

Sri Lankan government and LTTE inch closer to negotiations

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Under pressure from the major powers, the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are inching toward talks aimed at ending the civil war that has engulfed the island for 17 years and resulted in more than 60,000 deaths.

Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar last week indicated that the Peoples Alliance (PA) government felt that “political talks with the [LTTE] aimed at solving the conflict can and should begin forthwith”. He emphasised, however, that any negotiations would be held without preconditions and rejected proposals by Norway, which has been acting as a mediator, for a series of confidence building measures before the beginning of talks.

While the PA government has signalled its readiness for talks, the Sri Lankan army has launched a series of operations in the northern Jaffna peninsula aimed at regaining areas seized by the LTTE earlier this year. Last weekend the military carried out its second offensive in the month in a bid to take back LTTE-controlled territory just to the east of Jaffna town. According to the government, at least 12 government troops and 30 LTTE fighters died in fierce fighting.

Kadirgamar's comments were a belated response to an offer of unconditional talks made by the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran in his Heroes Day speech on November 29. “We are seeking a negotiated settlement that would be fair, just and equitable and that it would satisfy the political aspirations of the Tamil people,” Prabhakaran said, adding: “We are not imposing any pre-conditions for peace talks.”

Prabhakaran did, however, call for “de-escalation and normalisation of civilian life” in the leadup to any talks, which has led to ongoing wrangling with Colombo over the basis for negotiations. The LTTE issued a statement last weekend calling on the “international community to use its good offices to persuade the Sri Lankan government to abandon its hardline militaristic approach”. The LTTE has since announced a unilateral ceasefire for a month beginning on December 21.

The appeal to the “international community,” that is to the major powers, is characteristic of the LTTE's diplomacy. In his speech, Prabhakaran commented: “If Sri Lanka is to be directed towards the path of peace, the reins are in the hands of the international governments who feed the economic needs of the country.” The fact that the LTTE places great store in the “good offices” of international governments is indicative of the outcome that it has in mind—a separate, or at least autonomous, capitalist Tamil statelet in the north and east of the island along the lines of the Palestinian authority in the Middle East.

Since the Sri Lankan parliamentary elections in October, the US and the European powers have been exerting strong pressure on both the PA government and the LTTE to come to the negotiating table. Both Colombo and New Delhi have been a hive of diplomatic activity. Last month Norwegian special envoy Erick Solheim made a special trip across the military frontlines in northern Sri Lanka to meet with Prabhakaran. UK deputy foreign minister Peter Hain and US assistant secretary of state Karl Inderfuth have since visited India and Sri Lanka. Both the US and Britain have reaffirmed their support for the Norwegian initiative and India's involvement.

While the official statements have been suitably cordial, there is evidence of considerable behind-the-scenes arm-twisting. Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has been in Europe since the beginning of November for discussions with a number of governments and to attend a vital meeting of 24 donor countries and international organisations convened by the World Bank in Paris this week. During the talks, which Sri Lankan delegation leader G.L. Pereis described as proceeding with “refreshing candour,” the European Union bluntly urged the Sri Lankan government to enter peace talks with the LTTE and improve its human rights record, citing “shortcomings in the government”.

The Sri Lankan government is in desperate need of continuing financial aid from the donor group. Defence expenditure shot up by over 40 percent after the government

went on an arms spending spree in May following a series of serious military setbacks at the hands of the LTTE forces. The money market has dried up, leading to higher interest rates. Political and economic uncertainty has caused a flight of foreign capital nearly nine times higher in the first 10 months as compared to last year—3.2 billion rupees as compared to 475 million rupees last year.

The LTTE also faces a series of thinly veiled threats. During his visit to Sri Lanka, Hain hinted that the British government may consider declaring the LTTE illegal under its new anti-terrorist legislation due to come into force next year. London is one of the LTTE's main international bases.

India has warned recently that it may crack down on LTTE activities. In late November, Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani told the Indian parliament that naval detachments and coast guard units had been established at vital points in southern India to curb smuggling activities by pro-LTTE groups into northern Sri Lanka. An effective Indian naval blockade would seriously affect the LTTE's ability to obtain key military supplies.

Advani also said his government was pursuing Prabhakaran's extradition over alleged LTTE involvement in the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. He said Indian officials had visited Sri Lanka in mid-November to meet with the Sri Lankan attorney general over the issue.

None of the major powers support the LTTE's demand for a separate Tamil state. In its most recent statement, the EU reiterated that any deal should “take substantial account of the aspirations of the Tamil minority and not breach the intangible principle of the territorial integrity and unity of Sri Lanka”.

The real concern of the US and European powers has nothing to do with the rights of Tamils and other minorities, which have been trampled on without any significant international protest ever since the country gained independence in 1948. Their object in Sri Lanka, as in Kashmir, is to put an end to conflicts that have the potential to trigger instability throughout the Indian subcontinent—an arena of growing international economic and strategic interest.

For its part, the PA government has proposed constitutional changes to give limited autonomy to the north and east. The devolution package is in effect a powersharing arrangement between sections of the Sinhalese and Tamil elites aimed at ending the economically ruinous conflict and facilitating foreign investment and their mutual exploitation of the working class. It will do nothing to provide basic democratic rights and decent living standards for the Sri Lankan masses—Sinhalese or Tamil—and will further entrench the ethnic divisions, laying the basis for further discord.

Kumaratunga attempted to pass the devolution package in early August but withdrew it after protests by Sinhala extremists organised by the Buddhist clergy, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Sihala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage). During the subsequent election campaign, the PA pandered to Sinhala chauvinist layers by insisting that the constitutional package and talks with the LTTE were off the agenda. Under pressure from the major powers and sections of local big business, Kumaratunga has again abruptly switched course. But she is acutely aware that any concessions to the LTTE will provoke a storm of protest from rightwing Sinhala groups and open up divisions within the ruling coalition.

For the time being, those within the ranks of the PA who have demanded no talks and an intensification of the war against the LTTE appear to be marking time. Backing away from his previous speeches, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake told a public meeting recently that he would not “impair in the slightest way” attempts to get the peace process underway. The UNP and Tamil parties have also indicated their support for talks between the government and the LTTE.

The JVP, however, has accused the government of betraying the country by proposing negotiations with the LTTE. Last week general secretary Tilwin Silva told a meeting that the JVP was willing to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of lives to “defend the motherland” as it had done following the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord. During the late 1980s the JVP carried out a vicious campaign of fascist thuggery in its bid to force out Indian troops brought into northern Sri Lanka as part of the Accord arrangements.

As for the SU, it has been carrying out a series of provocative protests against Norway and its role in facilitating the talks.

If talks do finally get underway, Kumaratunga's negotiators will be constantly looking over their shoulders to determine the reaction of rightwing extremists such as the JVP and SU.



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