

Sri Lankan president on a political tightrope

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Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga is facing sharp opposition, both from within government ranks and from outside, over her moves to set up a joint body with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to handle tsunami relief work. The campaign to stop the signing of an agreement, scheduled for next week, is being led by her key government ally, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Because of pressure from the US and other powers, setting up the joint body with the LTTE has become a crucial issue for the president. The proposal was initiated by the US, the European Union (EU) and Japan as a way to channel funds for tsunami relief into areas under LTTE control. Such an arrangement would have the added advantage that it could be used to press for a resumption of the stalled peace talks to end the more than 20-year conflict between the LTTE and the Colombo government.

Though Kumaratunga agreed to the proposal, she has continued to drag her feet because the JVP has denounced it, saying it would amount to conferring recognition on the LTTE.

Tensions sharpened last month when Kumaratunga reiterated that she was prepared to come to an agreement with the LTTE. Pressure to resume the peace talks was mounted by the US and EU powers, with Christine Rocca, the US assistant secretary of state, and Erick Solheim, the Norwegian special envoy, both visiting Sri Lanka for talks with government and opposition leaders.

Diplomats have told the media that donor countries want both sides to move towards the creation of the joint body before a World Bank-sponsored development forum to be held in Kandy on May 16-17. These dates have become a deadline for the president, with a spokesman for the Asian Development Bank telling the *Daily Mirror* that the joint mechanism will be a key issue at the forum. After the launch of the joint mechanism, “we can pour in the required funds for relief and rebuilding,” he said.

If Kumaratunga fails to meet the deadline, hundreds of millions of dollars pledged for tsunami relief could be lost. According to the Sri Lankan treasury secretary, out of \$1.8 billion in pledges only \$750 million has been received as commitments.

Knowing that she faces heavy opposition from all the Sinhala-chauvinist forces, above all her own JVP coalition partner, Kumaratunga has been desperately trying to cobble together support for the joint mechanism. The stakes are high. She told a meeting of Buddhist and Christian leaders on May 3 that “in the process the government might fall” and that she could “even lose the presidency,” but those things were not in the national interest, “unlike bringing lasting peace to the country.”

Trying to appease the Buddhist monks, who are at the centre of the Sinhala chauvinist movements, Kumaratunga said there was a “high degree of practical possibility of bringing the LTTE to the negotiating table” and that the “LTTE for the first time has agreed to accept the sovereignty of the government.”

Nervous about chauvinist opposition, Kumaratunga has yet to publicly reveal details about the joint body. When religious leaders asked to see a draft, she said it was impossible but then provided details in a closed-door meeting.

According to information leaked to the media, the organisation will be known as the Post-tsunami Management Structure and will be limited to one year. Its operations will be confined to six tsunami-affected districts in the north and the east, to a distance of 2 kilometres from the sea. The peak national body will have three representatives—from the government, the LTTE and a Muslim organisation. The regional body will consist of five LTTE members, three Muslims and three from the government.

The Sinhala chauvinists are not the only source of opposition. Last week, Kumaratunga met with representatives of the Muslim peace secretariat, made up largely of MPs belonging to her own ruling coalition and to the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which is aligned with the opposition. Members of the SLMC and even some Muslim MPs from the government have indicated they could not work with the LTTE. This opposition is being motivated by fears among some in the Muslim elite that they will miss out on the money being put into reconstruction and relief work.

Last Friday, Kumaratunga met with JVP leaders to explain

her plans. The JVP has insisted that a joint body would strengthen the hand of the LTTE, giving it “acceptance” and “paving the way for UN recognition,” and even that the LTTE would be conferred with “executive powers” under the proposed scheme.

These are gross exaggerations aimed at fanning chauvinism. The LTTE has agreed to the joint mechanism in order to demonstrate its readiness to accept the intervention of the major powers in dictating a so-called “political solution” to the war and in order to secure funds for the regions controlled by them. Nearly five months after the tsunami, anger among people in these already war-devastated regions is rising.

So far, the JVP has been unmoved by Kumaratunga’s appeals. It has planned a series of meetings—the first one of which was held last Tuesday—under the slogan “No to the joint mechanism”.

To intensify pressure, the JVP has unleashed its front organisation, the Patriotic National Movement (PNM), to campaign against the joint mechanism. PNM spokesman Elle Gunawansa, a Buddhist monk, told the media that “over 30 religious and civil society organisations have expressed support for our campaign.” A spokesman for the JVP front organisation operating among the monks said the government could give the joint mechanism to the LTTE only over their dead bodies.

The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), another Buddhist-monk-led organisation competing with the JVP for Sinhala chauvinist support, has also joined the fray.

The United National Party, the main opposition party, is playing a duplicitous role so characteristic of all the bourgeois parties. For the past few months, it has been criticising the Kumaratunga for not working out a plan with the LTTE to distribute aid and start reconstruction. But as the campaign against the joint mechanism has heated up, the UNP, its eye firmly on the Sinhala chauvinist constituency, has decided not to support the government. Rejecting an invitation from Kumaratunga to hear an explanation of the joint mechanism, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe wrote that the party would respond “once the government reaches a final agreement with the LTTE.”

For its part, the LTTE is afraid that it might miss a chance to enlist the support of the major powers to secure a settlement. Like the other parties, it is looking to use the inflow of aid and other funds to its own political advantage. In an interview with Reuters on May 7, LTTE political leader S.P. Thamilselvan said the three-year truce was now in “jeopardy.” Kumaratunga was dragging her feet in sharing the \$2 billion aid pledged by donors, and it was doubtful if a deal would be implemented even if it were signed, he said.

The conflict has led to sharp divisions in the Sri Lankan media. The *Daily Mirror* expressed concern over the position of the UNP, saying that unless it was “bent on following opportunistic politics, thus jeopardising the country’s larger interests,” the opposition party should support the government’s move to create a joint mechanism.

Other sections of the media, however, have given prominence to the JVP campaign. An editorial in the *Island* on May 6 exemplified the general tenor. “If a terror outfit refuses to listen to the US, the UK and the rest of the European Union and continues to recruit child soldiers, exhort money, assassinate politicians, massacre rivals, which country on this planet could control it? And how on earth could a legitimate government have a partnership with it while it continues such crimes?”

The government is becoming increasingly nervous about the situation. If the JVP withdraws the support of its 39 MPs, the government may collapse or be forced to rule as a minority. While being pressured by the major powers, Kumaratunga does not want to lose the support of the chauvinists or the military. Asked about the impasse, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar told a press conference that there was a “firm commitment” for the joint mechanism on the part of the president but then quickly added that aid agencies should not press the government with deadlines and “exacerbate sensibilities.”

Kumaratunga faces bitter choices. On the one hand, if she signs the joint mechanism document she will lose the support of the JVP, possibly leading to the collapse of her government. On the other hand, if she does not sign, her refusal could be a final blow to the ceasefire agreement, opening the way for the resumption of the civil war. The dilemma is of her own making. When UNP leader Wickremesinghe was prime minister, Kumaratunga played the key role in rallying the military, the JVP and the JHU against the peace process initiated by his government.

Meanwhile, nearly five months after the tsunami, hundreds of thousands of victims are still being denied much needed relief and reconstruction. Such is the reactionary logic of the communal politics that characterises all the Sri Lankan bourgeois parties.



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