

Sri Lankan government and LTTE sign a tentative cease-fire agreement

Wije Dias
27 February 2002

After weeks of frantic behind-the-scenes activity, the Sri Lankan government signed a formal cease-fire arrangement with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on February 22—just two days before the deadline set by the Norwegian facilitators. The deal sets the stage for negotiations over a settlement to the protracted 19-year civil war that has claimed the lives of more than 60,000 people.

Both the United National Party (UNP)-led government and the LTTE have been under heavy pressure from the US and European powers, which have backed the Norwegian moves, to end the conflict and its potentially destabilising influence on the Indian subcontinent. Sections of big business in Colombo also want an end to the war and have been pushing the UNP to fulfill its promise to negotiate with the LTTE made at last December's election.

The February 22 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) simply formalises a cease-fire that had already been unilaterally declared by both sides and makes no mention of the basis for subsequent negotiations. Further talks over the next three months will lay the basis for formal negotiations for a political settlement.

The talks on the MoU were shrouded in secrecy. Even on the day before the signing, the government denied in parliament that an agreement had been finalised. The chief LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham strongly objected to media reports speculating on the conditions in the agreement. The nervousness reflects fears in both camps that sharp opposition will emerge to the deal.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is well aware that attempts by previous governments in Colombo have foundered on the opposition of Sinhala chauvinists to any negotiations with the LTTE. Even before the MoU was signed and its terms announced, the Buddhist clergy and several political parties, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Sihala Urumaya (SU), organised public protests against any talks, specifically focusing on speculation that the government would lift the ban on the LTTE imposed in 1998.

The cease-fire agreement is only the second signed since the war began in 1983. The previous Peoples Alliance (PA) government, which was elected in 1994 after promising to end the war, signed a similar agreement in January 1995. But the talks quickly collapsed and the PA regime led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga escalated the war.

In 2000, under pressure from the major powers, Kumaratunga attempted to pass constitutional changes that would have provided limited autonomy to the provinces, including the war-torn North and East. However, the devolution package, which was meant to be the basis for talks with the LTTE, collapsed when the UNP, responding to Sinhala extremist demonstrations, refused to provide the necessary backing in parliament.

At the beginning of 2001, with the country near bankruptcy and facing a severe balance of payments crisis, big business began to agitate strongly for an end to the war. The IMF, in granting a stand-by loan in March, instructed the government to cut defence expenditure as a major precondition. However, attempts to implement a cease-fire and begin talks

with the LTTE failed when the government, fearing the reaction of Sinhala chauvinist groups, refused to legalise the LTTE.

Following the events of September 11, sections of the ruling elite in Colombo viewed the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism" as an ideal opportunity to extract concessions from the LTTE to end the conflict in Sri Lanka. With the backing of big business, the UNP and its allies defeated the PA. Once in power, Wickremesinghe immediately invited Norway to resume its role of facilitator for peace talks.

In his first policy statement on January 22, the prime minister outlined the logic of his move to parliament: "This [international] opinion has intensified since the September 11 attack on New York. The LTTE is under pressure to give up terrorism and the armed struggle for a political solution as a result."

Clearly under pressure, the LTTE leadership has made a number of concessions in signing the MoU. Most significantly it has all but formally dropped its demand for a separate Tamil state in the North and East of the island. Wickremesinghe has ruled out in advance any discussion of a separate state, which has no support from any of the major powers.

The MoU tacitly accepts the legitimacy of the Sri Lankan state. After outlining procedures for ending military action and demarcating areas of control, the document adds: "The Sri Lankan armed forces shall continue to perform their legitimate task of safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka."

In a strong indication that the LTTE will bend even further, deputy leader Karikalan said on Tuesday that the organisation may give up the idea of a separate homeland if the government could provide a political solution that would ensure the rights of the Tamil people.

The LTTE also dropped its insistence that the government's ban on it be lifted as a precondition for any formal cease-fire arrangement. Just five days before the deal was signed, LTTE negotiator Balasingham reiterated that the organisation wished to be treated as "an equal partner" and that "its legitimacy as the sole representative of the Tamil people" was important.

While Wickremesinghe refused to lift the ban, there was clearly a deal done to give the LTTE a degree of legitimacy and to undercut rival Tamil organisations. Its unarmed members will be allowed "freedom of movement" in government-controlled areas in the North and East to carry out political work—but only step by step. Fifty cadres will be allowed entry a month after the signing of the cease-fire comes into effect, and an unrestricted number two months later.

The agreement also calls for the disarming of Tamil paramilitary groups such as those associated with the EPRLF, PLOTE, EROS, TELO and EPDP. These groups, which once claimed to fight for a separate Tamil state, have become adjuncts to the Sri Lankan military. Supplied with arms and money, they have operated alongside the security forces against the LTTE and suppressed broader anti-government opposition among Tamils. In recognition of their services, the government is to offer individual militia members a place in the army in areas outside the North

and East.

Through the MoU, the LTTE has secured a certain status for itself in any talks that are held. But the class orientation of the organisation, which represents the interests of sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie, is indicated by its failure to establish basic democratic rights as part of the cease-fire arrangement. In areas under its control, the LTTE will not allow other parties to engage in political activities.

The LTTE has not insisted on the immediate lifting of harsh restrictions imposed on Tamil fishermen by the Sri Lankan military to cut arms smuggling. Fishermen, many of whom have been reduced to abject poverty, have been demanding unrestricted access to fishing grounds. The LTTE, which has covertly supported their protests in the past, has agreed to the restrictions remaining in force for three months.

The notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act, under which thousands of Tamils have been detained without trial for months and years, often on trumped-up charges of being “LTTE suspects,” will not be abrogated. The Sri Lankan government has only agreed “that such operations shall not take place” after the MoU is signed. Tamil political prisoners will not be released.

Both sides have several hundred prisoners captured in combat but they are not treated as prisoners of war. Their status will not change under the MoU, although they may receive visits by family members.

The US, Britain, Japan and other major powers immediately welcomed the MoU. US Secretary of State Colin Powell sent a congratulatory message to the Sri Lankan foreign minister saying: “The US is 100 percent with Sri Lanka and ready to render any assistance in the peace process.”

Big business, which is desperate for an end to the war to boost the country’s economic prospects and foreign investment, also responded positively. Share prices in Colombo rose on Tuesday with the All Share Index rising 1.1 percent and the Milanka blue chip index gaining 1.3 percent on the previous day.

At the same time, the overwhelming majority of working people, who have borne the hardships of the war, are also in support of a negotiated settlement. For the past decade, voters have put into office the party that has promised to find a way to end the conflict. A recent opinion poll published by the Social Research Unit Center for Policy Alternatives found that 80.7 percent of respondents expressed confidence in peace talks.

But having begun the war as a means of dividing the working class on religious and ethnic lines, the ruling class has created bases of support for its continuation among those with vested interests—war profiteers, sections of the military top brass and state bureaucracy, the Buddhist hierarchy and Sinhala extremists groups such as the JVP and SU. Previous attempts to secure a peace deal have failed because this constituency exerts a powerful influence inside both of the major traditional parties—the UNP and the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), the major component of the Peoples Alliance.

PA leader Kumaratunga, who retains the powers of the Sri Lankan presidency, has placed a question mark over the MoU. She expressed “surprise and concern” at not being informed of the terms of the agreement prior to its signing. Her statement gave cautious and conditional support to the agreement, indicating she had “expressed concern to the prime minister about certain specific clauses and aspects”.

On Tuesday, Kumaratunga convened a meeting of PA leaders and their allies, including the JVP and EPDP, to discuss their attitude to the agreement. Divisions have already appeared in their ranks. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) supported the cease-fire and pointedly issued a statement saying that it “sees no reason for any party to commence a campaign of panic or fear mongering”.

The LSSP’s comments are directed at its allies, including elements within the SLFP who are keen to whip up chauvinist opposition to the deal

as a means of boosting support in local elections due in March. The EPDP is bitterly opposed to the agreement as it will mean the loss of the arms and money—reportedly in the vicinity of 7 million rupees (\$US75,000) a month—that it received for its militia under the PA government.

The JVP has denounced the MoU as “an agreement of surrender” and claimed that the government has accepted the LTTE’s demand for a separate Tamil state. Seeking to win sections of the PA to its side, the JVP has reiterated Kumaratunga’s concerns about not being informed. In the late 1980s, the JVP waged a vicious campaign against the Indo-Lankan Accord, which brought an Indian peace-keeping force into the North and East of the country to impose its terms on the Tamil minority. The JVP branded the accord “a betrayal of the motherland” and gunned down workers and political opponents who refused to support its protests.

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe is also concerned about possible opposition from the defence establishment. Significantly he chose to travel to the northern city of Vavuniya to sign the agreement and to address troops at the main army camp. To appease the military top brass, Wickremesinghe insisted that defence expenditure would not be immediately cut. He also told soldiers that they were not going to lose their jobs as a result of the cease-fire.

Although the guns on the battlefield are silent, for the time being at least, none of the underlying issues have been addressed, let alone resolved. Throughout the election campaign and the subsequent months, Wickremesinghe has studiously avoided spelling out any proposals for a political settlement to end the war, beyond saying that he will not discuss a separate Tamil state. No doubt he has in mind Kumaratunga’s experience in 2000. She spelled out her devolution package in detail, only to find that she faced opposition, not just from the JVP and SU but from the UNP and within her own coalition.

But having engineered a cease-fire, Wickremesinghe will now be compelled to start to outline the basis for an end to the war. In all likelihood it will be similar to Kumaratunga’s devolution package. After all, the UNP had agreed to support the PA’s constitutional changes in 2000, before Wickremesinghe, who was opposition leader at the time, bowed to the chorus of chauvinist opposition and reneged. Now he faces Kumaratunga’s political problem—how to negotiate an end to the war to satisfy big business and the major powers while keeping the Sinhala extremists, including those within his own party, at bay.

Kumaratunga’s constitutional package was not aimed at ending the systematic discrimination and oppression of the Tamil minority that has been part and parcel of Colombo politics since independence in 1948 and ultimately led to the war. Rather it was a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites, which further entrenched ethnic and religious divisions, sowing the seeds for future conflict. Wickremesinghe’s peace formula will be no different in its essentials.



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