

Washington calls for end to political standoff in Sri Lanka

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Washington last week publicly intervened in the two-month political crisis in Sri Lanka with a blunt message that it will not tolerate a continuation of the standoff between the president and the government. President Chandrika Kumaratunga's unilateral decision on November 4 to seize control of three key ministries—defence, interior and media—has effectively stymied attempts by the major powers and big business to restart peace talks between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage issued a public statement on December 29 declaring: “The United States maintains a strong interest in Sri Lanka finding a resolution to its 20-year civil conflict... The political crisis precipitated in Colombo [by the president] during the prime minister's Washington visit, will have a negative impact on the peace process until a clarification of responsibilities that would allow the prime minister to resume peace negotiations can be found.”

The comments are a thinly veiled warning to Kumaratunga. The president seized the ministries during an official visit by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to the US and only backed away from imposing a state of emergency when the Bush administration indicated its support for Wickremesinghe's government. Since then, however, attempts to find a compromise have floundered.

Armitage's statement came after talks with Sri Lankan cabinet minister Milinda Moragoda, who was in Washington to plead for assistance in ending the standoff. Indicating that strong international pressure would be brought to bear in the days ahead, Armitage declared that, “the current political impasse in Sri Lanka cannot be allowed to continue”. He foreshadowed talks with other governments—including Norway, Japan and the European Union—“to define a way forward” toward the early resumption of peace talks.

Armitage's comments were further underlined on

January 2, when US Secretary of State Colin Powell sent letters to Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe, urging the two Sri Lankan leaders to resolve their differences and resume the peace talks as soon as possible.

US pressure to restart peace negotiations has nothing to do with the plight of the Sri Lankan people, which Washington has ignored for two decades. The protracted conflict is a continuing source of instability that threatens to cut across growing US interests in South Asia. In particular, it seeks to plunder the region's abundant supplies of cheap labour and forge close strategic ties with India.

Armitage's intervention came after weeks of failed negotiations between the president and the government. Wickremesinghe and Kumaratunga held several rounds of talks. A committee led by senior presidential adviser Mano Tittawela and United National Party chairman Senarath Kapukotuwa worked continuously behind the scenes to work out a compromise. But the deadline set by Kumaratunga for a deal—December 15—passed and no date has been fixed for a meeting between the two leaders.

Kumaratunga offered earlier to return the media and interior ministries to the government while retaining the defence ministry for herself. She also proposed to place control of the armed forces in the north and east under a new national security ministry or the prime minister. But Wickremesinghe rejected the plan, insisting that the government had to have full responsibility for defence in order to conduct peace talks with the LTTE.

On December 16, the president proposed through the Tittawela-Kapukotuwa committee to gazette the three services—army, air force and navy—under the joint control of the president and prime minister. Tittawela indicated that this was Kumaratunga's “final offer” but the government rejected it.

Kumaratunga's determination to retain control of the defence ministry reflects the social layers to which she is

appealing—the military hierarchy and various Sinhala extremist organisations that are opposed to any concessions to the LTTE and the country's Tamil minority. The president seized the three ministries in November after a protracted campaign by these groups and in the media accusing the government of caving in to the LTTE and compromising national security.

Wickremesinghe is insistent in regaining control of defence because the military top brass has already obstructed peace negotiations. Several rounds of talks between the government and the LTTE were marred by the navy's provocative interception of LTTE vessels. If it were formally under Kumaratunga, the military would have a freer hand to cut across the peace process.

Over the past fortnight, Kumaratunga has taken a more aggressive approach. On December 19, she instituted a major reorganisation of the interior ministry. A new internal security ministry has been established in charge of the police and the narcotics bureau. Other departments, including immigration, prisons and the registration of persons of Indian origin, have been transferred to the defence ministry. These measures further strengthen the defence and internal security apparatus under her control.

On December 28, the president launched a broadside on state radio against the prime minister, declaring that he was responsible for creating “an imaginary crisis” in order to justify the failure of the peace talks. Kumaratunga has insisted all along that she was simply resuming her rightful responsibilities under the constitution, which grants broad executive powers to the president. Prior to coming to office in 1994, she and her Peoples Alliance (PA) had been trenchant critics of the autocratic presidency.

Along with Washington, business leaders in Colombo are also demanding an end to the political crisis that is undermining the economic gains that have been made since a ceasefire between the government and the LTTE was signed in February 2002.

On December 31, Joint Business Forum (Jbiz) chairman Mahendra Amarasuriya told the *Daily Mirror* that a meeting would be held on January 8 “to get a wider view of what the business community should do to resolve the highly damaging political impasse in the country”. Jbiz comprises the main chambers of commerce in Colombo.

A Jbiz statement declared that it “can no longer remain a passive observer of an emerging political scenario... In the event our appeal does not result in a political solution very early in the New Year, we intend to utilise all the available resources to mobilise the entire business

community in the country and the civil society to pressurise the political leadership to achieve a consensus...”

Jbiz warned the crisis was so serious that it could “completely disrupt the economy of the country and the social fabric and future welfare of the people”. It listed the negative consequences: projects in the north and east have been halted; the stock market has declined by over 80 billion rupees (\$US820 million); the IMF, World Bank and other donors have made the disbursement of loans dependent on the resumption of peace talks; and the US has put a Free Trade Agreement with Sri Lanka on hold.

Kumaratunga, however, shows no signs of backing down. She hinted on state radio on December 31 that she might call a snap general election if no agreement were reached with the government. “If the prime minister and his government are not prepared to come into an understanding, I will be forced to move towards a democratic alternative,” she declared.

Yet, an election would do nothing to resolve the sharp divisions in the Sri Lankan political establishment. The most likely outcome would be the return of Wickremesinghe's United National Front (UNF) government, inflaming the constitutional conflict with the president, who is elected separately. Even if Kumaratunga's Peoples Alliance and its allies did win power, the basic issue that provoked the political crisis would remain: whether to negotiate with the LTTE, or return to a costly and debilitating war that has already claimed more than 60,000 lives.



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