

British ban on LTTE strengthens Sinhalese extremists in Sri Lanka

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The Peoples Alliance (PA) government in Sri Lanka has hailed the British decision on February 28 to put the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on its list of terrorist organisations as a “diplomatic triumph”. For months, President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her ministers have been waging a campaign for the proscription of the LTTE, which has been waging a war for the last 18 years for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island.

In recent weeks, the PA worked hand in glove with the Sinhala extremists campaigning for the British to proscribe the LTTE. The Sinhala Urumaya (SU) party launched a petition to collect one million signatures to handover to the British High Commission. The ruling alliance joined the SU, Sinhala Jathika Sangamaya (an SU-breakaway) and the Buddhist hierarchy in criticising the opposition United National Party (UNP) for not demanding the British government to ban the LTTE. On the day before the British announcement, several PA ministers organised a demonstration at the British High Commission to present a letter with the same demand.

In the wake of the British decision, the SU and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) claimed a victory and have announced that they will extend the campaign to oppose Norwegian attempts to facilitate talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. SU leader and parliamentarian, Thilak Karunaratna, told the press: “Our next target is Norway. The position that Norway is a neutral inter-mediator is a myth and Oslo is the most likely next haven for the LTTE. We urge the government to pull out of this sham peace process and militarily defeat the LTTE.”

The JVP has also called for Western governments to help defeat the LTTE militarily. “If the British government took this decision 15 years ago the LTTE

would not have been in a position to launch a separatist war. If it acted in that manner it would have been possible to prevent a disaster of such a magnitude,” a JVP press release stated. Calling on Norway to ban the LTTE, it added: “The responsibility of the European Union is to help Sri Lanka defeat Tamil communalism and separatist ideology in Sri Lanka.”

Buddhist monks, other Sinhala racist organisations and sections of the media have joined the chorus calling for other Western powers to outlaw the LTTE.

Most Tamil parties in Sri Lanka have expressed dismay at the British ban. Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) General Secretary R. Sambanthan commented: “It is very unfortunate that this has become applicable when the prospect for serious peace process is commencing.” A coalition of Tamil parties, including the TULF, had sought talks with the Indian and British government over the ban but was turned down.

Having stirred up Sinhalese chauvinism and given a boost to the SU, JVP and others, the government has now expressed concerns at what they have set in motion. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar told a press conference on March 2 that the Sinhala community should not treat “the proscription of the LTTE as a matter for gloating or triumph and not as occasion for glorification.” He urged Tamils not to “treat this as a blow against them.”

After appealing for other European countries to ban the LTTE, Kadirgamar added lamely that the “hope for peace is nearer.” The foreign minister has been central to Sri Lanka's lobbying effort. During the last two months he has warned several times that if the UK did not ban the LTTE it would “strain the relations between two countries.” Last month he met with India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh to seek his assistance in

putting pressure on the British government.

The contradictions in Kadirgamar's statement reflect the conflicts within the government and the ruling class as a whole over the country's protracted civil war.

The Sri Lankan government is under pressure to find a negotiated end to the conflict, which has become a barrier to the economic interests of big business in Sri Lanka and the strategic concerns of the major powers within the region. At the same time, however, both the PA and the opposition UNP are fearful of alienating the Sinhala extremist layers on which they have relied to wage the war.

The PA has campaigned for a British ban on the LTTE, firstly to undercut the SU, JVP and other chauvinist groups; secondly to divert public attention from the rising prices and falling living standards; and finally to put pressure on the LTTE in the lead up to any negotiations. But having succeeded in getting the British ban, the situation threatens to escalate out of the government's control and put any negotiations in jeopardy. Thus Kadirgamar's belated and hypocritical appeal for calm.

The LTTE has attempted to avoid a ban by the British government, which could severely affect its operations in Europe. Its international headquarters are based in London and it relies heavily on fund raising activities among Tamil exile communities in Britain and elsewhere in Europe.

Prior to the British government decision, LTTE official Anton Balasingham warned that any ban would affect the "peace process" initiated by Norway. After the announcement, Balasingham initially threatened to withdraw from the preparations for talks, then backtracked, lamenting that it was "a sad day for Anglo-Tamil relations" which would "encourage the repressive Sri Lankan regime." He pledged to "continue the peace process" depending on how the law was applied.

Britain's decision to list the LTTE as a terrorist organisation is aimed at keeping up the pressure on the LTTE to reach an agreement with the Sri Lankan government to end the war. At present, none of the major powers support the LTTE's demand for a separate state. The US and India have previously outlawed the LTTE. Earlier this month the US Supreme Court dismissed appeals by the LTTE and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) against US bans on their

organisations.

The LTTE has indicated its willingness to begin negotiations and has for the three consecutive months declared a unilateral ceasefire in the warzones. The Sri Lankan government, however, has refused to reciprocate and has been waging a military offensive to win back areas lost to the LTTE last year in order to strengthen its hand at any talks and to placate the Sinhala chauvinists.

Last year there were indications that negotiations could begin as early as January. But the process is dragging out. Last week Norway's special envoy Erik Solheim arrived for another round of discussion with Kumaratunga and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, and left again giving no indication as to when negotiations might start. His only comment was "everything is moving" as he prepared to fly to London for talks with Balasingham.

Like the LTTE, the Sri Lankan government is under pressure from the major powers to negotiate. It also confronts a mounting financial crisis caused in part by huge increases in military spending over the last year. But there are few signs that Kumaratunga is prepared to hold talks in the immediate future. The president told CNN during a three-day visit to India in late February that negotiations could begin in two months. She is about to embark on another trip to Europe, to seek economic assistance and to put further pressure on European countries to follow Britain in banning the LTTE.



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