

LTTE makes major concessions at peace talks with Sri Lankan government

Wije Dias

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The second round of talks in Thailand between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended last weekend with a string of new concessions from LTTE negotiators aimed at integrating the guerrilla organisation into the political establishment as rapidly as possible.

Chief negotiator Anton Balasingham summed up the LTTE's stance by telling the assembled media on November 3 that his organisation's aim was ultimately "to enter the democratic, political mainstream" of Sri Lankan politics. Sri Lankan government representative G.L. Peiris praised the outcome of the negotiations, declaring that both sides had "made progress that no-one thought was possible".

Balasingham told the press conference: "We have to accept other political groups. We are willing to do that." The LTTE has been notorious for the intimidation, detention and murder of its political opponents. While it is cooperating closely with various bourgeois Tamil parties, the LTTE's attitude to the political rights of socialists in northern Sri Lanka is somewhat different. The LTTE leadership has refused to repudiate death threats by its local officials on Kayts Island against members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). [See: Sri Lankan police belatedly initiate action over the LTTE's threats against the SEP]

After the first round of talks in September, Balasingham publicly retracted the LTTE's longstanding demand for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island, declaring: "The LTTE doesn't operate with the concept of a separate state." He indicated that the LTTE would accept some form of regional autonomy. Discussions on the establishment of an interim regional council were due to be finalised in the second round.

During the latest talks, however, the LTTE effectively

shelved its call for an interim administration in order to accommodate the United National Front (UNF) government in Colombo, which had come under fire from the opposition Peoples Alliance (PA) and Sinhala extremist groups for caving in to the LTTE. Balasingham also agreed to the establishment of three joint committees with the government in order to accelerate a settlement to the country's 19-year civil war.

The key committee on political issues, to be co-chaired by Balasingham and Peiris, will be at the heart of the wrangling over a power-sharing arrangement between Colombo and a regional administration in the north and east. Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem has also been given a position on the committee. The SLMC, a component of the UNF coalition, is calling for the establishment of a separate Muslim administrative unit in the east of the country—a demand that the LTTE has, in the past, opposed.

A further sign of the LTTE's willingness to accommodate to the ruling elites in Colombo is an undertaking given to the SLMC that the LTTE would allow Muslims to return to their homes and farms in the northeast within two months. In 1991, the LTTE drove thousands of Muslim families from their land, accusing them of betraying the struggle for a separate Tamil Eelam. This action greatly strengthened the hand of the communal SLMC, with which the LTTE is now seeking a settlement.

The LTTE also agreed to join hands with the government in making a joint appeal for foreign aid and investment at a meeting of donor countries and organisations to be held in Oslo on November 25. A joint committee on humanitarian and rehabilitation needs will be established to preside over the allocation of funds to the war-torn north and east. The third

committee on military matters will involve “high-level civilian and military personnel on both sides,” including defence secretary Austin Fernando and LTTE commander Karuna.

During the talks, the Sri Lankan navy intercepted an LTTE boat carrying a large quantity of explosives. Six LTTE members, including the local LTTE leader in Trincomalee, Kiriba, were arrested. The LTTE delegation made no attempt to protest the government’s actions. They washed their hands of the six, declaring they “had been acting on their own without the knowledge of the LTTE leadership” and gave the government a free hand to deal with them “according to the law of the land”.

There appear to be no limits to what the LTTE is prepared to do to ingratiate itself to Colombo. Balasingham even suggested to Peiris in the course of discussions that the ruling UNF should hold fresh elections in order to establish a stable majority. In the event that the UNF decided on early elections, Balasingham promised that the LTTE would extend its full support to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. Wickremesinghe’s United National Party was responsible for stoking up the communal tensions that led to the conflict in 1983 and for prosecuting the brutal war until the party was ousted from government by the PA in 1994.

One note of discord followed the announcement of a High Court decision in Colombo sentencing LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran *in absentia* to 200 years in jail for planning a bomb attack on the Central Bank in 1996 that killed 76 workers. Balasingham reacted sharply to the decision, saying it was “an utter absurdity”. LTTE spokesman S.P. Thamilchelvan angrily declared that if government leaders were tried for Colombo’s acts of state terrorism against Tamil civilians, the courts would have to sentence them to 2,000 years. Having made very few concessions itself, the government will no doubt use the court decision as a useful bargaining chip in the course of further negotiations.

Both sides are under considerable international pressure to reach an agreement. The talks have been organised by Norway with the backing of the European Union and the US. In Colombo, the most powerful sections of business have been pressing for an end to the conflict to ensure the government, with the support

of the LTTE, is able to push through the economic restructuring measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.

After nearly two decades of war, the economy has suffered from declining investment, huge military expenditures and falling exports. Preliminary estimates for the budget presented on Tuesday revealed that the bulk of the 339 billion rupees (\$US3.5 billion) in revenue will be consumed by debt repayments, forcing the government to borrow 350 billion rupees and press ahead with planned privatisations. Last year the economy suffered a decline of 1.4 percent and estimates put growth this year at just 2 to 2.5 percent.

There is nervousness in ruling circles at the growing opposition among public sector workers to the impact of privatisation and other restructuring measures. The most recent demonstration against privatisation and other so-called reforms on October 24 drew 10,000 workers from the ports, railways, government owned banks and insurance companies, and the electricity board. They were joined by hundreds of small farmers from the north-central province, protesting against the selling off of a phosphate deposit to a US corporation.

By supporting the IMF’s economic reforms, the LTTE has effectively agreed to join forces with the government in suppressing and, if necessary, crushing the opposition of workers and small farmers to measures that are devastating their lives. A small sign of the government’s pleasure at the rapidity with which the LTTE is falling into line is the indication given after the talks that Balasingham would probably meet Prime Minister Wickremesinghe in the course of the donors’ conference in Norway in late November. The next round of government-LTTE negotiations is due to be held on December 2-5 in Oslo.



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