Amid Sri Lankan political crisis

LTTE offers reassurances to major powers

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In his annual "Heroes Day" speech on November 27, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leader Velupillai Prabhakaran bent over backwards to reassure the major international powers that his organisation intended to adhere to the so-called peace process and was willing to negotiate with the Colombo government over the LTTE's proposals for an Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA).

The speech was delivered just one day after Prabhakaran met with European Union External Affairs Commissioner Chris Patten, who warned the LTTE that it would earn "the implacable criticism" of the international community if there were any return to violence. He told a press conference in LTTE-held Kilinochchi that he hoped the ISGA proposals were not a final position, as they were difficult to reconcile with "a federal solution" within the framework of a unified Sri Lanka.

In Colombo, Patten was confronted with protests by Sinhala chauvinist groups who denounced him as a "white Tiger" (LTTE member). Far from being a friendly chat with Prabhakaran, the purpose of Patten's visit was to deliver a sharp message to the LTTE leadership on behalf of the major powers not to take advantage of the current political crisis in Colombo.

Just days after the LTTE released its ISGA proposals on October 31, President Chandrika Kumaratunga accused Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government of undermining national security by making too many concessions to the LTTE. She exercised her autocratic powers as president to seize control of three key ministries, suspend parliament for two weeks and move toward imposing a state of emergency.

Prabhakaran used his "Heroes Day" speech to demonstrate that he understood Patten's message. He "categorically denied" that the LTTE was strengthening its military structure and preparing for war. "We are deeply committed to the peace process," he said, pointing out that the LTTE had adhered to the ceasefire arrangements for two years despite provocations by the Sri Lankan military.

The LTTE leader insisted that the ISGA proposals had been "misinterpreted as a project for a separate state". At the beginning of talks last year, the LTTE formally abandoned its longstanding demand for the establishment of a separate state of Tamil Eelam in the north and east of the island. Both the ISGA plan and the government's own proposal for an interim administration are attempts to restart negotiations that broke down in April.

Prabhakan's speech is a measure of the intense international pressure that has been brought to bear on the LTTE to reach a power-sharing deal with the Colombo government. Having ignored the devastating war for the past two decades, the US and European powers now regard it as a dangerous destabilising influence in a region that has growing economic and strategic importance. Washington has continued to brand the LTTE as a "terrorist organisation"—implying that it could be targetted militarily if it fails to toe the line.

For its part, the LTTE has already indicated its willingness to act as a junior partner to the Colombo government in policing the working class and transforming the island into a cheap labour platform for foreign investors. At the first round of talks last year, chief LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham declared that the LTTE supported plans to turn Sri Lanka into a "Tiger economy". The LTTE's accommodation to Colombo and the major powers is not a break from but the logical outcome of its previous demand for a separate capitalist statelet of Tamil Eelam.

In his "Heroes Day" speech, Prabhakaran declared that the LTTE's proposals contained "progressive, constructive and original elements". There is, however, nothing progressive at all about the proposed ISGA. Far from fulfilling the aspirations of the Tamil masses for democratic rights and decent living standards, the plan will impose an unelected body in the north and east that will serve the interests of a narrow privileged elite.

There are significant differences between the proposals advanced by the LTTE and the Colombo government. But what is particularly striking is their basic similarity: both are completely anti-democratic and involve the imposition of a body comprising communally-based appointees on the population of the north and east.

The ISGA would be composed of Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim representatives chosen by the LTTE, the government and Muslim communal organisations respectively. The LTTE would be guaranteed a majority and, unlike the government proposal, would have effective control over the selection of the ISGA chairman. The chairperson would exercise wide powers

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over the administration of the north and east, including the appointment and dismissal of the chief administrator and other officials. The body would stay in place for five years.

To justify its majority on the ISGA, the LTTE declared in the preamble that it alone is the "authentic representative" of the Tamil people. The LTTE's claim rests largely on a long history of authoritarian measures directed against the very people it claims to represent. In the name of the armed struggle against the Sri Lankan military, it has violently suppressed any opposition that has raised political and social demands. This is most clearly expressed in the LTTE's actions against its socialist opponents—the detention of Socialist Equality Party members in the Wanni in 1998 and the death threats made against SEP members on Kayts Island in 2002.

The LTTE would not only have extensive powers over the ISGA but also over the administrative committees to be established in eight districts in the north and east provinces. Under the LTTE proposals: "The ISGA may create District Committees to carry out administration in the districts and delegate to such committees, such powers as the ISGA may determine". The existing elected local government bodies would be nullified.

While the ISGA proposals more unambiguously put the LTTE in charge of the north and east, the major difference with the government plan is the extent of the body's powers. The ISGA would have "plenary," that is unqualified, powers over a number of areas excluded from the government's proposal—including revenue raising, law and order and land, all of which are highly contentious issues.

In the Muslim-dominated areas of eastern Sri Lanka, bitter and sometimes violent communal disputes have already erupted over the LTTE's policies on taxes, land and policing. These clashes underline the fact that far from ending conflict, the solutions proposed by the government and the LTTE would only entrench communally-based organisations and pave the way for future tensions and strife.

The ISGA would have extensive economic powers, including to borrow internally and externally, provide guarantees and indemnities, receive aid directly and engage in or regulate internal and external trade. In addition, it would control all the funds coming to Sri Lanka through agreements with other states and institutions earmarked for the northeast. The LTTE has also called for control over the marine and offshore resources of adjacent seas.

While the LTTE has accepted that the north and east would remain within the framework of a unified Sri Lankan state, the proposed structure is a rather loose federation. Any disputes that arise would not be resolved within the framework of the Sri Lankan constitution but would involve the mediation of Norway, the present facilitator of the peace process, and ultimately a tribunal in which the key role of chairperson would be decided by the International Court of Justice.

Sinhala extremist groups such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Sihala Urumaya (SU), which oppose any concessions to the Tamil minority, immediately rejected the LTTE proposals out of hand as a stepping stone to the creation of a separate Tamil Eelam. Their protests, which were joined by sections of Kumaratunga's Peoples Alliance, undoubtedly played a part in the president's decision to seize control of the defence, interior and media ministries.

For its part, the LTTE has repeatedly insisted that its proposals are up for negotiation. To those who criticise its demands for wide powers, the LTTE has pointed out that it already has such powers in the substantial areas of the north and east currently under its control.

Just as significant as the Sinhala extremist opposition, however, was the fact that the government, the majority of the media, and business leaders generally welcomed the LTTE proposals as the basis for restarting negotiations. A decade, or even five years ago, such a plan would have been greeted with denunciations by the entire political establishment, which is deeply imbued with Sinhala chauvinism.

The most powerful sections of the ruling elite calculate that only by ending the war and harnessing the LTTE as a junior partner and policeman is it possible to integrate Sri Lanka into the global economy and take advantage of the business opportunities opening up in South Asia. The character of both sets of proposals for the north and east is a warning to the working class that the agenda of economic restructuring, which is part and parcel of the peace process, cannot be imposed democratically.

Prabhakaran's "Heroes Day" speech was aimed at reassuring the imperialist powers that the LTTE would continue to be "responsible," despite the political crisis in Colombo and the continuing impasse of the stalled peace negotiations. It confirms the fact that the LTTE does not speak for the Tamil masses but for a tiny privileged elite whose ambition is carve out a share of the profits for itself.

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