

Sri Lankan government rejects LTTE call for peace talks

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The Sri Lankan government has rejected an appeal by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leader Velupillai Prabhakaran for the resumption of peace talks, compounding fears that the present, increasingly shaky ceasefire will break down completely.

Prabhakaran made the call for negotiations in his annual Heroes' Day speech on November 27. He warned that the LTTE could not continue indefinitely in "a political vacuum" without any settlement or the prospect of talks and that "a borderline" had been reached. He appealed for talks on the basis of the LTTE's proposal for an Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) for the North and East of the island and hinted at a return to armed conflict if the "peace process" were not restarted.

The ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), however, flatly dismissed the appeal. In a statement issued on December 1, the government declared: "A call, couched in threatening language, from the LTTE now for the resumption of negotiations conditions, while setting conditions itself by insisting unilaterally on a single item is scarcely conducive to good faith negotiations."

The UPFA continues to insist that any discussion of an interim administration has to be linked to negotiations over a final political settlement. The government, however, has not presented any proposals for a deal to end the country's longrunning civil war. Moreover, its insistence that an interim administration is linked to a final settlement amounts to a rejection of the LTTE's demand for a say in administering the North and East now. Having signed the ceasefire in February 2002 and abandoned its demand for a separate Tamil state, the LTTE has gained little in return.

Prior to elections in April, President Chandrika Kumaratunga, her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)

and her allies in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) denounced the ruling United National Front for betraying the country in talks with the LTTE. Having won the elections, however, Kumaratunga attempted to restart the "peace process" she had been criticising, opening up divisions in the UPFA alliance.

Attempts to restart negotiations over the past eight months have repeatedly foundered on the LTTE's demand for an interim administration. The JVP has rejected the ISGA proposal outright because it threatens to undermine the "unitary state"—that is, Sinhala Buddhist domination. As the stalemate has dragged on, armed clashes, through relatively minor, have been steadily on the rise, particularly in the East, where an LTTE faction headed by V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, broke away earlier this year.

While not openly advocating war, the UPFA government is nevertheless preparing for conflict. Last Monday, deputy defence minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake made a jingoistic speech in the parliament supporting a further increase in the defence budget. "We will strengthen armed forces in terms of men, material, idea and weapons.... We are ready to meet any threat to this sovereign nation," he declared.

Expressing their support, the JVP's parliamentarians responded by enthusiastically thumping their desks. Prominent JVP leader Nandana Gunathilaka hinted at the end of November that his party would take matters into its own hands if talks on the ISGA began. "The TNA [pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance] should be held responsible if the youth in the south take up arms against the division of the country through the ISGA," he warned. Other Sinhala chauvinist organisations such as the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) have made similar threats.

The defence budget, which increased spending on the

military to 56 billion rupees (\$US541 million) or by 8 percent over last year, was passed by a huge majority of 140. The only parliamentary grouping to oppose the increased defence allocation was the TNA, along with two individual Tamil MPs.

The opposition UNF voted for defence allocation. In comments on December 5, UNF leader Ranil Wickremesinghe declared that “Sri Lanka is inexorably drifting towards war”. While blaming the UPFA for failing to take “steps towards peace talks”, he nevertheless supported the government’s preparations for war.

Norwegian special envoy Erik Solheim is due in Colombo today for further talks with both sides. Coming just weeks after a high-level Norwegian delegation failed to make any progress, no one is optimistic that Solheim will make a breakthrough. Agence France Presse quoted a diplomat in Colombo who dismissively declared: “The visit is almost considered a routine monthly touch-base sort of exercise.”

In the North and East, tensions are continuing to rise. On December 2, the Sri Lankan military unilaterally closed the A9 highway—the main road linking the south to the northern Jaffna peninsula—for the first time since the ceasefire was signed. Over the past two years, any decision affecting travel on the road has been taken in consultation with the LTTE. The military insisted the closure was necessary to prevent people from joining LTTE-organised protests in Vavuniya and Mannar.

On December 3, the army blocked the transport of electricity generators to Vadamarachchi in the eastern part of Jaffna peninsula controlled by the LTTE. The villages use these generators for religious festivals and other public events such as weddings. Last Monday, a relay station in Jaffna for the television network Shakthi was damaged after an “unidentified group” forcibly entered the premises. The government, the military and various Sinhala extremist groups regard the network as pro-LTTE.

In the East, four hand grenades were thrown at the LTTE’s political office in Batticaloa on December 7. The bombing is thought to be the work of the Karuna faction. On the same day, bombs were thrown at a political office of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO)—an armed militia that is opposed to LTTE and has connections with the Sri Lankan

military.

Business leaders have repeatedly expressed their fear that the country is drifting back to war. Having pushed for a ceasefire and a political settlement, they are concerned that foreign investment will rapidly dry up if there is any resumption of hostilities.

At the end of November, Deva Rodrigo, chairman of the Sri Lanka Chamber of Commerce, blamed the political establishment in Colombo for the lack of peace talks. “Many southern political parties are endangering peace by rejecting the ISGA,” he warned. Businesswoman Nila Maricar bluntly declared at the same seminar: “The Sri Lankan (political) parties do not yet have a credible solution.”

While concerned about their profits, the business elites in Colombo, who for decades have promoted Sinhala chauvinism as a means of dividing the working class, are no more capable than their political servants of ending the disaster they have helped to create.



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