

LTTE's chief negotiator returns to a political minefield in Sri Lanka

Wije Dias
8 April 2002

Anton Balasingham, chief negotiator and “theoretician” for the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), returned to Sri Lanka late last month amid preparations for negotiations brokered by Norway to end the country’s 19-year civil war. He flew straight into the north of the island on March 25 aboard a Twin Otter seaplane, especially organised by Norwegian officials to bypass immigration procedures and landed in a small lake in the LTTE-controlled Wanni region.

Since leaving the Wanni in 1998 because of a serious medical condition, Balasingham has been in exile in London where he has acted as the LTTE’s chief political spokesman and negotiator. His return to Sri Lanka, and the manner in which it was effected, underscore the importance that the LTTE leadership, Norway, the Sri Lankan government and the major powers attach to his presence. All of them, each with the different interests, are counting on Balasingham to play a major role in dealing with the opposition that is expected to emerge within the country’s Tamil minority to the terms of any settlement.

The LTTE signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on February 22 for an open-ended ceasefire with the United National Front (UNF) government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as the first step towards peace talks. In signing the MoU, the LTTE has tacitly, though not explicitly, relinquished its longstanding demand for an independent Tamil state of Eelam in the north and east of the island. In the document, the LTTE accepts the right of the Sri Lankan military to “safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka.”

As a result, the LTTE leadership is in a precarious position. The major powers, in particular the US, have already indicated that tough measures will be taken

against the LTTE if it fails to toe the line in the talks. At the same time, the LTTE leaders are well aware that any settlement will not end the country’s entrenched racial discrimination nor improve living standards and therefore is likely to provoke protests in its own ranks as well as among broader layers of Tamils.

The events since Balasingham’s arrival only confirm a degree of turmoil in the LTTE. Soon after meeting with the LTTE’s top leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, Balasingham met with Norwegian officials to discuss the arrangements for negotiations. All are agreed on Thailand as the venue, but the talks themselves are to be delayed for a month until May. The postponement does not appear to have come from the government side. In fact spokesman G.L. Peris indicated that the government was prepared to lift its official ban on the LTTE which was a major obstacle to the start of talks.

Even before he arrived, Balasingham made the LTTE’s orientation perfectly clear. In early March he sprang to the defence of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, who came under fire from President Chandrika Kumaratunga from the opposition Peoples Alliance (PA). Kumaratunga wrote to the prime minister on March 1 offering him “close consultation and cooperation... [to] make this ceasefire work,” but at the same time criticising the terms of the ceasefire agreement as “incompatible with the sovereignty status of Sri Lanka”.

Kumaratunga did not openly reject the MoU, which she knows has the backing of major sections of big business in Colombo as well as the major powers. But her letter contained a series of references that were deliberately designed to appeal to Sinhala extremist groups with whom she maintains close relations and who are adamantly opposed to any peace talks. She compared the temporary ceasefire line to the 50-year

division of Kashmir and criticised Norway's role saying: "This is the first time in the history of post independence Sri Lanka that a foreign government is being authorised to draw demarcation lines on the soil of Sri Lanka."

Balasingham stepped into the debate to back Wickremesinghe, declaring the following day: "Her [President's] argument that certain articles in the truce agreement have compromised the island's sovereignty and national security is untenable and fallacious." He said that the ceasefire document simply reflected "the actuality of the ground situation" and described the comparison with Kashmir as "preposterous and ridiculous."

Balasingham stopped short of declaring that the LTTE had abandoned its demand for a separate state but his reply to Kumaratunga is the firmest indication so far that the organisation is prepared to formally do so. His willingness to shore up long-time political opponent Wickremesinghe reveals the degree to which the LTTE is desperate for a deal with but also for recognition from the US and other major powers.

Days later on March 11, the US issued an official statement on the peace talks insisting that Washington would only respond positively to the LTTE if it "chooses the path of peace, ends its reliance on terrorism, [and] accepts that an independent 'Eelam' is both unattainable and unnecessary". Balasingham was quick to praise the US for being "seriously concerned about the establishment of peace and stability in the island" and added that "those LTTE members who are found guilty of violating the ceasefire will be severely punished."

Under these conditions it is significant that the LTTE, for the first time, has held several large rallies in towns adjoining areas under its control, including Mannar, Vavuniya, Batticaloa and Trincomalee. The demonstrations held under the banner of Pongu Tamil (Tamil resurgence) mobilised a significant number of Tamils under the slogans of "the right of self determination for Tamil Eelam" and "recognition for the LTTE as the sole representative of Tamil people".

Far from indicating a shift in the LTTE's policy, however, these rallies are designed to serve several interlinked purposes. The first is to consolidate political support for the LTTE as the "sole representative" of the Tamil people and thus to preempt and intimidate any

criticism or opposition. The second is to strengthen its position at the bargaining table by trying to convince Colombo and the major powers that it alone is capable of imposing and implementing any settlement.

From its inception, the LTTE has sought support in the major capitals for its demand for an independent Eelam. After two decades of opportunist manoeuvring, the LTTE has found no backing in the US or Europe for a separate Tamil state which is regarded as setting a dangerous and destabilising precedent for the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, since September 11, the LTTE has been threatened with the prospect of being among the targets of the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism".

In his annual Heroes Day speech last November, LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran clearly signalled his capitulation to the demands of the major powers. He pleaded that the LTTE's policy was "neither separatism nor terrorism". But far from denouncing US aggression in Afghanistan, he offered the LTTE's full support, declaring: "We welcome the counter-terrorist campaign of the international community to identify and punish the real terrorists."

The exact terms of any settlement between the Colombo regime and the LTTE are yet to be worked out. But it is clear in advance that the aim of any agreement will be to satisfy the demands of the major powers and international investors whose interests stand in direct opposition to the aspirations of the working people, both Tamil and Sinhalese, for basic democratic rights and decent living standards.



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