

Preparations for peace talks drag out as Sri Lankan government continues military offensive

A correspondent
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A month into the new year and no firm date or proposals have been made for the peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that were mooted last November to begin in early January.

In fact, the Peoples Alliance government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, which routinely accuses the LTTE leadership of “bad faith,” has exploited the LTTE's unilateral ceasefire declared in December to launch a military offensive on the northern Jaffna peninsula.

Codenamed “Anvil 9,” the military operations are aimed at winning back large tracts of land which fell to the LTTE forces last April and May in what was a debacle for the Sri Lankan army. For the first time in the course of the 18-year conflict, the military lost control of the strategic Elephant Pass army base controlling the approach to the Jaffna peninsula.

The defeats precipitated a major political crisis in Colombo. Desperate to shore up 30,000 demoralised troops cut off on the Jaffna peninsula, the government went on a spending spree, paying out \$US350 million on new fighter aircraft, patrol boats, artillery and multi-barrel rocket launchers.

The Kumaratunga government is under pressure from sections of the big business and the major powers to reach a negotiated settlement to the war but at the same time cannot afford to alienate Sinhala extremists, including within its own ranks, who insist that there be no compromise with the LTTE. By refusing to accede to the LTTE call for a reciprocal ceasefire and launching “Anvil 9,” Kumaratunga clearly hopes to negotiate from a position of strength when and if talks finally begin.

In *Time* magazine interview with commander Major General Anton Wijendra indicated the political aim of the offensive. “A war of this nature cannot be won by military actions alone,” he said. “We need to get it to a point where the enemy is weakened sufficiently whereby they agree to our terms of negotiations. We are presently in a position of strength... This situation is very favourable to us.”

The exact military situation is unclear. Apart from limited guided tours for selected journalists, the Sri Lankan government permits no independent reportage from the war zones. But from the claims made by the military, which have not been denied by the LTTE, the army has made significant gains on the Jaffna peninsula and is advancing toward the Elephant Pass area.

Having retaken Chavakachcheri to the east of Jaffna town, government troops have advanced further to the south and east of the peninsula. A recent report indicated that the army is only 22 kilometres from Elephant Pass and has overrun the LTTE's first line of defence.

Fighting has been fierce. On January 17, military sources said, casualty figures were 50 soldiers and two officers dead and 54 LTTE fighters killed. More than 300 from both sides were wounded. The previous day, according to the military spokesman, Sanath Karunaratne, “18 soldiers were killed in the fighting and 89 wounded while the bodies of 22 rebels had been recovered.” The army claims to have killed 1,200 LTTE fighters since beginning a series of offensives in September.

An eyewitness report in the *Sunday Times* described Chavakachcheri: “[It was] once a bustling centre of commerce on a strategic junction in the Jaffna

peninsula. Only bullet scarred name boards of banks, co-operative societies and shops remain alongside piles of rubble. They are testimony to the level of sophistication the 18-year long separatist war has brought about. Whilst residents of this once prosperous township languish in refugee camps, bitter fighting continues on the outskirts.”

An LTTE statement claimed: “The army only gained ground in the most recent offensives thanks to the strategic withdrawal we were forced to make because of the constraints of a self-imposed ceasefire.” But the LTTE appears to have had substantial losses and is now gathering its forces to defend Elephant Pass, which is vital for its supplies from the Vanni district to Jaffna peninsula.

With its ceasefire due to expire on January 24, LTTE spokesman Anton Balasingham warned there would be no extension unless Colombo reciprocated and entered peace talks being sponsored by Norway. He pointed out that the PA government had ignored a series of proposals by Norwegian special envoy Erik Solheim to de-escalate the fighting.

“We said we cannot talk when a bloody war is being carried on,” Balasingham said. “We are prepared to extend our ceasefire if the government is prepared to consider the Norwegian proposals. Otherwise there is no point in extending the ceasefire.” The government, however, again refused to end the fighting. The LTTE nevertheless prolonged its ceasefire for a further month and appealed to the “international community to persuade the Sri Lankan government to reciprocate”.

The LTTE decision to continue the ceasefire despite the government's provocative military actions indicates that it is under considerable pressure. The British government, which is pushing for a settlement, has hinted on several occasions if the LTTE does not toe the line that it may declare the LTTE a terrorist organisation, effectively shutting down its base of operations in London.

After strengthening its position militarily, the PA government has again suggested that it may be willing to begin negotiations. Last weekend Kumaratunga called on the LTTE to set definite dates for the start and ending of talks, saying there was “a faint glimmer of hope for peace at the end of the tunnel”. But she ruled out any halt to the fighting and said the army's offensives would continue during any discussions.

Solheim arrived in Colombo again on Wednesday for talks with the government and political leaders, after reportedly holding talks in London with LTTE spokesman Balasingham. His previous visit to Sri Lanka in mid-January produced no results and his reception was rather cool. At that time, Solheim met with the president, prime minister, opposition leader and various ministers. He also sought permission to repeat last year's visit across the military frontline to meet with LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran in the Vanni. The trip did not take place and no explanation was offered. Solheim left after two days without issuing any statement.

Whether his latest visit will be a step toward negotiations is yet to be seen.



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