

Tokyo aid conference fails to restart Sri Lankan peace process

Wije Dias
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An aid conference held in Tokyo on June 9-10, with the participation of 51 countries and 20 international finance agencies, granted \$US4.5 billion to Sri Lanka spread out over four years. More than expected, the money pledged was, however, conditional on the success of peace negotiations between the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which have recently stalled.

The LTTE boycotted the conference after the government rejected its demand for the establishment of an Interim Council to oversee reconstruction and development in the war-ravaged northeast of the island. Colombo proposed a number of alternatives within the existing constitution in the two weeks leading up to the conference, but none were acceptable to the LTTE.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe attended the Tokyo conference and delivered the opening report, which promised “a provisional administrative structure with wider powers to the LTTE”. He was clearly jubilant that his proposals to restart the peace talks and for economic restructuring were endorsed by the major powers. “Today’s Tokyo declaration sets out a new framework which I strongly believe will re-energise Sri Lankan peace and development,” he declared.

But the optimism soon dissolved after the LTTE indicated it was not about to restart the talks. Citing grievances over the truce agreement and lack of assistance for Tamils, the LTTE broke off negotiations after Washington blocked its attendance at a preliminary aid conference in the US in April.

An LTTE statement on June 11 accused Wickremesinghe of “not offering anything new” at the Tokyo conference and condemned his proposed administrative structure for the northeast. “The Prime Minister is taking cover behind the laws and constitution of Sri Lanka, which have effectively institutionalised racism against which the Tamil people have been struggling for decades,” it declared.

The statement betrayed a distinct nervousness over the growing involvement of the major powers, particularly the US, in the so-called peace process and the mounting demands on the LTTE. It accused the government of shifting “the peace process from third party facilitation to the realm of international arbitration by formidable external forces.” Declaring it would not be bound by the Tokyo declaration, the LTTE stated: “The Colombo government with the active assistance of the facilitator and its international ‘tactical allies’ has formulated the strategic paper to

superimpose its own agenda on the LTTE.”

The comments represented a marked shift from the LTTE’s initial attitude towards the major powers and Norwegian facilitators. As recently as February, chief negotiator Anton Balasingham told an LTTE gathering in Germany: “The international community which called us terrorists, extremists, militants is inviting us monthly and talking to us with due respect. This time we have been invited by Germany. The reason for this is our diplomatic move.”

But the elation evaporated in April when Washington barred LTTE representatives on the grounds that the US lists the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage outlined a series of demands for the ban to be lifted—essentially that the LTTE renounce the armed struggle and disarm. Ignoring the increasingly aggressive actions of the Sri Lankan armed forces, he insisted: “The Tigers need to honor 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.”

After announcing its temporary withdrawal from the peace talks, the LTTE sent a letter to the Norwegian facilitators on May 21 indicating it would only attend the Tokyo aid conference if “an efficient, radically new administrative mechanism” with wide powers was instituted immediately. But the major donor countries, particularly the US, EU and Japan, declared that the conference should go ahead irrespective of the LTTE’s participation, encouraging Colombo to reject the LTTE’s demand.

The LTTE is caught in a dilemma. Its top leaders have already discarded their battle outfits for business suits and made a series of substantial concessions in a bid to win international respectability. The organisation has given up its demand for a separate Tamil statelet in return for the prospect of a power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo government and has signalled its support for free market policies. But it has received nothing in return that could be presented to the Tamil masses as an achievement. Instead, the LTTE faces demands for disarmament before any political resolution has been agreed.

As the peace talks have dragged on, the LTTE leadership has been losing its local and foreign support base. In its May 21 letter, the LTTE referred to the failure of the talks to address any of the pressing social problems in the areas devastated by the 19-year civil war. “The lack of performance and the failure to produce tangible results on urgent humanitarian issues has eroded all

confidence of the Tamil people in SIRHN [Sub-committee on Immediate Rehabilitation and Humanitarian Needs], the only single institution that was created through lengthy sessions of dialogue.”

When the LTTE withdrew from the peace process and SIRHN meetings, the Wickremesinghe government proposed new administrative arrangements—three layers of committees, including local government institutions for development and reconstruction. In rejecting the proposal and calling for an Interim Council, Balasingham revealingly declared: “We will be ridiculed by the Tamil masses for having fought a liberation war for political independence and statehood and finally end up with village committees devoid of any authority.”

Colombo and the LTTE exchanged another four letters prior to the Tokyo conference. Wickremesinghe insisted that any administrative arrangement for the northeast had to comply with the existing constitution. His government continues to face opposition from President Chandrika Kumaratunga, her opposition Peoples Alliance (PA) and various Sinhala extremist groups that are opposed to any concessions to the LTTE and the Tamil minority.

The LTTE wrote to Wickremesinghe on May 30: “We can certainly understand the fragile position of your government caught up with an enraged president seeking revenge and an entrenched constitution that allows no space for manoeuvre.” But, as Balasingham bitterly noted, the LTTE faced major problems of its own. He complained that, “the main international and regional players... continued to treat the LTTE shabbily as a proscribed entity with a ‘terrorist’ label to be excluded from international forums.” The LTTE had done its best, he explained, “to advance the negotiating process even at the risk of losing grass-root support.”

Faced with the prospect of further demands at the Tokyo conference, the LTTE wanted an interim administration established quickly, without any international involvement, in order to salvage its standing. The pro-LTTE newspaper *Sudero* (Burning Light) revealed the leadership’s concerns about growing US and Indian pressure in a comment on June 1. “Movements, which are fighting for liberation, have to face an international problem and Eelam Tamils are no exception. In this respect the Japan conference is a trap to bring the Tigers to the international conference and pressurise the LTTE,” it warned.

Wickremesinghe, however, ignored the LTTE’s concerns and sent a further letter to the LTTE on June 1 offering only cosmetic changes. He conceded that the LTTE could participate in what he called the “Apex Body” and would have a “majority voice” but provided no concrete detail and simply proposed “a comprehensive and substantial dialogue to clarify and expand the new structure.”

Balasingham replied within 48 hours, rejecting the government’s proposal. Desperate for an Interim Council prior to the Tokyo conference, Balasingham asked frustratedly: “How many rounds and negotiations do the parties have to undergo to arrive at a final formulation of this new bureaucratic institution?” He also openly expressed concerns that Wickremesinghe’s proposal would be subject to international endorsement. “This endorsement will not

be forthcoming since some of the powerful international and regional players are prejudiced against us and continue to deny our hard earned status as the true representatives of our people,” he said.

Like the LTTE, the Wickremesinghe government is desperate for a resumption of peace talks. The United National Front (UNF) won the 2001 elections and defeated Kumaratunga’s PA by promising to end the war. Wickremesinghe has the backing of major sections of Sri Lankan business that have come to regard the conflict as a barrier to foreign investment and economic growth. If the peace process fails, the government could rapidly lose their support.

Kumaratunga, the PA and the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have actively sought to undermine the peace talks by appealing to chauvinist sentiment. In the lead-up to the Tokyo conference, they jointly campaigned against any interim council, claiming it would be a first step towards a separate Tamil state. In order to fend off the opposition challenge, the UNF has clearly decided it cannot afford to make any major concessions to the LTTE.

Wickremesinghe is also acutely aware that he cannot cross Washington. US Deputy Secretary of State Armitage, who co-chaired the Tokyo conference, made it crystal clear that any solution to the Sri Lankan conflict will be on US terms. Referring to the LTTE boycott, he praised Japan for “not succumbing to the temptation to be blackmailed by a group who would not participate.”

Armitage no doubt calculates that the LTTE will eventually be compelled to drop its protest and return to the negotiations. The implied threat all along has been that the Bush administration could make the LTTE the next target in its “war on terrorism” and provide Colombo with significant military backing. Despite growing tensions in its own ranks, there is little doubt that the LTTE, whose strategy all along has been to win major power backing, will fall into line with US demands.

All of these manoeuvres underscore the fact that the so-called peace process has nothing to do with the interests of ordinary working people—Tamil or Sinhalese. They are the means for advancing the interests of the major powers in Sri Lanka and the broader region and for imposing drastic new economic restructuring that will further erode the social position of the broad masses of people throughout the Indian subcontinent.



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