

Sri Lankan peace talks: the LTTE bows to international capital

The Editorial Board
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The Sri Lankan peace talks, held in Thailand from Monday to Wednesday, provide an object lesson in the political bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism. The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) has announced to the world it will join the long line of national liberation movements that have exchanged their combat fatigues for an entrée card into government administration and corporate boardrooms.

The LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham set the tone for the talks when he declared, in his opening address, that the LTTE was looking for a partnership with the government. "The leaders of the Sri Lankan government have expressed a desire to transform the island into a successful Tiger economy," he said. "We appreciate their aspiration. Such an aspiration can best be realised by embracing the Tamil Tigers as their equal partners in the task of economic reconstruction of the country."

In economic parlance, the term "Tiger economy" is quite specific: it refers to the cheap labour platforms set up in Asia to attract foreign capital through cutthroat competition. In Sri Lanka, the IMF, World Bank and business leaders have already laid out the next stage of a detailed agenda of privatisation and spending cutbacks to make the country "more competitive".

The chief obstacle to investment, however, has been the country's 19-year civil war, which has plunged the economy into crisis and created deep-going social and political tensions. Balasingham's offer of a partnership with Colombo amounts to a pledge, not only to end the war and implement the IMF's economic prescriptions, but to suppress the opposition of working people to growing poverty, unemployment and social inequality.

To demonstrate the LTTE's credentials, Balasingham referred to its record in areas under its military control. "We have built an effective administrative structure for more than 10 years which has sustained social cohesion and law and order," he boasted. "Therefore, it is crucial that the LTTE should play a leading and pivotal role in administration as well as the economic development of the Northeast."

The message could not be clearer. The methods the LTTE has used to deal with opposition—threats, arbitrary detention, physical violence and murder—will now be placed at the disposal of international capital. The organisation will work, in tandem with the Sri Lankan government and its repressive state apparatus, to implement "law and order" and "social cohesion".

Few details have been released of the three days of closed-door talks between Balasingham and the chief government negotiator

G.L. Peiris at the Sattahip naval base in Thailand. But there can be no doubt that the government gratefully accepted Balasingham's offer and that the basic outline of a settlement has been agreed.

There is already a clear agenda. Three more negotiating sessions have been announced over the next four months. Moreover, the final communiqué issued a joint appeal for international donors to provide immediate aid. It also announced the establishment of a joint task force to assist in the resettlement of an estimated 1.6 million people displaced by the war and in reconstruction in the north and east. "It is quite possible to start a whole variety of programs," Peiris declared. "There is no antagonism. On the contrary, there is a partnership."

To set the seal on the arrangements, Balasingham announced to a press conference on Wednesday that the LTTE no longer called for an independent Tamil Eelam. "The LTTE doesn't operate with the concept of a separate state," he said. "We operate with the concept of a homeland and self-determination. Homeland doesn't mean a separate state; it means an area where Tamils and Muslims live. Saying the LTTE is fighting for independence has no relevance."

Previously, the LTTE leadership had hinted it would be prepared to drop its longstanding demand for an independent Tamil state. This was, in fact, implicit in its agreement to attend the talks. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, with the backing of the US, Britain and other major powers, had repeatedly insisted that a separate state was off the agenda. Balasingham's explicit repudiation of the demand was intended, however, to broadcast to the world that the LTTE was open for business and willing to integrate itself into the framework of the Sri Lankan capitalist state.

The Sri Lankan negotiators immediately welcomed his statement, remarking that the progress it represented exceeded all expectations. Wickremesinghe, who was in New York to address the UN, said he was "encouraged." He said he expected the peace process to take three to four years, but added he hoped it would be quicker. Reflecting the mood in business circles, the All Share Price Index on the Colombo stock market shot up by 5.3 percent in record trading over the week.

Among layers of the LTTE membership, the leadership's decision to abandon the demand for an independent Eelam will no doubt be viewed as a betrayal. But the LTTE's accommodation to Colombo in reality represents the logical outcome of its nationalist perspective.

The demand for a separate Tamil Eelam never expressed the

interests of the broad masses of Tamil workers, small farmers and businessmen who have been the victims of systematic discrimination and persecution at the hands of the Sri Lankan state. Rather, it embodied the ambitions of the Tamil bourgeoisie for its own state as the best means for exploiting the working class and establishing its own connections with international capital.

The LTTE raised no challenge to the profit system or the oppression of Sri Lanka by imperialism. Its aim was always to enlist the imperialist powers in support of a separate Tamil Eelam. In return the LTTE pledged, ever more explicitly, to open up the north and east of the island as a cheap labour paradise for international investors.

Like other bourgeois national movements such as the PLO in the Middle East, the IRA in Ireland and the ANC in South Africa, the LTTE's ability to manoeuvre on the international arena ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. From the mid-1990s, it came under increasing pressure from the major powers to end the war and reach a settlement with Colombo. Not only was the continuing conflict a barrier to investment in Sri Lanka, it threatened to further destabilise an already volatile Indian subcontinent.

But any move for peace was met, inside Sri Lanka, with trenchant opposition from the constituency of Sinhala extremists fostered by successive governments over the past two decades. A series of "peace initiatives," orchestrated by Britain and then Norway, collapsed to cries of "betrayal" from the Sinhala chauvinists.

The transformation of the international political climate following the September 11 attacks in the US, however, altered the balance of forces in Sri Lanka. The Bush administration made crystal clear it would tolerate no impediment to US interests on the Indian subcontinent. Every major political party in Sri Lanka fell into line, signaling their agreement by backing the US-led invasion of Afghanistan—the first direct imperialist military intervention in the region for more than 50 years.

The US, backed by the European Union and India, stepped up the pressure on Colombo and the LTTE to end the conflict, reiterating its opposition to a separate Tamil state. In Washington's eyes, the ongoing civil war on the tiny island threatened to interfere with its broader ambitions in the region. Any concession to the LTTE's demand would only encourage separatist movements elsewhere on the subcontinent, particularly in Kashmir. Under these circumstances, both sides concluded that to continue the war was untenable.

For the LTTE leadership, the alternative was isolation and eventual destruction. The US and Britain had already designated it as "terrorist" and other European powers were threatening to follow suit, thus cutting it off from vital external financial and political support. Last December, Balasingham commented bitterly: "Like blowing and spoiling a conch [shell], a madman called Bin Laden clashed with America and now some countries have included us in their list of terrorists."

For Sri Lankan business, the war had created a desperate economic situation. The LTTE had inflicted a series of significant military defeats on the Sri Lankan army in 2000, which necessitated huge military purchases and added to the mounting

debt and foreign exchange crisis. In 2001, the economy experienced negative growth for the first time since independence in 1948. In the aftermath of September 11, the corporate elite insisted that the government engage in talks with the LTTE and forced fresh elections when the Peoples Alliance government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga ignored their demands.

Wickremesinghe, who won the December election, signed a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE in February. But talks, which were initially mooted for May, were repeatedly stalled, as his United National Front government came under pressure from Sinhala extremist groups. In July, however, Wickremesinghe received his marching orders when he met Bush in Washington—the first visit to the White House by a Sri Lankan prime minister in 20 years. Shortly after, he announced the dates for talks in Thailand and in August declared he would de-ban the LTTE. Twelve days before the talks began, the LTTE was officially de-banned.

The talks have, predictably, raised great hopes in Sri Lanka. Nearly two decades of civil war have killed more than 65,000 people and left many more permanently maimed. More than a million people, out of a total population of 18 million, have been internally displaced and large sections of infrastructure, particularly in the north and east, have been destroyed.

But it is necessary to issue a sharp warning. The negotiations are not being held to meet the genuine desire for peace among ordinary working people—Sinhala and Tamil alike. Their purpose is to effect a powersharing arrangement among the ruling elites to intensify the exploitation of the working class. The proposals for "regional autonomy" and "devolution" will perpetuate the same communal tensions that produced the war in the first place and inevitably sow the seeds for future conflicts. None of the plans to transform Sri Lanka into a "Tiger economy," from Colombo or the north, can or will be implemented democratically.



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