

Washington pushes LTTE for more concessions at Sri Lankan peace talks

Wije Dias

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The third round of peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) opened on Monday in the Norwegian capital of Oslo. While no formal announcements have been made, all the indications point to the LTTE making further concessions as it seeks a power-sharing arrangement with the government to end the country's protracted civil war.

Just last week the LTTE joined the government in appealing for financial assistance to rehabilitate the war-torn areas in the north and east of Sri Lanka at a support conference, also convened in Oslo. Representatives from some 40 countries, including the US, Japan, Britain and other European Union members, attended the conference.

Even before the conference opened, the US ambassador to Sri Lanka Ashley Wills made clear that the Bush administration would use the opportunity to pressure the LTTE to openly renounce the use of violence. He also explained that, as the LTTE is on the US list of terrorist organisations, the US delegation to Oslo would not be shaking hands with the LTTE or sitting at the same table.

Wills' statements were calculated to add to the pressure on the LTTE, which, at the first round of talks in Thailand in September, formally abandoned its demand for a separate Tamil state. At the second round, also in Thailand, the LTTE chief negotiator Anton Balasingham agreed to cooperate in a series of joint committees and declared that his organisation's aim was to enter the political mainstream in Sri Lanka.

Balasingham did not miss the signal from Washington. In his address to the aid conference he stated: "We will continue to make every endeavour to advance the negotiating process towards its ultimate aim of finding a permanent solution to the Tamil

national question. As solemnly pledged in the truce agreement, we will not resort to war or violence."

Despite Balasingham's efforts to accommodate, his statement was not enough. In the midst of the conference, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage took the unusual step of issuing what amounted to an ultimatum to the LTTE. He said the US was "greatly encouraged" by the LTTE's commitment to a political solution, then added: "We urge the LTTE to go one step further and add to this commitment a public renunciation of terrorism and of violence—to make it clear to the people of Sri Lanka and indeed the international community that the LTTE has abandoned its armed struggle for a separate state, and instead accepts the sovereignty of a Sri Lankan government."

As has been the case elsewhere, the call to repudiate violence is simply the first step towards insisting on complete disarmament. Having fought a brutal war against the Sri Lankan army for nearly two decades, the LTTE, as Balasingham made clear, is not about to give up its arms without some guarantees in return. Yet that is exactly what the US is pushing toward.

Balasingham nevertheless bent over backwards during the aid conference to ingratiate himself to the major powers and to the Sri Lankan government. He pointedly blamed the previous Peoples Alliance (PA) government for the destruction of the economic structure of the predominantly Tamil areas. "The war and the economic embargo that was imposed on our people by the last government has seriously undermined the agricultural and fishing industries that form the economic foundation of the Tamil nation," he declared.

While Balasingham's comments serve to establish closer relations with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, they conveniently ignore the record

of the United National Party (UNP)—the major partner in the current United National Front government—in starting the war in 1983 and prosecuting it for over a decade. In fact, the UNP lost office in 1994 after President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the PA won a majority by exploiting the growing hostility of working people—Tamil and Sinhalese—to the war and the UNP.

In his annual “Heroes Day” speech on November 27, LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran publicly dropped the demand for a separate state, stating that the war could be ended permanently with “substantial power-sharing within a framework of a unified Sri Lanka”. He said the LTTE had “reached a turning point,” declaring: “We can not ignore the realities of today’s world. We have to realise this and adjust our path to freedom.”

The LTTE’s demand for a separate Tamil Eelam was always aimed at enlisting the support of the major powers for the establishment of an independent capitalist statelet in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Having failed to win that support, the LTTE leaders concluded, particularly in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the US, that it was necessary to reach an accommodation with the ruling elites in Colombo.

For its part, the Wickremesinghe government is under pressure to secure a deal with the LTTE. Sections of business in Colombo have been pushing for an end to the war in order to rein in the country’s spiralling public debt and to revive foreign investment. The US and other major powers that have backed the so-called peace process fear the conflict has the potential to further destabilise the increasingly volatile Indian subcontinent.

But having prosecuted the war for two decades, successive UNP and PA governments deliberately fuelled Sinhala chauvinism and encouraged the emergence of Sinhala extremist groups that are opposed to the peace negotiations and any concessions to the country’s Tamil minority. Sections of the press in Colombo have seized on any opportunity to fan chauvinist sentiment by implying that the government is preparing to betray the country by ceding too much to the LTTE.

Just prior to the Oslo aid conference, the *Sunday Times* published a photograph purported to be of an LTTE ceremony inaugurating a courthouse—the implication being that the LTTE was establishing its

own separate administration. Its Sinhala-language sister paper *Lankadeepa* also published the photograph, suggesting that the LTTE was setting up its own law courts in government controlled areas. As it turned out the photograph was taken in LTTE-controlled territory in 1993—nearly 10 years ago.

Sections of the press have seized upon Balasingham’s refusal to renounce violence outright as a demonstration of the LTTE’s bad faith. The *Island*, which is notorious for its Sinhala racism, carried a banner headline “LTTE rejects no violence pledge” and declared in an editorial that “the Tiger [Balasingham] has not changed his stripes and is still committed to violence and terrorism”.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the main component in the opposition Peoples Alliance, joined the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to hold public rally last week in Colombo, the day after the Oslo conference, to oppose any settlement with the LTTE. Speaker after speaker railed against the setting up of LTTE courts and the refusal of the LTTE to renounce violence.

The UNF government is acutely sensitive to the campaign being waged Sinhala extremist groups. Just two years ago, the UNP allied itself with the same organisations to oppose attempts by the PA government to implement constitutional changes aimed at establishing the basis for talks with the LTTE. Wickremesinghe and his chief negotiator G.L Peiris will be seeking further concessions from the LTTE in order to shore up support for the government.



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