

Moves towards peace talks stall as Sri Lankan government refuses to lift ban on LTTE

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At the beginning of May, Norway's special envoy Erik Solheim was cautiously optimistic that the long drawn out process of attempting to bring the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the negotiating table might finally bear fruit. Solheim even indicated that he felt that the arrangements for the first discussions would be finalised by May 15.

The date passed and no talks took place. Not even the framework for negotiations was announced and no explanation was forthcoming from any quarter. Instead, what emerged from the LTTE was a demand for the lifting of the government proscription placed on the organisation in 1998. Over a week later, the Peoples Alliance (PA) government in Colombo rejected the LTTE's call outright, effectively putting the arrangements for negotiations into limbo.

The LTTE's demand came in the course of a meeting on May 17 between Solheim and the leader of the LTTE's political wing, Thamilchelvan, in the jungles of Wannu in the north of the island. Previously the separatists had insisted on a ceasefire, the lifting of the economic blockade on areas under its control and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) prior to any talks.

The LTTE has been under strong pressure from the US and Europe, acting through Norway and India, to negotiate with Colombo. From last December, its fighters observed a unilateral ceasefire despite Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's refusal to respond in kind or halt her diplomatic campaign aimed at encouraging European countries to join the US and Britain in outlawing the LTTE.

When the LTTE finally ended its ceasefire in April, the Sri Lankan military immediately seized the opportunity to launch a large-scale offensive operation code-named Agni Kheela (Rod of Fire). Kumaratunga was clearly hoping that the army, bolstered by costly purchases of new weapons, would be able to inflict a major defeat on the

LTTE and strengthen the government's hand in any talks.

The opposite proved to be the case, however, as the military operation rapidly turned into a disaster. Officially, more than 250 soldiers were killed, another 1,600 were wounded, and the army was forced to retreat to its original positions. Only then did the government signal its willingness to observe an unofficial ceasefire and to partially remove sanctions on essential goods for LTTE-controlled areas.

In a "confidential letter" leaked to the media on May 10, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar wrote to his Norwegian counterpart: "In pursuance of the objective of finding a negotiated political solution, the parties decided to take measures to alleviate any hardships and dangers to civilians affected by the ongoing conflict and contribute to building understanding and the foundation on which negotiations can take place."

But the impression that talks were on the immediate agenda quickly soured. LTTE spokesman Anton Balasingham characterised Kadirgamar's statement as "recklessly premature". On May 12, Solheim sounded a further note of caution, saying: "The parties agree on certain issues but it is definitely too early to say that there is an agreement that can be the basis for talks." Shortly afterwards, the LTTE issued its demand for legal recognition in Sri Lanka.

The LTTE's shift points to dissatisfaction within its ranks over the direction of the so-called peace process. For months its fighters observed a ceasefire that the army exploited to strengthen its military position on the northern Jaffna peninsula. It was not a diplomatic success for the LTTE either—in March, Britain acceded to Sri Lankan government demands and listed the LTTE as a "terrorist organisation". Moreover, if the talks do finally start, all the major powers have ruled out in advance the establishment of a separate Tamil state—the main demand for which the LTTE has been fighting for the past 18

years.

The tensions within the LTTE are indicated by an attempt to assassinate Thamichelvan as he was travelling to Malavi to meet with Solheim in mid-May. A mine destroyed the lead vehicle of his convoy while in LTTE-controlled territory. Thamichelvan only escaped with his life because he had just switched from the front vehicle—his official jeep—to another that was several kilometres behind.

The LTTE immediately issued a statement blaming the Sri Lankan military for the attack. The defence ministry in turn denied any responsibility, stating that it “knew nothing about it” and had “not been anywhere near the area”. While it is not possible to determine who exactly carried out the attack, there are two significant features that point to the LTTE itself.

Firstly, the blast took place at Kokavil, well north of the army's defence lines and deep within an LTTE-controlled area. The LTTE has tight surveillance within these areas and it is unlikely that a group of soldiers could have infiltrated unobserved. Secondly, after its initial statement, the LTTE has issued no further press releases even though other media have announced that seven LTTE cadre were killed in the blast. Unless it is deliberately seeking to downplay the incident or is directly involved, the LTTE would normally seize the opportunity to denounce the army and the government.

Whatever the immediate reasons, the LTTE's call for an end to its proscription exacerbated the difficulties confronting the Kumaratunga government in Colombo. For more than a week, the matter was discussed in ruling circles, before a decision was finally made to keep the ban in place.

Solheim briefed Kumaratunga and Foreign Minister Kadirgamar on the outcome of the talks with Thamichelvan on May 18. Rather than a full cabinet meeting, Kumaratunga first invited a few of her close confidantes for a private meeting. The cabinet due on May 23 was postponed for a day and then did not discuss the LTTE demand. An official statement was only made on May 26.

The obvious indecision underscores the dilemmas facing the government. Having suffered a major military setback in April, Kumaratunga is in no position to immediately insist that the army renew an offensive against the LTTE. The government's huge arms purchases last year have contributed to the country's worsening financial position and to growing social tensions fueled by rising prices.

Moreover, Kumaratunga is also under pressure from the major powers and sections of big business to reach a negotiated end to the protracted war. Solheim flew straight from Colombo to Washington to brief officials in the Bush administration, including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, and to meet with Congressional committees.

At the same time, however, the government is facing opposition from Sinhala chauvinists within its own ranks and from extremist organisations such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Sihala Urumaya that are opposed to any concessions to the LTTE or more broadly to the country's Tamil minority.

On May 23, well before any official statement, Justice Minister and Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) secretary Batty Weerakoon sought to placate the Sinhala extremists by ruling out any lifting of the ban on the LTTE. “When Norway started the process, the LTTE was willing to start talks without pre-conditions but is now making demands which are impossible for the government to give into,” he stated.

On May 26, the country's chief Buddhist prelates chaired a provocative meeting in Colombo attended by the leaders of a number of chauvinist organisations. Former Sihala Urumaya president S.L. Gunasekera gave the keynote speech, insisting that the government maintain the ban on the LTTE, scrap plans for talks and intensify the war.

On the same day, the government announced its decision. On May 28, the LTTE warned that by refusing to end the ban, the government “should bear full and total responsibility for the collapse of the peace efforts and the serious consequences that might arise from its decision”.

Since then fighting has erupted again. In late May, the LTTE blew up a naval convoy carrying sailors on leave, killing 17 and injuring another 20. Last week, the army's commandos entered LTTE-controlled areas near Kanchikudichchiaru in the Ampara district east of Colombo and killed at least 14 people. The following day, the LTTE hit back at an army base in the same area, killing six soldiers and injuring 10 others.



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