

Sri Lankan peace talks run into difficulties over LTTE disarmament

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The fourth round of the Sri Lankan peace talks was held in Thailand on January 6-9. Unlike the previous three rounds, which were hailed by the media as “breakthroughs” in the so-called peace process, the latest ran into serious difficulties. Sharp disagreements emerged around demands by the military that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) disarm prior to the resettlement of refugee families inside the army’s High Security Zones (HSZs).

The issue is a particularly sensitive one. In the course of the war, the Sri Lankan military has established large HSZs around all of its major installations and bases in the north and east of the country. In order to prevent LTTE infiltration, the military has evicted thousands of Tamil civilians who have lost their land and livelihoods. On the Jaffna peninsula alone, the security forces have established 15 HSZs covering 160 square kilometres or 18 percent of the total land mass and driven an estimated 130,000 people from their homes.

A formal ceasefire has been in place between the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE since early last year but the displaced families have not been permitted to return. In response to growing resentment and a number of small protests by refugees and their supporters, the LTTE accused the Colombo government of failing to honour the terms of the ceasefire agreement.

The army responded in late December with a report prepared by its Jaffna commander, Major General Sarath Fonseka, which concluded that civilian resettlement in the HSZs should only be considered if the LTTE agreed to the “disarming of its cadres and decommission of its long range weapons”. It advised the government not to take “risks or chances” that would “weaken security by making the HSZs vulnerable”.

The report provoked immediate opposition from the LTTE, which declared in a statement on December 28 that “the disarming of the LTTE cadres, [and] the decommissioning of their weapons are non-negotiable”. It accused the Sri Lankan military of trying to “scuttle” the peace process.

In previous negotiating sessions, the LTTE dropped its demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam and pledged to support the IMF’s economic restructuring demands in return for a limited regional autonomy for the north and east of the island. If the LTTE were to immediately disarm, however, it would be left without any leverage in subsequent talks over a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites. As Balasingham commented to the BBC: “[Our armed] units now observe the ceasefire, but they are also a bargaining power...”

The LTTE is coming under increasing pressure, from the US in particular, to abandon its last bargaining chip even before it has been given any political guarantees by Colombo. At an international aid conference prior to the last round of talks in Oslo, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage urged the LTTE to make “a public renunciation of terrorism and of violence” to demonstrate that it had “abandoned its armed struggle for a separate state”.

Of course, as the LTTE is well aware, a formal renunciation of violence would be followed by a demand for disarmament. Balasingham commented at the time that the LTTE would only be prepared to take such steps further down the track, that is, once the nature of any political settlement became clearer. However, Armitage’s pointed intervention, which was widely noted in the media, clearly encouraged the Sri Lankan military to use the issue of the HSZs to press for the LTTE to disarm.

As a symbolic protest at the outset of the fourth round of talks, LTTE negotiator Balasingham announced that the LTTE would not participate in the Subcommittee for De-escalation and Normalisation (SDN). This key group, which is headed jointly by the Secretary of the Defence Ministry, Austin Fernando, and the LTTE’s eastern province military leader, V. Muralitharan, is responsible for normalising relations between the security forces and the LTTE fighters, as well as dealing with the problems of displaced persons.

Balasingham’s announcement threw the negotiations into crisis. Colombo’s chief negotiator G. L. Peiris said the government could not accept the LTTE’s withdrawal. But as

the Norwegian Deputy Prime Minister Vidar Helgesen, who mediated the talks, was forced to admit: “The parties did not reach an agreement on the continuation of the work of the subcommittee.” To prevent a breakdown in negotiations, the LTTE agreed to shelve the issue of resettlement in the HSZs.

As a face-saving device, both sides agreed to await a report by an international expert on the HSZs and moved on to less contentious issues. A resettlement plan was drawn up for an estimated 250,000 displaced persons from areas other than the HSZs. The LTTE and Colombo also agreed to accept the World Bank as the body designated to manage the international aid funds for rehabilitation work in the north and east.

The two chief negotiators put on a show of unity at the conclusion of the round. Peiris told the media that there was no “disruption or breakdown of the peace process as both sides are committed to talks.” Balasingham duly concurred. But nothing is resolved. The LTTE is obviously baulking at what amounts to a further capitulation—the handing over of its weapons—which has now been placed squarely on the agenda.

What is being demanded is a unilateral disarmament on the part of the LTTE that would leave Colombo’s security forces, and all their weapons, in place in the north and the east. As Balasingham feebly complained in the *Sunday Leader*: “We are not asking for the dismantling of the armed forces, army camps or military complexes.... We are not asking the army to withdraw.”

Moreover, even though peace talks are in progress, the government is still building up its military. This year’s military budget is 50 billion rupees, one billion more than last year. Part of the money will be used to buy Israeli Kafir jets for the airforce. Naval commander Daya Sandagiri recently signed an agreement with the Indian navy to patrol deep sea areas to the north of Sri Lanka—a move that potentially threatens the LTTE’s supply routes.

Sections of Sri Lankan business want a negotiated end to the war to halt the drain on resources, to encourage investment and to enable the government to concentrate on implementing the restructuring demands of the World Bank and IMF.

At the same time, the major powers have been pressing both sides to end a conflict that has the potential to further destabilise the Indian subcontinent. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is due to visit Sri Lanka next month, underscoring the significance of the peace process. However, Armitage’s remarks make clear that the LTTE will only have a role in any political settlement if it demonstrates its willingness to accept US dictates. American officials have indicated that the LTTE will remain on the US

list of terrorist groups until it meets Washington’s requirements.

A significant layer of the Sri Lankan state apparatus, the military, the Buddhist hierarchy and business have a vested interest in seeing the war continue. The security forces have grown by 450 percent to a staggering 120,000 personnel over the last 20 years. Some top officers have amassed small fortunes through military-related business dealings. The army top brass exerts a powerful influence in Sri Lankan politics and has close connections both to the ruling United National Front and the opposition Peoples Alliance.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga, whose Peoples Alliance was defeated in the 2001 elections, has cautiously encouraged Sinhala chauvinist elements as a means of pressuring the government. When the military’s report on the HSZs was made public, Kumaratunga immediately held talks with its author—Jaffna commander Fonseka—and Army Commander L. Balagalle. In doing so, she offered encouragement but did not publicly support the report.

Sinhala extremists groups have seized on the Fonseka report to insist on LTTE disarmament. The Sihala Urumaya (SU) held a press conference on January 9 calling on the army to “stick to its guns” until the LTTE laid down its arms. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has been holding talks with Kumaratunga over a possible alliance, held a protest of 10,000 last week against the peace talks.

The impasse at the fourth round of the peace talks over the issue of the High Security Zones is a product of the social and political tensions that are simmering just below the surface. It underscores the fact that a negotiated settlement is by no means a foregone conclusion.



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