

Moves to restart Sri Lankan peace talks

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Renewed Sri Lankan peace talks have been mooted next month in Paris after the United National Front (UNF) government presented a proposal to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the establishment of an interim administration for the north and east of the island.

Negotiations broke down in April after the LTTE, finding itself increasingly boxed into a corner, pulled out. The LTTE confronted a series of provocative measures by the Sri Lankan military, including the sinking of its vessels, and demands from Washington to disarm. At the same time, it faced growing hostility from the Tamil masses as living conditions failed to improve following the February 2002 ceasefire.

The final straw came when the Bush administration refused to allow LTTE representatives to participate in a Washington aid conference in mid-April, citing the fact that the LTTE is still on the US list of terrorist organisations. The LTTE failed to attend a further donors' conference in June and indicated that it would only take part in further talks once an agreement for an interim administration had been reached.

Both sides, however, came under pressure from the major powers to restart negotiations. Loans and grants worth \$US4.5 billion promised at the Tokyo conference were made contingent on satisfactory progress in the peace process. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe attempted to lure the LTTE back to the negotiating table with proposals for an interim council in May and June—both of which were rejected. But the LTTE has indicated that it is actively considering the government's latest plan for a Provisional Council, issued on July 17.

The proposal is the first time that the government has revealed in detail its plans for a future administration in the north and east. Its thoroughly anti-democratic and communal character underscores the nature of the peace process itself—an attempt by the ruling elites in

Sri Lanka to reach a power-sharing arrangement for the mutual exploitation of the working class and oppressed masses.

No elections will take place. The LTTE, the government and the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress will simply nominate the members of the Provisional Council. The government has indicated that it will include members of the opposition Peoples Alliance (PA) among its nominees. None of the other Tamil parties will be entitled to representatives—a tacit acceptance of the LTTE's claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka.

The LTTE is guaranteed a majority on the council and a role as chairperson with veto powers. Two alternative methods are proposed to fill the post of chairperson. Either one is elected by the council, which would guarantee LTTE control over the position, or there would be two chairpersons, one LTTE and one government, each with veto powers. Either way the LTTE is guaranteed a leading position.

The plan also envisages the establishment of eight district councils working under the Provisional Council. Again these bodies will not be elected. The Provisional Council will select the membership of the district councils and appoint one of its own members to act as chairperson in each case.

While the government has assigned the LTTE a major role on the council, the powers that it can exercise are limited. The council will be involved in “policy making, implementation and monitoring” but the crucial sectors of police and security, land and revenue are excluded. As a sop to the LTTE, the government is proposing that the council will have control over the allocation of foreign aid for reconstruction in the north and east.

The key areas of security, land and revenue have all been sources of sharp conflict. If it accepts the proposals, the LTTE will face demands for the

disarming of its fighters and an end to its own taxes. In February, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage spelled out Washington's demand for the LTTE to completely renounce violence and disarm. "Internal self-determination, within one Sri Lanka, is not going to be consistent with separate armies and navies for different parts of the country," he declared.

Land is also under dispute. More than 40,000 Tamil families, who were forced to leave their homes and businesses when the army established High Security Zones (HSZ) in the north and east, are demanding the right to return. The army has insisted that the LTTE disarm before any moves to dismantle these areas begin. Beyond the immediate issue of the HSZs are a series of unresolved land conflicts generated by the policy of successive Colombo governments to encourage impoverished Sinhala villagers to establish colonies in previously Tamil areas.

In addition to circumscribing the powers of the Provisional Council, the UNF government plans to retain overall administration control through its appointment of a special commissioner to implement the body's decisions. At the district level, the government will hold administrative power as the top district bureaucrats—the District Secretaries—will be designated as secretaries to the new district councils.

These anti-democratic proposals will impose a form of government in the north and east that will further institutionalise communal organisations and thus lead inevitably to further communal conflict and strife. The plan not only entrenches the LTTE as the sole representative of Tamils but gives the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) a similar status in relation to the Muslim community. The UNF and PA will act as representatives of the Sinhalese. Each will have veto rights in relation to issues that directly affect the interests of their community—a recipe for exacerbating existing communal tensions.

Right from the outset, there are sharp disagreements between the LTTE and the SLMC. The SLMC was formed in the late 1980s to exploit the grievances of the large Muslim population in the east of the island. Successive Colombo governments have attempted to use the SLMC as a means of dividing the population against the LTTE, pointing in particular to its wholesale expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna in the early 1990s.

Representing the interests of the Muslim elite, the

SLMC has in the past called for the establishment of a separate administrative council covering Muslim majority areas—a demand that the LTTE has opposed. The SLMC is currently split between pro-UNF and pro-PA factions, with some of its leaders holding ministerial positions in the Wickremesinghe government. A minority faction led by a government minister, M. Athulla, threatens to derail the proposed Provisional Council by insisting on the creation of a separate council for the Muslims in the eastern province if the north and east are merged.

At the same time, the Wickremesinghe government is under pressure from Sinhala extremist organisations that regard any concession to the minority communities as an act of treason. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is seeking a coalition with the opposition PA, has already begun a campaign throughout the island against the proposals, branding them as steps towards a division of the motherland.

The opposition PA, headed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, is sounding a similar note. Presidential adviser Lakshman Kadirgamar insisted that tougher preconditions had to be placed on the LTTE before the establishment of any Provisional Council. "How could we perceive of an interim administration in the north east to the LTTE sans [without] a commitment towards a final solution and laying down arms. It is totally unpalatable for any government as it would only mark the beginning of the end [the establishment of a separate Tamil state]," he told a meeting on August 1.

Whether the Provisional Council is finally established or not, the proposal points to the reactionary agenda of the ruling elites—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike. Completely incapable of meeting the social needs and democratic aspirations of the masses, each is nevertheless exploiting the broad desire for peace to impose a power-sharing arrangement to defend its own narrow communal interests. Far from ending tensions, such a deal will only pave the way for further conflict.



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