

Pessimism over latest attempts to restart peace talks in Sri Lanka

K. Ratnayake

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A high-level Norwegian delegation led by Foreign Minister Jan Petersen arrived in Sri Lanka this week as part of international efforts to save the country's tottering peace process. Petersen, his deputy Vidar Helgessen and special envoy Erick Solheim will hold a series of talks with Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, V. Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and other political figures over the next few days.

No one is optimistic, however, that the latest Norwegian move is going to be any more successful than previous initiatives in restarting negotiations between Colombo and the LTTE. Deputy Foreign Minister Helgessen came to Colombo in September and left without any positive results. Japan's special peace envoy Yasushi Akashi recently spent five days in Sri Lanka and warned that international aid would not be forthcoming without negotiations. But he pessimistically told a press conference at the end of his trip on November 2: "[N]either side wants to make the first move towards resumption of peace talks."

Petersen, who arrived in Colombo yesterday, was not hopeful either. He issued a press statement last week declaring: "Based on signals received from the parties over recent weeks, I do not have high expectations (on peace talks). But in difficult situations it is even more important to keep engaging with the parties." Special envoy Solheim admitted in comments to the media on Tuesday that "it is difficult to say whether we could thaw the ice".

These cautious comments make clear that the aim of the Norwegian delegation is as much to prevent a collapse of the ceasefire and a return to civil war as it is to encourage talks between the two sides. The ceasefire was signed in February 2002 following the election of a United National Front (UNF) government in late 2001 and six rounds of talks were held before the LTTE walked out of negotiations in April 2003.

Throughout 2003 the UNF came under sustained political attack from Kumaratunga and her allies, including the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the military hierarchy, for selling out the country to the

LTTE. She dismissed the government in February and her United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), which includes the JVP, narrowly won the April election. Faced with a desperate financial situation, she rapidly made an about face and announced she intended to restart talks with the LTTE.

Over the last six months, however, no progress has been made. Moreover, there are growing dangers of a breakdown of the ceasefire as clashes continue between the LTTE and a breakaway LTTE faction in the east of the island led by V. Muralitharan (Karuna), in all likelihood with the backing of sections of the Sri Lankan military.

The latest incidents have involved the military directly. On October 31, the Colombo media reported that a group of navy special forces found and destroyed two LTTE camps near the eastern city of Trincomalee. On November 8, the vehicle of the army's brigade commander at Kalkudah in the east came under attack. The LTTE has denied responsibility for the camps and blamed the attack at Kalkudah on forces that want to "sabotage the peace process."

While Kumaratunga is pushing for peace talks, the army is preparing for war. The *Daily Mirror* reported in late October that the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), Vice Admiral Daya Sandagiri has appointed a "Strategic Planning Committee" to make preparations to "face a possible resumption of hostilities in the near future and map out future military action". The team has already visited the war zones in the North and East of the country and is to submit a report to Sandagiri for discussion at the National Security Council.

Kumaratunga also faces opposition within her ruling coalition from the JVP, which is campaigning, along with the Sinhala extremist Patriotic National Movement (PNM), against the LTTE's demand for talks on the establishment of an Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) in the North and East. At a rally in Ratnapura in late October, JVP spokesman Wimal Weerawansa denounced the ISGA as a "document for a separate state" and ruled out any talks on that basis. The JVP has previously threatened to pull out of the government if such negotiations take place.

Desperate for political support, Kumaratunga convened a

National Advisory Council for Peace and Reconciliation (NACPR) last month in a bid to involve other political parties and non-government organisations in the so-called peace process. But the gathering turned into a non-event when the opposition UNF refused to attend. While declaring its support for talks with the LTTE, the UNF is reluctant to take any responsibility for an uncertain process that is fraught with political dangers.

The UNF, like Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), is deeply mired in Sinhala chauvinism. In a bid to ward off criticisms from the JVP and within the SLFP, the president has insisted that any talks on the ISGA as well as a final political solution to the conflict take place within the framework of the Oslo agreement—a declaration issued in December 2002 after initial peace talks calling for “a power-sharing federal arrangement within the framework of a united Sri Lanka.”

Kumaratunga linked any talks on the ISGA to discussions on a final solution—a demand that is unacceptable to the LTTE. Having given up its longstanding demand for a separate state, the LTTE is insisting on the formation of an ISGA, in which it would play the dominant role, to shore up its support among the Tamil minority. The peace process, which is aimed at a power-sharing arrangement between the island's elites, was never aimed at meeting the demands of ordinary working people—Tamil or Sinhala—for decent living standards and democratic rights.

The clearest indication of growing resentment among Tamils towards the LTTE leadership is the breakaway by the Karuna faction in the east. Karuna sought to exploit the hostility among Tamils in the eastern province by blaming the “northern leadership” for taking the lion's share of the benefits from the peace process. While the LTTE crushed the Karuna group militarily in April, it has failed to secure its full authority in the region and sees the ISGA as a convenient tool for consolidating its political control.

The LTTE is also under sharp pressure from the US and other major powers to agree to the government's terms for peace talks. The LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham recently insisted that the LTTE was not bound by the Oslo declaration. “[T]he Sri Lankan government with the active collusion of its international tactical allies, the donor governments, have formulated several resolutions in the form of a Declaration to superimpose its own set of ideas and propositions on the LTTE,” he told the Tamilnet website in early November.

The reelection of the Bush administration in the US has dashed any hopes that the LTTE may have entertained of a more sympathetic ear from a Democratic president. Washington has backed the “peace process” in order to end a war that threatens to destabilise the Indian subcontinent,

where the US has growing economic and strategic interests. At the same time, the US is determined to ensure that the LTTE has only a subordinate role in any final settlement.

In a video message played at the US embassy in Sri Lanka on November 3, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage warned that “a unique opportunity to reach a peaceful and permanent settlement might be slipping away.” Blaming the LTTE, he demanded that it “renounce terror and return to the negotiation table.” Armitage has previously insisted that the LTTE give up its arms—one of its main negotiating chips—in any settlement.

In what amounts to an implicit warning to the LTTE, the US has been developing closer ties with the Sri Lankan military through a series of high level visits. In late October Major General Karl Eikenberry, director for strategic planning and policy, arrived in Colombo and travelled to the northern city of Jaffna to meet with top Sri Lankan officers.

India, which has formed a close strategic relationship with the US, has recently agreed to sign a defence cooperation agreement with Sri Lanka. While the deal has yet to be made public, details revealed late last year indicate that the arrangement will significantly bolster the Sri Lankan armed forces in the event of any return to civil war. The agreement was one of the main topics of discussion during Kumaratunga's five-day trip to India last week.

India's chief of armed forces N.C. Vij visited Sri Lanka last week. He pointedly travelled to the northern town of Vavuniya and then to the army checkpoint of Omanthai, which borders LTTE-controlled areas. Insisting on the importance of the defence agreement between the two countries, Vij told Sri Lankan military officers that although the ceasefire was in force, “the recruitment of soldiers and the boosting of their morale should continue.”

The visit and the proposed defence deal have provoked a sharp reaction from the LTTE. Speaking in a Voice of Tigers broadcast late last month, Balasingham stated: “The proposed agreement would tilt the balance between Sri Lanka's armed forces and the LTTE and further strain in already fragile ceasefire.” The Tamil MP for Vavuniya P. Sithamparanathan bluntly warned that the deal meant that “preparations are underway for another war in the island.”

The latest Norwegian delegation is unlikely to end the present deadlock and to restart the peace talks. The slow slide back towards civil war is set to continue.



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