegation headed by special envoy Erik Solheim crossed over the military frontlines in northern Sri Lanka to hold secret discussions with LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran on November 1 over possible peace negotiations. News of the discussions—the first international contact with Prabhakaran in five years—only became known through an LTTE news announcement from London.

Kumaratunga said nothing concrete about the outcome of Solheim's trip. She said that "certain conditions," as yet undecided, had to be met before negotiations could begin and that the government would take into account "the previous practices and attitudes of the LTTE" before making any decisions on the talks.

The president's noncommittal approach is conditioned by the delicate political balancing act she is performing. During the campaign for the October 10 election, the government appealed directly to Sinhala chauvinist layers by promising an all-out war against the LTTE.

Now Kumaratunga is under pressure from significant sections of big business, as well as the US and major European powers, to reach an agreement with the opposition United National Party (UNP) to find a means of ending the war.

The European Union has issued a statement welcoming the Solheim visit and urging the government and the LTTE to "bring about a negotiated solution".

The Joint Forum of Chambers of Commerce and Industries, Employers Organisations and Trade Associations recently issued a 29-page document entitled "A way forward strategy" to both the government and opposition parties setting out a detailed agenda to lift Sri Lanka's "share of the world trade and services". The first item in the list is to bring "an effective and long term resolution" to the war, which big business regards as a major barrier to its plans to encourage foreign investment through a program of accelerated privatisation and economic restructuring.

Negotiations have been taking place between the PA and the UNP, including over the issue of the war. The day before parliament met, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe stressed the need for a joint approach, referring to the party's document "A Common Programme for New Political Culture," which warns that "the public at large will lose confidence in our political system". He called for "consensus building, constructive engagement and the creation of trust among all political parties," pointing out that the "majority parties have clearly expressed their desire to seek a political solution to the conflict".

In parliament, UNP deputy leader Karu Jayasuriya said: "Everyone wants peace and no one wants to withhold support for any effort to resolve this national crisis. Let us all put our heads together and devise the

means to resolve the crisis. Enough blood has been shed and it is time that we give priority to the question of resolving the crisis.”

Big business realises that without a consensus between the PA and UNP any move to reach a negotiated end to the war will be torpedoed by Sinhala extremist groups that vehemently oppose talks with the LTTE or concessions to the country's Tamil minority, and demand an intensification of the war.

In early August, Kumaratunga was forced to withdraw her so-called devolution package after it met with rabid protests and denunciations from the Buddhist hierarchy and extreme rightwing groups such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Sinhala Urumaya Party (SUP). The package of constitutional reforms was aimed at a limited power sharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites.

Having all but abandoned the constitutional package during the election campaign, Kumaratunga is now tentatively moving toward a deal with the UNP and talks with the LTTE. At the same time, she stressed in her speech to parliament that “we will not allow anyone to divide the country” and “we shall carry on with courage and determination to free this country of armed terrorism [a reference to the LTTE].” In another overture to the Sinhala extremists, Kumaratunga promised to allow the Buddhist hierarchy the opportunity to express their views on any constitutional changes.

Kumaratunga is well aware that any step toward negotiations with the LTTE will provoke a new round of protests. The JVP has written to the Norwegian Ambassador condemning his country's diplomatic initiative and demanding that “Norway should in no way act as a peace broker and upset the national integration of Sri Lanka.” The letter included slogans such as “Ugly Norwegians go home. There is much for you to do there.”

The SUP parliamentarian Tilak Karunaratne commented in like fashion during the parliamentary session last week. “What is this hypocrisy the government is indulging in with the so-called Norwegians?” he asked rhetorically. “The leader of the team, Solheim is a member of a tiny leftist political party in Norway. When they hold their May Day rallies it is the LTTEers in Norway who march with them.”

While the SUP has only one parliamentarian, there are those within the PA and UNP who share Karunaratne's chauvinist sentiments. Any initiative by Kumaratunga threatens to open up divisions in the ruling coalition and her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). In the leadup to the recent election, she inserted Ratnasiri Wickremanayake as prime minister—a politician with close links to the Buddhist establishment—and included the racist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) in the PA's ranks.

During the election campaign, Wickremanayake ruled out any further involvement by Sri Lanka in the Norwegian diplomatic effort and called for the “annihilation” of the LTTE and its leader Prabhakaran. In comments to the *Weekend Express* on November 10, he made clear that he had not backed away from his stance. After listing a series of recent LTTE attacks on the military and civilians, he said: “This is ample proof that the LTTE does not believe in democracy but in terrorism... Terrorism cannot be wiped out through discussions. Terrorism can be wiped out only through war.”

As the *Sunday Times* commented last weekend: “[T]he PA will face a dilemma once again when it presents the [changes to the] constitution in parliament. The pertinent question that arises is whether the government could carry on, with Sinhala hardliners such as Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake and MEP leader Dinesh Gunawardene. Moreover, the Sinhala Urumaya and the Buddhist clergy along with the JVP would oppose extensive devolution.”

The PA government is already an unstable coalition with a bare majority in parliament. In order to provide political payoffs to all her disparate allies, Kumaratunga had to expand the cabinet to include a massive 44 Ministers and 35 junior ministers, leaving only 37 government MPs as backbenchers. Whichever way Kumaratunga turns, she confronts a precarious situation, as any defections will undermine her slender parliamentary majority.



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