An uneasy cease fire in Sri Lanka

K. Ratnayake
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An indefinite cease fire between government forces and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been in place in Sri Lanka since February, as a prelude to peace negotiations in Thailand next month. But the arrangements, which are being supervised by a monitoring mission involving delegates from Norway and other Scandinavian countries, are far from secure.

While professing support for the "peace process," the Sri Lankan government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is under pressure from Sinhala extremist groups that are opposed to any negotiated settlement with the LTTE. Both of the major parties—Wickeremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) and the opposition Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) of President Chandrika Kumaratunga—are responsible for prosecuting the 19-year war and are thoroughly steeped in Sinhala chauvinism.

In a meeting with the top Buddhist priests in Kandy in late April, Wickremesinghe pledged that his government would not accept the LTTE's demand for a "homeland". At a press conference last month, LTTE leader Prabhakaran all but dropped the demand for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island and indicated that "internal self determination" may be acceptable. However, to Sinhala extremists, including many in the Buddhist hierarchy, any talk of even limited autonomy for the country's Tamil minority is tantamount to treason.

Bent on appeasing these layers, Wickremesinghe told a ceremony of Buddhist monks held on May 11 that any interim administration in the north and east would only be set up with the approval of the "people" and the parliament. By "people" he was, of course, referring to his audience—promising the Buddhist prelates a virtual veto over any agreement with the LTTE.

It is not even clear that the talks in Thailand will take place. The LTTE has insisted as a basic prerequisite for negotiations that the government lift the existing ban on its organisation. While there has been considerable behind-the-scenes discussion on the issue, the Wickremesinghe government has yet to announce any decision. If it is not recognised as a legal organisation, the LTTE could still pull out of the talks.

The SLFP, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Buddhist hierarchy have all opposed the LTTE's deproscription. The SLFP wrote to the prime minister in early May calling for "satisfactory progress" in talks before any lifting of the ban. The opposition party also insisted that an interim administration should only be established as part of a final agreement. The JVP has called for the LTTE to be disarmed before the ban is ended. JVP leaders have called for a halt to Norway's involvement and accused Wickremesinghe of having a secret agreement with the LTTE to divide the country. Other groups such as Sihala Urumaya (SU) are opposed to any peace talks and demand that the LTTE be crushed militarily.

In late April, the JVP organised a rally of about 4,000 people, including Buddhist monks, under the chauvinist slogan: "Do not allow the division of the motherland". Since then the JVP has held joint demonstrations with a section of the SLFP and other racist groups against the peace moves. In early May, around 1,000 Buddhist monks held a rally in Colombo and attempted to march to the prime minister's residence to hand over a petition.

None of these demonstrations have been large, however. Most people want an end to the 19-year war that has cost at least 60,000 lives and left many more maimed or homeless. Having won the national election last year by promising to bring peace, Wickremesinghe is engaged in a precarious balancing act. The most powerful sections of big business as well as the major powers have been pushing for an end to the war, which

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has become a major obstacle to investment. At the same time, however, the prime minister cannot afford to offend the Buddhist hierarchy and Sinhala extremists, and so is wary about making any significant concessions to the LTTE.

Wickremesinghe is preparing to leave for Europe to meet UK prime minister Tony Blair, European Union president Romano Prodi and other leaders and enlist their support in putting pressure on the LTTE to further modify its demands, particularly for a lifting of the ban. At this stage, the LTTE has not modified its position. The *Tamil Guardian*, considered to be the LTTE's unofficial mouthpiece, lamented in its May 15 issue that the government had not taken measures to deproscribe the organisation.

The cease fire is also threatened by actions of the military. The most serious incident occurred on May 1, when the Sri Lankan navy attached a number of vessels off the east coast of the island. The Sri Lankan military claimed the boats were smuggling arms for the LTTE and made a formal complaint to the monitoring mission (SLMM) set up by Norway. The LTTE denied the allegation, accusing the military of attacking fishing boats.

Our reporters visited the Batticaloa district and spoke to survivors—local fishermen—who explained that they had been attacked suddenly. At least two fishermen were killed. The monitoring mission's acting chief, Hagrup Haukland, issued a statement last week declaring that one of the trawlers had been carrying illegal arms. But he absolved both the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE, leaving open the possibility that an unnamed third party had been smuggling arms.

Wickremesinghe boasts that the cease fire has enabled the free movement of people in the north and east. But the monitoring mission has received a growing number of reports of harassment and intimidation by the Sri Lankan armed forces. On the night of April 29, two people at Nilaveli were injured in a navy ambush. One was a 43-year-old mother, Marimuttu Pechchimuttu, and the other a 13-year-old student, Subashini. About 15,000 people stopped work on May 4 and held a public rally in the eastern town of Muttur to protest this and other incidents.

There is a long list of similar events. On May 13, Sri Lanka navy gunboats surrounded fishing boats near the eastern port of Trincomalee and assaulted 35 fishermen. At Ampara, the Special Task Force demolished a garment factory, supposedly in order to extend its defence lines.

The military has refused to allow the LTTE to conduct political activities on the island of Kyats, north of the Jaffna peninsula, and has maintained roadblocks and security checks. In Jaffna town, local people have complained that the security forces are building new bunkers in several areas. The army has refused to vacate 16 schools that were previously taken over and used as military camps.

Sections of the military, including the high command, have been bitterly opposed to any negotiated end to the war. For the majority of soldiers, many of whom were unemployed rural youth, the conflict has been a disaster. Others, however, have profited from an enhanced career or an association with businesses dependent on military contracts. Layers of the armed forces and state bureaucracy are deeply imbued with Sinhala chauvinism and have close connections to Sinhala extremist groups and the Buddhist hierarchy.

Under such circumstances, there is a wide scope for the military to engage in harassment, intimidation and outright provocation as a means to disrupt or even sabotage the cease fire. The top brass has insisted on maintaining the armed forces in a state of readiness. The LTTE has complained of military aerial reconnaissance over areas under its control in the northern Wanni region. The government has announced plans to recruit 5,000 new soldiers to bolster the army's numbers.

Talks between the Wickremesinghe government and the LTTE are due to take place in Thailand within weeks. No date has yet been set, however, and it is far from certain that negotiations will begin at all.

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