

British minister visits Colombo

## **A new burst of diplomatic activity to push peace talks in Sri Lanka**

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Britain's junior foreign minister Peter Hain visited Colombo last week as part of a renewed flurry of diplomatic activity aimed at engineering talks between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the country's long-running war.

Hain spent two days in Sri Lanka and held a long series of discussions with Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, several cabinet ministers and the leaders of three Tamil parties.

Hain delivered a speech at the British Council on November 22 in Colombo urging the Sri Lankan government to follow the example of negotiations in Northern Ireland. "This is a war neither side can win militarily," he said. "It is a conflict that cannot be resolved without elected leaders being prepared to sit down with people who may well be responsible for barbarous assassinations, but who do have a legitimate political program which needs to be engaged not shunned."

None of the major powers support the LTTE's demand for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka, but Hain did hold out the possibility of international support for a far more wide-ranging form of autonomy than the Kumaratunga government has been prepared to concede.

"The LTTE, like the IRA, need to acknowledge that, whilst a Tamil kingdom constitutionally split from the rest of the island will not receive recognition by Europe, the USA or indeed India, the principle of self-determination and control over most if not all the key policies affecting the daily life would be supported by the international community."

Hain made clear that Britain was putting pressure on the LTTE to take part in talks. In the course of his visit he hinted that if the LTTE did not do so, Britain was considering "very seriously" proscribing it under anti-terrorist laws due to go into effect next year. The LTTE has a centre in London whose closure the Sri Lankan government has been demanding.

Hain indicated that Britain was in close consultation with the US and India over the situation in Sri Lanka. His visit took place just three weeks after a trip by Norwegian special envoy Erik Solheim, during which Solheim crossed the military frontline in northern Sri Lanka to hold talks with LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. He also met with President Chandrika Kumaratunga and several other party leaders.

Norway and India, with the backing of the major powers, have been engaged in trying to facilitate negotiations. While Hain was in Colombo, Solheim was back in New Delhi reporting to Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh on his recent discussions in Colombo and with the LTTE.

This week US Assistant Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth is scheduled to arrive in Colombo. A US embassy spokesman downplayed the significance of the visit saying, "he is not coming to talk about the ethnic problem specifically but will meet a cross section of top leaders from the government and the opposition". It is clear from Inderfurth's trip, however, following a visit earlier in the year by another top US State Department official Thomas Pickering, that the US is taking a direct hand in the peace moves.

For much of the last 17 years, the US, Britain and other major powers have taken no interest in bringing

about an end to the civil war that has cost the lives of more than 60,000 people and left many more maimed and homeless. But increasingly the war has come to be seen as a dangerous destabilising influence in the region, particularly after significant LTTE military gains over the last year, and therefore a barrier to international investment on the Indian subcontinent.

The timing of the latest round of diplomatic activity is directly linked to Sri Lanka's recent general elections. Both the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and the opposition United National Party (UNP) ran campaigns that pandered to Sinhala chauvinist layers which are hostile to any peace talks and demand a stepping up of the war against the LTTE. Just prior to the election, a round of protests by Sinhala extremist groups forced Kumaratunga to shelve planned constitutional changes aimed at laying the basis for a negotiated end to the war.

In the aftermath of the election, the PA and UNP are again under pressure from sections of big business concerned at the war's economic impact. As a result Kumaratunga signalled, tentatively, during her opening address to parliament that the government is prepared to engage in negotiations. Her concern is that any attempt to open up discussions with the LTTE will be met with a wave of protests from rightwing pro-war groups and open up divisions within her ruling coalition.

On Monday, Prime Minister Wickramanayake, who is known for his close connections to the Buddhist hierarchy and Sinhala chauvinist layers, spoke dismissively of Hain's visit, saying that the experiences of other countries (Northern Ireland) could not be "planted" in Sri Lanka. "We will carry on the military option until the enemy is totally eliminated," he said.

Sinhalese extremists have seized upon Hain's reference to Tamil "self-determination" to condemn the British visit. In its weekly political commentary, the *Sunday Leader* stated: "In fact he [Hain] is very specific when he not only says the LTTE has a legitimate political program that needs to be engaged but also that the principle of self-determination pushed by the LTTE has international support. This in itself is not just a diplomatic defeat for the government but a major triumph for the LTTE."

The rightwing Sihala Urumaya (SU) held a protest outside the British Council building while Hain was

delivering his speech. Previously, following Solheim's meeting with Prabhakaran, the SU held a protest of several hundred people, including Buddhist monks, on November 16 outside the Norwegian embassy in Colombo. The protesters burned an effigy of Solheim and held up placards reading "murderous Norwegians go home".

In an interview last weekend with the Colombo weekly, the *Sunday Times*, the head of the LTTE's political wing S.P. Thamilchelvam, reiterated the LTTE's willingness to take part in negotiations. "I think the day that the President of Sri Lanka and the Tamil national leader [Prabhakaran] sit together and talk is the happiest day for both nationalities, Sinhalese and Tamil," he said.

When asked if Prabhakaran could become another Mandela or Arafat, Thamilchelvam had nothing but admiration for the leaders of the ANC and PLO. "Nelson Mandela and Yassar Arafat are people who were committed to the cause—freedom for their people. Our leader is also leading our people, who are subject to political tyranny and he is being loved and admired by his people in the same way that Mandela and Arafat are."

There is no doubt that the LTTE already has its foot on the same road trodden by the PLO in the Middle East and the ANC in South Africa. In return for hanging up its guns, the LTTE is hoping to preside over a capitalist statelet, or perhaps just an autonomous region, on less than half an island—an outcome that will do nothing to ensure basic democratic rights or decent living standards for ordinary working people.

The willingness of Britain, Norway and other countries to concede a measure of autonomy to the north and east of the island indicates that the major powers already recognise that the LTTE can be trusted to defend their interests in the event that a deal is worked out with the Sri Lankan government.



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