

Tamil separatist leader confirms readiness for deal with Sri Lankan regime

Our correspondents
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At a press conference in northern Sri Lanka last week, Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), signalled his willingness to fall into line with the demands of the US and other major powers for negotiations to end the country's long-running civil war.

Prabhakaran explained to around 300 Sri Lankan and foreign journalists: "There has been a lot of misunderstanding about the LTTE. We would like to explain through the international media that the LTTE is committed to peace and a negotiated settlement." To underscore the point, he appeared for his first press conference in 12 years in a light blue safari suit instead of his usual battle fatigues. Emphasising the unity of the LTTE leadership, he was flanked by the LTTE's chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, just returned from exile in Britain, and the leader of the LTTE's political wing, Tamil Chelvam.

Central to the negotiations is the insistence by the major powers that the LTTE abandon its long-held demand for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island. The issue has the potential to open up divisions in the LTTE. Having promoted a separate Tamil Eelam as the only means of ending the oppression of the Tamil minority, the LTTE will be sitting down at a negotiating table in Thailand in June on the tacit understanding that independence is off the agenda.

The LTTE leaders are obviously sensitive to the political difficulties involved. Asked whether the LTTE would "renounce" an independent state, Prabhakaran hedged around the issue, saying: "Conditions have not arisen to abandon an independent statehood. The struggle for Eelam is a demand of the Tamil people." At the same time, however, he declared in unmistakable terms that he would drop the demand if a place could be found for the LTTE within Colombo's proposals for limited autonomy.

Asked what he meant by "self-determination," Prabhakaran stated: "If autonomy and self government is given to our people, then also we can say that internal self-determination is to some extent met. But if the Sri Lankan government rejects our demands for autonomy and self-

government and continues with repression, then as a last resort we would opt for secession... So self-determination entails autonomy and self-government. In an extreme case, in the last resort, it means secession."

With an eye to the impact in its own ranks, the LTTE attempted to disguise the message by referring to Prabhakaran as "the President and PM of Tamil Eelam" and reaffirming the guerrilla leader's declaration that his troops should shoot him if he ever gave up the demand for Eelam. In Colombo, however, these rather theatrical gestures were well understood and Prabhakaran's remarks were greeted approvingly.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe praised Prabhakaran's comments as indicating "several points towards a political solution". The US embassy in Colombo issued a statement welcomed the LTTE's "commitment to peace and a negotiated settlement". And the Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister arrived in Sri Lanka to prepare the agenda for the Thailand talks.

While Prabhakaran claims to speak in the name of the Tamil people, the LTTE's program never represented the interests of the oppressed masses. In opposition to a socialist perspective, the demand for a separate Tamil state was advanced in the early 1970s under conditions of intensifying anti-Tamil discrimination, which was enshrined in a new constitution. The LTTE leaders opposed a class solution based on the unification of Sinhala and Tamil workers and called instead for an independent Eelam—a proposal that represented the ambitions of the Tamil bourgeoisie for their own capitalist statelet.

Concerned at its destabilising impact on the Indian subcontinent, the US and other major powers have firmly ruled out a separate Eelam. As a result, the LTTE is prepared to negotiate a power-sharing arrangement within the framework of a unified Sri Lankan state with the parties that have been responsible for carrying out systematic anti-Tamil discrimination and prosecuting the 19-year civil war.

Prabhakaran denied that the LTTE had been under pressure from the US after September 11. He went out of his

way to ingratiate himself to the US and other major powers. In response to questions from WWSW journalists, he avoided any criticisms of US policy and remarked: “We cannot condemn Colombo’s growing collaboration with the USA or the prevailing international configuration of states.” He repeated the LTTE’s support for Bush’s “war against terrorism”—that is, for US military aggression in Afghanistan—and made an obsequious appeal to Washington for the LTTE not to be categorised as a terrorist organisation.

Prabhakaran signalled his approval of the government’s proposal for a two-year interim administration in the north and east—an arrangement the LTTE is hoping to dominate. He expressed his confidence in Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, saying “his hands must be strengthened” to allow for a full political settlement after two years. Wickremesinghe has come under criticism from President Chandrika Kumaratunga, her opposition Peoples Alliance (PA) and Sinhala extremist organisations opposed to any negotiated settlement with the LTTE.

The exact terms of any agreement on “internal self-determination” are yet to be decided. But several of Prabhakaran’s remarks make clear that it will not be in the interests of the majority of ordinary working people—Tamil or Sinhalese. Rather it will be an arrangement between the two ruling elites for the joint exploitation of the working class, with the LTTE playing the role of policeman among the Tamil masses.

When questioned about the LTTE’s program if it were to rule in an interim administration, Balasingham insisted it would follow “an open economic policy”. This was a clear message to international finance capital that the LTTE, like Colombo, would meet the dictates of the IMF and international investors for “pro-market” policies.

Nearly two decades of war have had devastating consequences, particularly in the war zones in the north and east. Over 60,000 people have been killed and many more have been injured or displaced. Much of the area’s roads, housing and infrastructure have been damaged or destroyed. The only inducement to investors to risk their capital in such conditions will be a low-cost, disciplined workforce, something the LTTE leaders are pledging to provide, in collaboration with Colombo.

In that context, the LTTE’s refusal to guarantee basic democratic rights to political opponents is particularly sinister. When WWSW journalists asked whether an LTTE administration would permit other political organisations to function, Balasingham at first agreed, then qualified his remarks, saying only Tamil organisations would be allowed. When pressed on the LTTE’s attitude to working class organisations, he said they would be permitted but insisted

that the LTTE would retain a veto. He attempted to justify the present lack of democratic rights in LTTE-controlled areas by claiming that “a liberation struggle” precluded such rights.

The LTTE’s oft-repeated claim to be “the sole representative of the Tamil people” is inherently anti-democratic. Prabhakaran noted with satisfaction that most of the established Tamil bourgeois parties have accepted the LTTE’s claim—effectively writing themselves out of political existence. But while the LTTE may have the backing of the Tamil elite, it will not be able to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the Tamil masses for basic democratic rights and decent living standards. Its anti-democratic measures are aimed at intimidating any opposition to its policies.

Moreover, the plans for “internal self-determination” set the stage for further communal tensions, conflict and violence. The north and east of Sri Lanka also include sizeable communities of Sinhalese and Muslims. Prabhakaran has formally apologised for the brutal expulsion of thousands of Muslims from Jaffna in the early 1990s and has met with leaders of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress. But there have been reports of LTTE harassment of Muslims in the east of the island and claims that LTTE leader Karikalan has ruled out granting Muslims the right to hold land. Though as yet unconfirmed, these incidents point to the dangers to the working class of any agreement based on communalism.

A remark by Balasingham underscores the dangers. One journalist questioned the wisdom of relying on Norwegian diplomacy given the outcome of the Oslo agreement in the Middle East. Balasingham contemptuously dismissed the comparison declaring, “We know that the Palestinian problem has fallen into difficulties. But our problem is entirely different.”

While there are obvious differences between Sri Lanka and the Middle East, there are also more similarities than the LTTE leadership would care to admit. Prabhakaran is on the same road as Arafat—placing the future of the Tamil people in the hands of the major powers that have created a disaster in the Middle East.



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