Sri Lanka returns to the brink of war

The Socialist Equality Party
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Sri Lanka stands on the brink of the re-eruption of the civil war that has already claimed the lives of more than 65,000 people since 1983, and created a disaster throughout the island. Two and a half years after a ceasefire was signed between Colombo and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), both sides are preparing to plunge back into armed conflict.

The Socialist Equality Party has repeatedly warned that President Chandrika Kumaratunga has been sowing the seeds of war. Throughout 2002 and 2003, in league with the military hierarchy and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), she waged a protracted chauvinist campaign against the previous United National Front (UNF) government, denouncing it for betraying the nation in negotiations with the LTTE. In doing so, she recklessly set in motion forces she could not control.

Our warnings have been vindicated. As head of the shaky minority government that took office in April, Kumaratunga has attempted to restart stalled talks with the LTTE in a bid to ensure a continued flow of foreign aid and investment. But her allies—the military and JVP—are pulling in the opposite direction.

Sections of the armed forces, including the notorious military intelligence wing, have been actively instigating a LTTE breakaway faction led by V. Muralitharan (Karuna) to attack LTTE loyalists in the East, provoking a predictable and violent response. The army has repeatedly denied any involvement, but its lies collapsed last month when revelations emerged that military intelligence had been protecting Karuna for weeks in a safe house in Colombo.

In effect, a proxy war is already underway in the East and in Colombo. Scores of fighters and supporters from both factions have been assassinated. Last month, the LTTE sent a suicide bomber into Colombo in an attempt to kill Douglas Devananda, a government minister who has openly expressed support for Karuna. The security forces exploited the attack to reestablish checkpoints in the capital and to press Kumaratunga to reactivate the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which provides for prolonged detention without trial.

At the same time, the JVP, which is part of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), is bitterly opposed to any peace talks. The JVP leaders, backed by sections of the media, have denounced negotiations with the LTTE, because of the organisation's demand for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) in the North and East, and have threatened Kumaratunga with a split if she proceeds.

The JVP insists that any discussion about an ISGA must be part of talks on a final political settlement. But, as the JVP well knows, such a proposal completely defeats the purpose of an "interim" administration and is therefore unacceptable to the LTTE. Since signing the ceasefire, the LTTE has gained nothing in return for dropping its demand for a separate Tamil state. It is desperate for a means to shore up support within its own ranks and among Tamils who continue to face appalling conditions in the former war zones.

The JVP is now beating the war drum, condemning the ISGA as a ploy to divide the island and any acceptance as tantamount to treason. Those who oppose the JVP's chauvinist demagogy are being denounced as "peace Tigers", that is LTTE stooges, and the Norwegian facilitators of peace talks are being branded as "white Tigers". Even though the JVP campaign threatens to derail any peace talks, Kumaratunga has not openly opposed it.

Efforts to restart negotiations have stalled. Shuttle diplomacy by Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgessen last month failed to establish any basis for talks. He left Colombo warning: "What we are seeing is a frozen war starting to melt at the edges." Pointing to the killings in the East, he declared that the peace process was in its "most dangerous period". Accused by the Colombo media of exaggeration, Helgessen hit back, saying "there are elements playing with fire and there are very real risks to that".

Just how close Sri Lanka is to war was highlighted by Kumaratunga's remarks to United Press International this week, warning she would order government troops into LTTE-held areas in the East if the factional killings in the region continued. Such a move would amount to tearing up the ceasefire and would rapidly precipitate a return to all-out conflict. At the same time, accusing the LTTE of intransigence, the president confirmed there was no agreement on the basis for renewed talks.

In the midst of this highly volatile situation, the most ominous sign has been the silence emanating from the world's capitals, above all from Washington. The US has supported the Sri Lankan "peace process" as a means of ending a conflict that threatens growing American economic and strategic interests in the region. India, in particular, has become a key strategic partner in US plans to dominate the Middle East and Central Asia, and an important source of cheap labour, especially in IT-related industries.

While the Bush administration backed the peace talks, it has insisted that the LTTE must disarm and accept a subordinate role in any settlement. It has maintained the LTTE on its list of "terrorist" organisations—a designation that in the context of the "war on terrorism" carries an implicit military threat. Over the past three years, the US and Sri Lankan militaries have strengthened their ties. A string of high-ranking US officers, as well as assessment and training teams, has trooped into Colombo and visited sensitive military areas in the North and East of the island.

The message is clearly emerging: if the peace process collapses, Washington will bolster Sri Lanka's army in the event of any renewed fighting. While the US still formally maintains its support for talks, there is no evidence of any high-level effort to push the parties back to the negotiating table. In fact, the US think-tank *Stratfor*, which has close ties to US military and intelligence circles, indicated Washington was giving "tacit approval" to the Sri Lankan military's provocations involving Karuna. In an analysis last month, *Stratfor* commented: "The plan is to destabilise the Tigers [LTTE], bait the group into confrontation and ultimately launch an offensive aimed at destroying the fractured Tamil movement once and for all."

Washington's strategic ally in the region, New Delhi, has adopted a similar posture. Last month the new Congress-led government gave the go ahead for a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Sri Lanka that would significantly boost its military capacity to deal with the LTTE. The DCA would involve intelligence cooperation, training for Sri Lankan

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special forces, Indian assistance in airlifting troops and equipment to the northern war zones, and joint naval operations, including against arms smuggling. Like the US, India has made no public comment about the slide toward war.

In warning of the danger of war, an exasperated Helgessen noted what he regarded as an extraordinary political paralysis gripping ruling circles in Colombo. “I am disturbed about the violence [in the East],” the Norwegian minister said, “but [I am] equally disturbed about the incredible complacency.” Most people, he explained, were in favour of peace, but they were not in favour of the peace process.

However unintentional, Helgesson’s comments constitute a damning indictment of all sections of the Sri Lankan ruling class. In election after election over the past decade, millions of ordinary people have repeatedly voted for parties they believed would bring peace, basic democratic rights and an improvement in living standards. Yet, time and again, Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the rival United National Party (UNP) have proven incapable of satisfying these elementary aspirations.

The previous United National Front (UNF) government initiated the current “peace process” after winning the 2001 elections. Backed by dominant sections of Sri Lankan business, its purpose was to reach a communally-based powersharing arrangement with the LTTE to intensify the mutual exploitation of the working class. As the UNF’s “Regaining Sri Lanka” program made clear, a peace deal was one element of an ambitious economic restructuring plan to revamp the island’s infrastructure, slash the public sector and turn Sri Lanka into a global investment hub for the region—mirroring Hong Kong’s relationship to mainland China.

The so-called peace process, however, profoundly destabilised the political establishment in Colombo, which ever since independence in 1948, has relied on anti-Tamil chauvinism as a means of diverting social tensions and dividing working people along communal lines. The civil war broke out in 1983 after the United National Party (UNP) government, confronted with growing opposition to its free market policies, instigated a vicious anti-Tamil pogrom that claimed hundreds of lives.

Both parties—the UNP and SLFP—have presided over a brutal civil war, which has had, as its goal, the continued political supremacy of the Sinhala Buddhist elite. Significant entrenched interests have thus been created in the army, the state bureaucracy, the Buddhist clergy and more backward sections of business. The military, in particular, has become a powerful autonomous force in Sri Lankan politics. Since the 2002 ceasefire, the armed forces, with the collusion of Kumaratunga, have staged one provocation after another to undermine the peace process and defend the privileged position of a bloated officer caste.

Last November, with the backing of the military and the JVP, Kumaratunga used her sweeping presidential powers to seize control of three key ministries. In February, she arbitrarily dismissed the UNF government. Her SLFP formed the UPFA coalition with the JVP to contest the elections, exploiting popular hostility to the UNF’s axing of jobs, social services and subsidies. But having won an inconclusive victory in the April poll, Kumaratunga is confronted by exactly the same dilemmas as those facing the ousted UNF leader Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The country is in a deep economic crisis that is being compounded by rising global oil prices. The minority UPFA government has rapidly ditched its election promise to improve living standards and this has led to a growing wave of strikes and protests, including in the key oil sector. To obtain badly needed international financial assistance, the UPFA is continuing the UNF’s economic restructuring measures and attempting to restart peace talks. However, sections of the media, the JVP and other Sinhala chauvinist groups immediately denounce any hint of concessions to the LTTE as a betrayal of the country and whip up communal hostilities.

The ruling class has no way out of these social and political contradictions, which are inexorably leading to military conflict. A renewal of fighting will inevitably see the government implementing savage cutbacks to living standards to pay for the military machine. To impose these measures and prosecute the war, Kumaratunga will resort to increasingly autocratic forms of rule to crack down on any opposition.

The Socialist Equality Party warns that the JVP will play the most dangerous role. In the late 1980s, the JVP, then an illegal underground organisation, killed hundreds of workers, trade unionists and political opponents in fascistic attacks to further its “patriotic” campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord. Now in government for the first time, after being brought back into official politics in 1994, the JVP will not hesitate to use the most extreme methods to stamp out any opposition to the war.

None of the so-called traditional workers’ parties offers any alternative. All of them openly subordinate the interests of the working class to one or other section of the bourgeoisie. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party have been in coalition with Kumaratunga’s SLFP for four decades and subscribe completely to its racialist politics. The Nava Sama Samaja Party insists that working people put their faith in the closed-door wheeling and dealing of the ruling elites in the “peace process”.

The working class cannot place any political confidence in any section of the ruling class. An entire generation has grown up in Sri Lanka under the pall of war. The lives of tens of thousands have been sacrificed and many more have been maimed or turned into refugees. Militarism and communal politics have poisoned every aspect of daily life. This can only be overcome by undertaking a complete break from the entire edifice of bourgeois politics and all those responsible for this disastrous war.

The needs of working people for genuine peace, democratic rights and decent living standards require nothing less than the revolutionary overthrow of the political establishment and state apparatus that has created the present catastrophe. The only social force capable of carrying this out is the working class, at the head of the oppressed rural and urban masses.

The working class must elaborate a political strategy to fight for its own independent class interests and rally the oppressed urban and rural masses behind it. The essential precondition for such a movement is an intransigent opposition to all forms of racism and chauvinism and a defence of the democratic rights of all working people, regardless of ethnicity, religion or language. Workers—Sinhala and Tamil; Buddhist, Muslim, Christian and Hindu—confront a common oppressor and must wage a unified struggle against war and social inequality.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan military personnel from the North and East. The forcible maintenance of the unitary state has only strengthened militarism and chauvinism throughout the country. By taking the initiative in demanding the withdrawal of troops, the working class will become a powerful pole of attraction for uniting the Tamil and Sinhala masses around a common socialist program to meet the needs of the majority, rather than the profits of a few.

The SEP advocates the convening of a genuinely democratic Constituent Assembly composed of openly and freely elected representatives of ordinary working people to resolve all the outstanding issues of democratic rights. This is integrally bound up with the struggle for the establishment of a Socialist United States of Eelam and Sri Lanka as part of a broader fight for the United Socialist Republics of the Indian sub-continent and internationally.

The SEP fights for this socialist and internationalist program in Sri Lanka and throughout the region as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International. We urge all SEP supporters and readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* in Sri Lanka and the Indian subcontinent to seriously consider our perspective and to join and build our party.

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