

LTTE protests over exclusion from US aid conference

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The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last week pulled out of the latest round of peace talks with the Sri Lankan government after the Bush administration prevented its representatives from attending an aid conference in Washington on April 14. The LTTE also indicated it would not take part in a further aid meeting in Japan in June.

The LTTE's move was a rather feeble protest after what was a calculated slap in the face by the US administration. Chief negotiator Anton Balasingham wrote to Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe on April 21, just three days before the scheduled start of peace talks in Thailand, informing him of the decision to "suspend participation in the negotiations".

As well as exclusion from the aid conference, the LTTE cited non-implementation of the terms of the truce agreement, including the failure to resettle displaced Tamils, the continued military occupation of cities and civilian settlements, and the marginalising of Tamil areas in the economic development program. The United National Front (UNF) government, Balasingham declared, was "seriously undermining the confidence of the Tamil people and the LTTE leadership in the negotiating process."

The LTTE's protest was designed to quell concerns among its own members and supporters. In the six rounds of talks that began last September, the LTTE has made major concessions, including the abandonment of its demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam in the north and east of the island. In return, it has received very little. At the same time, it has confronted increasingly provocative actions by the armed forces, backed by Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her opposition Peoples Alliance (PA).

The last two rounds were held under extremely tense conditions. In January, the army demanded the LTTE disarm as the precondition for vacating High Security Zones (HSZs). Just prior to the talks in February, the navy intercepted an LTTE vessel and provoked a confrontation that ended in the tragic suicide of three LTTE members. On the eve of the talks in March, the navy sank an LTTE ship, killing its entire crew.

By excluding the LTTE's representatives from the Washington aid conference, the US, which is not formally a party to the negotiations, sent a sharp reminder to the organisation that it was in no position to set terms. Coming in the wake of the US invasion and military occupation of Iraq, the message carried added menace.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told the conference that the "LTTE must unequivocally renounce terrorism, in word and in deed" if the US is to remove the LTTE from its list of terrorist organisations. "The United States can see a future for the LTTE as a legitimate political organisation, but it is still up to the LTTE to change this situation," he said.

Armitage spelled out Washington's demands in a speech to a US thinktank in mid-February. He pointed out that the steps taken in talks so far had been "the easy ones". Referring to the need for the LTTE to integrate itself in "a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka," he declared that the negotiations had reached "a critical stage," in which both sides needed to "address more difficult issues and make real political compromises."

The steps outlined for the LTTE, including full disarmament, amounted to a complete capitulation and a relatively minor role within the Sri Lanka state. "The LTTE is going to have to take a number of difficult steps to demonstrate that it remains committed to a political solution," Armitage said. "The Tigers need to honour the restrictions and conditions that the ceasefire—and future negotiations—set on their arms supply. Logically, down the road, this is going to include disarmament issues themselves. Internal self-determination, within the framework of one Sri Lanka, is not going to be consistent with separate armies and navies for different parts of the country."

After listing other demands, including an end to the use of child soldiers and a dropping of the LTTE's claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people, Armitage concluded: "Finally, the United States government is encouraged by the vision of the LTTE as a genuine political entity. But for that to happen, we believe that the LTTE must

publicly and unequivocally renounce terrorism and prove that its days of violence are over.”

The LTTE has indicated all along that it is willing to reach a power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo government. But it has reacted sharply to suggestions, made by Armitage as early as last November, that it should begin disarming prior to any political settlement. As LTTE negotiators have pointed out, this would effectively mean giving away its only bargaining chip.

Washington’s latest rebuff was meant to emphasise that the LTTE has no room for manoeuvre—and it appears that the LTTE has understood the message. While the LTTE was obviously piqued by the US ban, Balasingham’s letter carefully avoided any harsh criticism of the Bush administration. He meekly accepted that Washington had the right to prevent the LTTE representatives, as members of a proscribed organisation, from entering the country, and instead blamed Colombo and the Norwegian mediators choosing for the venue.

Even as it pulled out of the talks, the LTTE made clear that it did not intend to end negotiations, declaring that the withdrawal was only “for the time being.” Nevertheless, President Kumaratunga rapidly seized on the opportunity to create a climate of crisis and intensify the political pressure on the UNF government. The day after Balasingham sent his letter, Kumaratunga put the country’s armed forces on alert against attack. The LTTE immediately rushed to reassure international monitors that it had no intention of breaking the ceasefire arrangements.

Both the LTTE and the government also came under immediate international pressure. British and French governments issued official statements that “deplored” the LTTE actions. Japan announced that its special envoy Yasushi Akashi would meet LTTE leaders in Sri Lanka this week. The IMF’s resident representative declared that “the LTTE must take part” in the June aid conference, implying that financial assistance was being put at risk.

The US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Ashly Wills, slammed the LTTE for breaches of the ceasefire and reiterated Armitage’s demand for disarmament. “LTTE weapons and armed cadres aren’t protecting Tamil rights,” he told Reuters. “They are prolonging this conflict and delaying the day when Tamils can live truly peaceful conditions.”

Attacking the LTTE for holding onto a separatist agenda and hoping for immediate economic relief, Wills bluntly set out an ultimatum: “It (the LTTE) should not pull out of talks. And it should go to Tokyo. It should not miss the opportunity to represent the Tamil people, to be identified with the decisions that are coming that will apportion donor money.”

The following day, Balasingham issued a cringing

response in an interview to *Tamil Net*. Declaring that he wanted to clear up any “misunderstanding,” Balasingham described the LTTE’s decision as “a rational form of protest” to allow the government time to implement changes. He appealed to Washington to understand why the LTTE cannot disarm immediately and reiterated that it was “in favour of an open market economy.”

The UNF government, which is also keen for the peace talks to proceed, appears to be offering the LTTE a face-saving device. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe sent his advisor Bernard Gunathilake to northern Sri Lanka on Monday to order an end to the construction of a military complex in Jaffna town and to report on the sensitive issue of High Security Zones. These military exclusion zones are vast, comprising 18 percent of the total area of the Jaffna peninsula. Their construction led to the displacement of around 130,000 people. The army has refused to vacate the areas until the LTTE disarms.

If Tamil refugees were allowed back into the HSZs, even partially, the LTTE could claim a small victory as it returned to the talks. But the ability of Wickremesinghe to offer even minor concessions is restricted by the opposition of President Kumaratunga. Her Peoples Alliance (PA) issued a joint statement with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) expressing “deep regret” over the LTTE’s withdrawal from talks. It opposed any compromise on the HSZs, demanded that the LTTE disarm and called on India to assist in monitoring the LTTE’s naval activities.

The conflict between Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe is bound up with sharp divisions in ruling circles over the peace negotiations. Backed by the business elite and the major powers, the government has pursued plans for a peace deal to end the crippling war and pave the way for foreign investment. However, 20 years of military conflict have created powerful entrenched interests among sections of business, the state bureaucracy and the military. It is to these layers that Kumaratunga appeals as well as to Sinhala extremist groups, such as the JVP, that are adamantly opposed to any concessions to the LTTE.

Regardless of the outcome of Gunathilake’s visit, it is already clear that the LTTE is on its way back to the negotiating table. Moreover, it does so knowing full well that the basic condition for its participation in future talks will be even greater concessions.



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