

Sharpening tensions in Sri Lankan government over talks with LTTE

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Attempts by Sri Lanka's president Chandrika Kumaratunga to resume peace talks and set up a joint body with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for tsunami relief has deepened already sharp tensions in the ruling coalition. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—the second largest party in the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA)—has warned Kumaratunga that it will quit from the alliance if such a body is established or talks with the LTTE begin on setting up an interim administration in the North and East.

Since the UPFA came to power last April, the JVP has repeatedly threatened to quit the government over the restarting of peace talks with the LTTE. The JVP, which espouses the most extreme forms of anti-Tamil chauvinism, is hostile to any, even limited, concessions to the LTTE. In the wake of the tsunami, the JVP has opposed any direct aid, or visits by international officials, to LTTE-controlled areas, claiming it would amount to de facto recognition.

The December 26 tsunami killed more than 30,000 people in Sri Lanka and displaced another half a million. Nearly three quarters of the destruction took place in the North and East of the island—regions that have already been ravaged by two decades of civil war. Some of the worst affected areas are under the control of the LTTE, which has insisted that any international relief aid be channelled through its Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO).

Kumaratunga, who like the JVP opposed any aid to the TRO, has had to do an about-face. While the major powers—the US, Japan and Europe—have not provided funds directly to the LTTE, they have insisted that the government establish a “joint mechanism” with the LTTE to provide relief to LTTE-controlled areas. The move is part of a broader plan to use the tsunami crisis to restart peace talks, which were broken off in April 2003.

Facing a mounting financial crisis, Kumaratunga had little alternative but to agree. Her government has been unable to drawn on the \$US4.5 billion aid pledged at a donor conference in Tokyo in 2003 because it is tied to resuming the so-called peace process. Another \$1.8 billion in tsunami

reconstruction aid has been pledged but most of this money will not be forthcoming if a “joint mechanism” is not worked out.

Last week, Treasury Secretary P. B. Jayasundara told a business conference that the government had so far received only 4 percent or \$75 million of the tsunami aid promised. Even before the disaster, the UPFA government was facing growing hostility over its failure to carry out its election promises. Now it confronts simmering resentment over the lack of adequate emergency relief and reconstruction assistance for hundreds of thousands of tsunami victims.

In a statement on February 22 to mark the third anniversary of the ceasefire, the government declared that it was working toward reconvening peace talks with the LTTE. The government was holding discussions “with the LTTE on the establishment of an interim authority to meet the humanitarian needs of the people,” the statement reported, and would “proceed thereafter to negotiating a final settlement of ethnic conflict”.

While carefully worded, the statement made a concession to the LTTE's demand for the establishment of an interim administration as the basis for resuming negotiations. The JVP immediately denounced the declaration. Its parliamentary group leader Wimal Weerawansa told parliament on February 24 that if the government took such a step, the JVP would “discontinue to be a party to the government”. He declared that establishment of a joint body with the LTTE was tantamount to giving “statehood” to that organisation.

In comments to Reuters on March 2, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe reiterated that the party would “break with the government if (it) pushes for a joint mechanism with the LTTE for distributing tsunami aid or interim self-rule”.

While the JVP has threatened to quit the government before, these latest warnings have a desperate ring to them. The JVP, which has often postured as a “left” and even “socialist” party, is now in office for the first time and confronts mounting anger over broken promises, rising

prices and the lack of tsunami relief. Increasingly, its appeals for people to shelve their demands during the tsunami crisis are falling on deaf ears. So the JVP demagogues are stirring up communal sentiment in a bid to divert and divide the opposition.

In the eastern port of Trincomalee last week, JVP MP Jayantha Wijesekera provocatively attempted to start building houses for Sinhala tsunami victims at what is known as McKeyzer Stadium—a large open area within the town. In doing so, Wijesekera deliberately ignored the decision of a parliamentary committee to build housing elsewhere, as well as Tamil sensitivity to the encroachment of Sinhala settlements. The police and military finally forced the JVP to withdraw after protests and the erection of roadblocks by local Tamils.

The JVP's actions compound an extremely tense situation in the East after a series of killings involving the LTTE and a breakaway group headed by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna. The murder of the LTTE's top eastern political leader E. Kaushalyan on February 7 has been followed by an attack on Kuveni, the eastern leader of the LTTE's women's wing, on February 28. She was seriously injured along with two other LTTE cadres.

The LTTE has accused the Sri Lankan armed forces of being behind the attacks. While the security forces deny any involvement, their previous contacts with, and sympathy for, the Karuna faction are no secret. Following the attack on Kuveni, Special Task Force head Nimal Lewke noted approvingly that "the Karuna group has become a strong opposition to the LTTE enjoying a great deal of sympathy and support within the Tamil community in the area... and has become a force to reckon with."

The LTTE has responded in kind. On February 22, the LTTE shot a soldier dead and wounded another near the Kilali army camp on the Jaffna peninsula, claiming they had intruded in a no-go zone. Ten people have died in shootouts between the LTTE and the Karuna faction in the past few days. On Saturday night, six civilians—four Muslims, a Tamil and a Sinhalese—died in a clash at Konakulaweli near the border of the eastern and north central province. The LTTE blamed the Karuna group, while the military accused the LTTE.

Whether the military is directly involved in encouraging these conflicts is not clear. But there is no doubt that elements of the military hierarchy view the tsunami disaster as an ideal opportunity to go on the offensive against the LTTE. Reflecting these sentiments, the JVP and other Sinhala extremist outfits have hinted that the LTTE's weakened state means that the government should make no concessions on an interim administration or any other LTTE demand.

Kumaratunga is walking a fine line. While she is under pressure from business and the major powers to recommence talks with the LTTE, the president and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party are just as mired in Sinhala chauvinism as the JVP and are thus sensitive to its criticisms. Moreover, without the JVP's 39 MPs, the fragile ruling coalition of nine parties would lose its parliamentary majority and could disintegrate.

While Kumaratunga pulled out of a meeting with the JVP scheduled for February 28, she met with other ministers and issued a statement designed to appease the JVP. It ruled out talks on an interim administration except in the context of a negotiated "final solution"—a formulation that effectively rejects the LTTE's demand. The JVP declared itself satisfied with the statement but still adamantly opposes any "joint mechanism" for the provision of tsunami relief.

In reality, nothing is resolved. If Kumaratunga is to restart talks, she has to make some concessions to the LTTE. But if she does so, she risks a walkout by the JVP and the collapse of the government. At the same time, the fomenting of communal conflict and the murders in the East are creating intense tensions that threaten to throw the country back to war.

A recent editorial in the *Daily Mirror* reflected the exasperation in ruling circles. "It is increasingly becoming clear to them (people) that they are destined to continue in the present state of confusion, conflict and tension while their burning problems get further complicated and aggravated... The need of the hour ... is for all parties to behave like adults and face the reality. The future of the country will, otherwise, be bleak."

The *Daily Mirror*, however, had no advice as to how to deal with these burning problems. Having deliberately cultivated communal hostilities since independence in 1948 and waged a bloody war for two decades, the ruling class as a whole has created a quagmire for which it has no solutions.



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