

LTTE leader's speech points to danger of renewed war in Sri Lanka

K. Ratnayake

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The annual "Heroes' Day" speech delivered by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leader V. Prabhakaran on November 27 is one more indication that Sri Lanka is sliding back towards civil war. Prabhakaran's comments were notable, not so much for their belligerence, but for their desperation and impotent appeals to the "international community" to restart stalled peace negotiations.

The Heroes' Day event was the third since the LTTE signed a ceasefire agreement with the United National Front (UNF) government in February 2002. However, as Prabhakaran noted in his speech, the LTTE has gained nothing from the so-called peace process. It formally abandoned its demand for a separate statelet of Tamil Eelam in the North and East of the island, but negotiations have not even begun on the final powersharing arrangement with Colombo that it was promised in return.

In summing up the LTTE's dilemma, Prabhakaran declared: "We cannot continue to be entrapped in a political vacuum without an interim solution or a permanent settlement, without a stable peace and without peace of mind.... We cannot continue to live in the darkness of political uncertainty, without freedom, without emancipation, without any prospects for the future. There are borderlines to patience and expectations. We have now reached the borderline."

The LTTE leader appealed to President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government to return to talks on the basis of its proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) in the North and East. He ended with a veiled threat to return to armed conflict and a plea to "concerned international governments to understand our predicament and prevail on the Sri Lankan government to resume peace talks based on our fair and reasonable stand."

These statements amount to an admission of political bankruptcy. When the LTTE signed the ceasefire three years ago, it boasted that it had been successful in enlisting the support of the major powers to force Colombo to the negotiating table. Its perspective was a powersharing arrangement that would enable the Tamil ruling elite to turn the north and east into a magnet for international capital. Its chief negotiator Anton Balasingham boasted at the first round of negotiations in 2002 that the LTTE would help turn Sri Lanka

into "a Tiger economy".

Insofar as the imperialist powers were concerned, however, the LTTE was only acceptable as part of any peace deal if it accepted a subordinate role and met all conditions required of it. The Bush administration in particular insisted that the LTTE had to "renounce violence" and continued to brand it as a "terrorist organisation"—a move that, in the context of Washington's "global war on terrorism" carried obvious threats.

The LTTE pulled out of talks in April 2003 after a series of naval provocations by the Sri Lankan military and the failure to achieve any, even limited, progress on preliminary issues. As the price for restarting negotiations, it demanded that the establishment of an interim administration in the North and East under its hegemony and after protracted negotiations with the UNF government submitted its ISGA plans last November.

Within days, however, President Kumaratunga, who along with the military and Sinhala chauvinist groups such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) had been agitating against the peace process, seized control of three key ministries and moved to impose a state of emergency. The protracted political standoff only ended when she finally dismissed UNF in February precipitating elections in April, which her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won in alliance with the JVP.

The new UPFA administration faced the same dilemma as the ousted UNF. On the one hand, any return to a war would be economically disastrous for plans by the business elite to transform the island into a cheap labour platform. On the other, making any concessions to the LTTE threatens to undermine the ideology of Sinhala chauvinism on which the Sri Lankan state has rested since its inception in 1948.

The result has been a dangerous stalemate. The JVP has threatened to quit the ruling UPFA if negotiations take place on the ISGA. The LTTE has refused to start talking unless the ISGA is the basis for discussion. All attempts by Norwegian mediators have failed to resolve the matter.

In his speech on Saturday, Prabhakaran devoted considerable effort to convincing, not so much the assembled audience, but the "international community" that the LTTE was committed to talks but the "stumbling block" was Colombo. He branded the government as "an unholy alliance of incompatible parties

articulating antagonistic and mutually contradictory views and policies on the Tamil national question.”

The LTTE’s frustrations are bound up with intense pressures on its own organisation. Utterly incapable of satisfying the social needs and democratic aspirations of the Tamil people, the organisation is riven with divisions. Earlier in the year, its eastern military commander V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, broke away, alleging that the “northern” leaders were monopolising the privileges and ignoring the needs of the east. While the LTTE rapidly moved in and dispersed the rebels, a bitter war of attrition between the two factions is continuing.

The LTTE is desperate for the implementation of the ISGA to provide a much-needed boost to its authority. “If some elements of our proposals are deemed problematic or controversial,” Prabhakaran implored in his speech, “these issues can be resolved through discussions at the negotiating table.” Under the terms of the ISGA proposal, the LTTE would automatically have the upper hand in an administration imposed undemocratically on the eastern and northern provinces. The deal would also mean increased foreign aid over which the LTTE would have a substantial say.

Prabhakaran will gain no assistance from the “international community”, however. Just 10 days before the Heroes’ Day speech, US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage issued a statement praising president Kumaratunga for being “consistent and forthright in her commitment to settling outstanding issues in the peace process in the frame work of united Sri Lanka.” He bluntly insisted once again that “abandon terrorism in word and deed and return to the peace table.”

India has already made clear that it will not accept the ISGA. Moreover, New Delhi is in the process of finalising a far-reaching defence pact with Colombo that would provide logistical support and training to the Sri Lankan armed forces and greatly enhance its ability to fight the LTTE. The US military has also been developing far closer relations with its Sri Lankan counterpart.

The LTTE is confronting an impossible dilemma. In any return to armed conflict, it faces the prospect of a Sri Lankan military, supported by the US and India. If on the other hand it makes concessions to Colombo to restart negotiations, the LTTE faces a further undermining of its position among the Tamil minority and heightened tensions in its own organisation.

Moreover, sharp conflicts leading up to the Heroes’ Day rally make clear the present ambiguous situation—not peace, not war—is increasingly untenable. The LTTE is already engaged in an escalating conflict with the Karuna faction, as well as facing growing provocations from the Sri Lankan military and Sinhala chauvinist organisations such as the JVP.

* On November 19, two Tamil youth were shot dead in Valvetithurai, north of Jaffna town. The LTTE blamed the Sri Lankan military. Protests erupted the following day in several parts of the Jaffna peninsula with demonstrators blocking roads and burning tyres. Several clashes took place, including one in

which police and soldiers fired on the assembled crowd, wounding one man.

* On November 24, two people involved in setting up decorations for the Heroes’ Day events were shot dead at Vanthaarumoolai, in Batticaloa. The murders were believed to be the work of the Karuna faction. The following day, an LTTE member Umakanth was shot dead in Akkaraipattu in the eastern province on November 25.

* On November 25, troops attempted to prevent the LTTE and its supporters from raising the LTTE flag as part of Heroes’ Day celebrations in Mannar. Fourteen people were injured when soldiers attacked the unarmed crowd, which included parliamentarian Vino Noharathalingam, with clubs and iron bars. A similar incident took place in Vavuniya on the same day, when the army fired into a crowd involved in raising the LTTE flag injuring six people.

* On November 26, the JVP instigated a provocative protest in Trincomalee demanding that a LTTE flag flying at a Hindu cultural hall be hauled down. JVP MP Jayantha Wijesekara led some 300 demonstrations in a march to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission office and then to the hall before being dispersed by police with tear gas. When a pro-LTTE Tamil forum organised a counter-protest on Monday, communal clashes erupted, leading to the deaths of three Sinhalese. Police immediately imposed a curfew.

Such are the tensions, particularly in the east, that Norwegian general Trond Furuhoide, who is head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, warned in comments to Associated Press on Tuesday that the “cease-fire is under tremendous pressure.” “Although we have a cease-fire, the war is on. A cease-fire is a state of war and what we actually see is some kind of subversive war,” he declared.

The LTTE has no progressive answer to this situation. Its demand for a capitalist statelet of Tamil Eelam always represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not the democratic aspirations of the Tamil working class and oppressed masses. Now it is reduced to futile appeals to imperialism to pressure Colombo for a junior role in a powersharing arrangement, or a return to a bloody war that has already cost 65,000 lives.



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