

Months of delays in scheduling Sri Lankan peace talks

K. Ratnayake
10 July 2002

The Sri Lankan government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on February 22 to end fighting in the country's devastating 19-year civil war. But while a formal ceasefire remains in place, the negotiations over a political settlement have been postponed repeatedly.

Talks were initially due to begin in Thailand in May. The start was delayed until June, then July and still there is no announcement. There is speculation in Colombo that negotiations may take place in August but that deadline could pass like the others. The inability of the United National Front government to agree on the framework for talks reflects its fear of Sinhala chauvinist groups that are hostile to any concessions to the LTTE or more broadly to the country's Tamil minority.

The government's spokesman, Constitutional Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris, did not even mention plans for peace talks during his regular press briefing last Thursday. The previous week he admitted that "differences" had emerged between the LTTE and the government but did not elaborate. He claimed that "the agenda was sorted out" then added that there were "certain matters that may have to be discussed in private".

Both the Wickremesinghe government and the LTTE are under pressure from big business and the major powers to reach a settlement. Big business backed the war initially as a means of dividing the working class on communal lines and thus to ram through the economic restructuring agenda demanded by international capital.

Now the war has boomeranged. The fighting has drained resources, created political instability and led to a loss of international investment. The most powerful

sections of business want an end to the war, as do the US and other major powers that regard the conflict as a dangerous destabilising influence on the Indian subcontinent. But having backed the war, the ruling class has also created social bases of support for the war's continuation among sections of the military and state bureaucracy, the Buddhist clergy and related businesses that have profited politically and economically from the fighting.

Under pressure from the Western powers, the LTTE has all but abandoned its demand for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island. But it has insisted on a series of preconditions that have become the target of a campaign by Sinhala extremist parties and organisations aimed at scuttling any negotiations. These include the lifting of the government's ban on the LTTE, the establishment of an interim administration in the north and east, as well as other measures contained in the ceasefire agreement.

The government has stalled on all of these issues, which has compounded the difficulties in announcing any decision on the talks. Wickremesinghe fears that any concessions to the LTTE will open up divisions in the ranks of his own party, the conservative United National Party (UNP), which is the major component of the ruling coalition. The UNP is just as steeped in the ideology of Sinhala chauvinism as the opposition Peoples Alliance (PA) headed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

A section of Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party has joined the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in an open campaign against the ceasefire agreement. These groups have called for the army to maintain its occupation of the north and east and attacked the government for "sacrificing the protection of the country" by withdrawing from some

army camps. The JVP has opposed the de-proscription of the LTTE and accused the Wickremesinghe government of “betraying the country to the separatists”.

Kumaratunga and the PA have not officially embraced the JVP’s campaign but their criticisms of the government follow the same line—that it has conceded too much to the LTTE in the MoU. Former Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar told a press conference on June 20 that the government has “carelessly agreed to some clauses such as vacating security forces on a deadline” and is now in serious difficulties. De-proscription and the setting up of an interim administration, he insisted, should be implemented after talks start on the “core issues” of power sharing.

Faced with these pressures, the government failed to order the military to end its occupation of schools and religious places by the deadline of March 18—three weeks after the MoU was signed. Colombo claims that the security forces have left most of the designated places but the LTTE and Tamil parties insist that this has not occurred. The chief of the Norwegian-led Monitoring Mission, Trond Furuhojde, said last week that the list of places occupied by the military was growing and the withdrawal would “continue long into the future”.

Furuhojde’s statement indicates how widespread the military occupation of the north and east has been. At first the armed forces resisted giving up any facilities under its control then called for these places to be declared security zones. Even when buildings have been vacated, the army has continued its harassment of the local Tamil population. The navy recently moved out of Velanai Central College and Sivapragasm College on Kayts Island in the northern Jaffna peninsula but took over nearby houses and banned the movement of civilians in the surrounding area.

Last week in breach of the MoU, the government postponed shifting the Special Task Force camp at Panama in the Eastern Province. A government spokesman claimed that local Sinhala residents had protested against any move.

The government has also ruled out any immediate lifting of the ban on the LTTE. Although he had previously indicated he would deproscribe the LTTE, Wickremesinghe has since put off its implementation

until 10 days before talks begin. While the LTTE is pressing for the establishment of an interim administration prior to negotiations, the government has refused to discuss the issue. Various chauvinist organisations have declared that the proposal is a means of dividing the country.

Several recent incidents raise the possibility that sections of the security forces are working in league with Sinhala extremists groups to sabotage the ceasefire. On June 20 a gang of thugs set upon two LTTE activists in the small town of Velanai on Kayts Island but fled when local people began to gather. Locals claimed that the assailants were navy personnel and members of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Front (EPDP)—an armed Tamil group that works closely with Sri Lankan security forces.

The incident provoked a number of protests in Jaffna and elsewhere by Tamil groups demanding the arrest of the attackers. A government commission cleared the army, navy and the EPDP, saying there was no evidence to prove who carried out the attack. Each has a motive, however. The navy had previously opposed the presence of any LTTE members on the island, claiming it was a security zone. The EPDP fears its privileged position will be undermined by the MoU which provides for the disarming of armed Tamil groups that have operated as adjuncts to the military.

Whoever is responsible, the incident points to the fact that there are powerful vested interests intent on ensuring that no political settlement is reached.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact