

Following a major military setback

Sri Lankan government puts peace talks back on the agenda

K. Ratnayake
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After the humiliating failure of a major military offensive on the northern Jaffna peninsula, the Sri Lankan government has signalled its willingness to adhere to an “unofficial” ceasefire and finalise arrangements for talks with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The Sri Lankan media, citing sources close to Norwegian special envoy Erik Solheim, indicated on Monday that a decision on the talks might be made as early as May 15. Solheim was in Colombo last week for discussions with the government and opposition leaders, then flew to London to meet with LTTE leader Anton Balasingham, and is expected to visit New Delhi to meet with Indian leaders.

Norway, acting on behalf of the European Union, has been attempting for more than two years to lay the basis for peace negotiations between Colombo and the LTTE. The Sri Lankan government has been under pressure from the major powers and sections of big business to negotiate an end to the brutal 18-year civil war. At the same time, however, it fears that any move towards talks will elicit a savage response from Sinhala extremist organisations such as Sihala Urumaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and open divisions in its own ranks.

At the beginning of April, there appeared to be prospects for talks. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar told parliament that peace negotiations with the LTTE were imminent and that the dates would be announced by the end of the month. After ignoring a unilateral LTTE ceasefire for three months and continuing military operations, the Peoples Alliance (PA) government felt constrained by mounting international pressure to show some sign that it was moving towards talks.

But in late April, the LTTE refused to extend its ceasefire beyond April 24, bitterly denouncing the government for continuing its military attacks and the major powers for failing to bring Colombo to the negotiating table. “Instead of commending and promoting our peace offensive,” an LTTE statement complained, “some international governments have imposed prescription and other restrictions on us. Whereas the other party in conflict is being provided with financial assistance, military aid and training facilities, thereby encouraging our enemy to adopt a hardline militarist stance.”

The statement was referring, in particular, to the British government's decision in February to proscribe the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. The LTTE leadership was also coming under pressure from its own fighters who were expected to adhere to a one-sided ceasefire while the Sri Lankan army continued its attacks and regained control of areas lost to the LTTE last year.

The LTTE statement noted that the armed forces had killed 140 of its fighters and wounded another 400 during the ceasefire period. It appears that the final decision to end the truce was made after the Sri Lankan military engaged LTTE boats near Mulaithivu—killing several of its cadres and capturing nine others—and also attacked positions at Thenmarachchi.

Within hours of the LTTE announcing an end to its ceasefire, the Sri Lankan army launched a major offensive codenamed Agni Kheela (Rod of Fire). Government troops advanced from their defence lines at Eluthumadduval and Nagar Kovil towards Palai, two kilometres to the south. The military objective was ultimately to recapture the Elephant Pass military complex—a key strategic position at the gateway to the Jaffna peninsula which the military lost to the LTTE for the first time in April last year.

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga was clearly calculating that the military would inflict a decisive defeat on the LTTE and thus strengthen Colombo's position in any negotiations. Since the defeat at Elephant Pass, the government has spent billions of rupees purchasing sophisticated new weaponry including multibarrel rocket launchers, warplanes and artillery to bolster the army's capacity.

But Operation Agni Kheela rapidly turned into a rout. According to the government's own statements, in four days of fierce fighting, the army lost 250 soldiers and another 1,600 were wounded, many of them seriously. It claimed to have killed 190 LTTE fighters and wounded another 400. The LTTE reported that the size of the government losses was even larger—500 dead and 2,000 wounded.

The seriousness of the defeat was underscored by the fact that, for the first time, the government admitted to having

suffered more casualties than the LTTE in an operation. Moreover, despite the heavy losses, the army gained no ground. A government statement reported that the army had faced heavy LTTE artillery and mortar fire and that the “troops were redeployed in the original defence line as [establishing] a new defence line would have... cost more in terms of lives.”

Many soldiers were wounded by land mines. Following the offensive, the Colombo National Hospital and military hospitals were filled to capacity with hundreds of wounded soldiers. According to hospital workers, they ran out of beds and a number of soldiers had to be put on the floor. At the Colombo National Hospital, there were repeated calls for more nurses to care for the casualties. Urgent requests were broadcast for blood donations.

A 26-year-old wounded soldier from a remote rural area bitterly told our reporters: “I deserted the army and rejoined recently. I was sent to the front line. After my wounds are cured I will have to go to the front even though I don't want to go there. This is a futile war. I joined the army because what you earn from farming is not enough to exist on.”

In a feeble attempt to save face, the government declared that the army, through its action, had been able to “preempt a planned Tiger [LTTE] offensive”. But the magnitude of the setback has obviously shaken the government and the military establishment, which has ordered an inquiry to ascertain what went wrong.

Previously Kumaratunga has maintained a policy of “engaging in talks while continuing the war” and “no cease fire.” Her aim was to ward off criticism from the JVP and Sihala Urumaya, as well as Sinhala chauvinists within the PA's own ranks, who are opposed to any negotiations with the LTTE. Following the failure of Operation Agni Kheela, however, Kumaratunga engaged in intensive talks with her top advisers and, with the consent of the military top brass, decided to observe a “temporary halt of hostilities.”

An article in the *Sunday Times* on April 29 reflected the mood of deep pessimism in ruling circles in Colombo. “[T]he fallout from a retreat, or at least an operation that was aborted,” it wrote, “would be that the political establishment will still have a tricky situation. Talks, which it seems cannot be avoided, are now looming round the corner. Across the table will be an enemy which clearly circumvented the traps which were set for it and walked off unscathed in the bargain.”

While the *Island* newspaper reacted to the defeat with a frontpage headline “LTTE takes the offensive,” the LTTE quickly made clear that it had no intention of exploiting the situation militarily. After an initial rocket barrage, it stopped the attack and issued a statement, accusing Colombo of escalating the conflict and “undermining the Norwegian peace project”. It then added: “[T]he LTTE remains ready to finalise and formalise the Norwegian MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) to cease all armed hostilities” and create the conditions for talks.

Behind the scenes, renewed pressure was put on Kumaratunga to agree to a ceasefire and talks. Both Norway and India had expressed alarm at the Sri Lankan government's decision to launch an offensive. On April 29, an Indian Foreign Office spokesman noted “with concern the events of the past few days” and expressed the hope that “all parties would continue with the peace process and the talks would commence early.” The following day Norwegian special envoy Solheim arrived back in Colombo and declared that the fighting was a “definite setback” to the peace process.

On May 1, Foreign Minister Kadirgamar flew to Washington for talks with Secretary of State Colin Powell, who, while restating US opposition to the LTTE's demand for a separate Tamil state, insisted that the Sri Lankan government enter talks as soon as possible. The US is concerned that the protracted conflict in Sri Lanka threatens to destabilise other parts of the Indian subcontinent where it has growing economic and strategic interests.

In Colombo, sections of big business fear that the war will compound the country's economic problems and heighten social tensions. Massive military expenditure, equivalent to 6 percent of the GDP, has already created a sharp balance of payments crisis and the flight of capital from the country has sent the sharemarket to 11-year lows. One analyst told the *Dow Jones* Internet service: “The military option is not the most viable at a time when the economy was getting back on track. At the moment we can't afford an escalation of the conflict.”

Confronting growing pressures inside and outside Sri Lanka, Kumaratunga appears to have agreed to an “unofficial ceasefire” and to lay the basis for talks. When and if negotiations do finally take place, however, they will be plagued by the conflicts that dogged the protracted efforts to get them started in the first place.



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