

Sri Lankan president's call for peace talks fuels tensions in government ranks

K. Ratnayake**4 May 2004**

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga took the first tentative steps towards reviving stalled peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) last week by formally inviting the Norwegian government to resume its mediating role. After months of bitter attacks on the so-called peace process, Kumaratunga's decision marks an abrupt about face that has the potential to open up deep divisions in the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA).

Prior to the country's April 2 election, the president and her allies repeatedly denounced the previous United National Front (UNF) government for undermining national security in its talks with the LTTE and criticised Norway for its alleged pro-LTTE bias. Now the new UPFA government is under pressure from big business and the major powers, particularly the US, to maintain the existing ceasefire and to reopen talks.

Shortly after Kumaratunga appointed the minority UPFA government, US Secretary of State Colin Powell phoned the president on April 9 and stressed the need for peace talks. He also spoke to Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar who is due to visit Washington on May 12.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage sent a message to the new Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse declaring that the US would be discussing the peace process with Norway and other donor countries. At stake is \$US4.5 billion in financial assistance pledged at the Tokyo donors' conference last April as an incentive to reach a peace deal.

Responding to Kumaratunga's appeal last week, Norway's Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik signalled his government's willingness to restart mediation. A delegation led by Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgessen and special envoy Erik Solheim arrived in Sri Lanka on Saturday and met with the president and Foreign Minister Kadirgamar on Sunday.

Helgessen described the discussions as "extensive and constructive" but indicated that it might be "some time" before any return to the negotiating table. While

Kumaratunga has called for talks with the LTTE, the basis for any negotiations is far from clear.

After meeting with Solheim on Monday, LTTE political chief S.P. Thamil Chelvan declared the willingness of his organisation to negotiate. He insisted, however, that the LTTE would not accept any new conditions for the resumption of talks and restated the LTTE's previous demands.

Formal peace negotiations first began in September 2002 after the UNF won the 2001 election and signed a ceasefire with the LTTE in February 2002. The talks broke down, however, in April 2003, after the LTTE suspended its involvement. The LTTE had made a number of concessions, including renouncing its demand for a separate Tamil state, but had received little in return. Washington refused to remove the LTTE from its list of "terrorist" organisations and prevented an LTTE delegation from participating in talks in the US.

At the same time, while paying lip-service to the need for "peace," Kumaratunga mounted an increasingly strident campaign against the talks. The president became the rallying point for Sinhala extremist elements, including Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) as well as the Sihala Urumaya (SU) and its associated organisation of Buddhist monks, the Jathika Sanga Sammelanaya (JSS). Using her powers as commander-in-chief, she and the military top brass engaged in a series of provocative actions designed to undermine the talks—including, on the eve of the final round, the sinking of an LTTE ship in controversial circumstances.

After the breakdown of negotiations, the political offensive against the UNF continued. The JVP and SU denounced Wickremesinghe for betraying the country to the LTTE and demanded the expulsion of the Norwegian-led peace monitors—the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM)—for their alleged bias. Under pressure from these layers, Kumaratunga last October called on Norway to recall SLMM chief General Tryggve Tellefsen, declaring his "impartiality" was in "serious doubt" and he was "not fit to hold the post."

The anti-UNF campaign reached a fever pitch in late October after the LTTE released its plan for an Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) as the basis for restarting negotiations. The JVP, SU and sections of Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) denounced the proposal as a plan to split the country. Just days later, on November 4, the president seized control of three key ministries and moved to impose a state of emergency—only pulling back after behind-the-scenes pressure from Washington and New Delhi. After drawn out and fruitless talks with Wickremesinghe, Kumaratunga sacked the government on February 7, setting the stage for the April 2 election.

Kumaratunga now rests on the UPFA—a coalition between the SLFP, the JVP and several minor parties—that reflects this opposition to the “peace process.” Moreover, as the new government lacks a parliamentary majority, it relies on the conditional support of the Jathiaka Hela Urumaya (JHU)—a party formed by the SU and JSS just prior to the poll. As a result, the president's about face on the peace talks will inevitably provoke opposition from her allies and within the SLFP.

The JHU has already criticised Kumaratunga's call for Norway's involvement. JHU parliamentary leader Aturaliye Ratana Thera pointed out yesterday that the president had used claims of Norwegian bias as one of the reasons for her seizure of the defence ministry last November. The JHU issued a statement over the weekend, warning it “would support” the government only “if the president discontinues peace talks and rejects ISGA proposals.”

The JVP has also objected. Its propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa told the *Sunday Island* that his party did not believe a solution to end the war could be achieved “through the Norwegians.” The JVP agreed to Norway's involvement to “some extent”, but only provided Sri Lanka's “sovereignty as well as national security was not endangered.” Weerawansa repeated the JVP's call for India to become involved.

The JVP has not opposed outright the restarting of peace talks, but sharp differences exist with the SLFP on the basis for negotiations. The coalition agreement between the JVP and SLFP outlines two contradictory positions. While the SLFP proposes a limited devolution of power at the provincial level to the wartorn North and East, the JVP rejects devolution and proposes an even more restrictive decentralisation that would provide no concessions to the LTTE.

The peace moves also threaten to alienate sections of the military top brass on whom Kumaratunga has relied heavily over the past year. Like the JHU and JVP, layers of the armed forces are also critical of the Norwegian-led ceasefire

monitors. Last week the *Island* cited an army officer who accused the SLMM of doing nothing about the LTTE's alleged ceasefire violations.

The killing of seven LTTE cadre near the eastern city of Batticaloa last week has raised the possibility that elements of the military may be provoking conflict to undermine the talks. The armed forces and the Colombo media pinned the blame for the Batticaloa attack on fighters loyal to the rebel LTTE leader Karuna. But the LTTE leadership claimed to have evidence of the army's complicity in the murders and has formally called for an SLMM inquiry.

Tensions within the ruling alliance and in the military are certain to sharpen as Kumaratunga proceeds with the so-called peace process. She dispatched Foreign Minister Kadirgamar to New Delhi last week to encourage the Indian government to play a more active role in negotiations. Her aim in enlisting Indian support was to put greater pressure on the LTTE and to appease her Sinhala chauvinist allies. New Delhi is hostile to the granting of any significant concessions to the LTTE, fearing it would encourage separatist movements in India, particularly in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

While in New Delhi, Kadirgamar indicated to the *Island* that the government was prepared to accept the LTTE's claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people—a key LTTE condition for talks. The remarks immediately provoked public criticism from the JHU leaders who demanded to know if Kumaratunga agreed with Kadirgamar. The comments will undoubtedly further fuel disagreements in the ranks of the UPFA, which repeatedly berated the previous UNF government for accepting the LTTE's conditions.

The conflicts underscore once again the basic dilemma confronting the Sri Lankan ruling class. Economically the war has become a barrier to the plans of big business in Colombo to transform the island into a cheap labour haven. Politically, however, the so-called peace process cuts directly across the anti-Tamil chauvinism on which the ruling elites have centrally relied for decades and which was responsible for the war in the first place.



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