

Sri Lankan government in crisis over tsunami aid

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After dragging her feet for months, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga is moving to finalise the establishment of a joint body with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for tsunami reconstruction in the north and east of the island. The proposal, which has provoked vehement opposition from Sinhala chauvinist groups and the Buddhist clergy, threatens to split the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and bring down the government.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the second largest UPFA partner, has served notice that it will quit the government if Kumaratunga signs such an agreement. The UPFA would be left without a parliamentary majority, plunging the country into political crisis just 15 months after national elections. On the other hand, if the president fails to agree to a joint aid body, there is little prospect for restarting stalled peace talks with the LTTE and the already strained ceasefire could break down completely.

Kumaratunga only hastened to set up the Post Tsunami Operation Management Structure (PTOMS), commonly called the joint mechanism, after a Sri Lanka donor conference in mid-May indicated that much of the promised \$US3 billion in aid depended on a resumption of peace talks. Not only is her government in serious financial difficulties but significant sections of business in Colombo argue that the economy needs the aid and a permanent settlement of the country's devastating 20-year civil war.

Last week, Kumaratunga made a three-day visit to New Delhi to meet with Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, to clarify the plans for a joint mechanism. She calculated that India's blessing would help disarm her political opponents who have been urging India to take a more active stance against the LTTE. She received only conditional support from New Delhi.

Speaking at a War Heroes Day meeting in Kandy on June 7, the president gave the clearest indication yet that she was about to finalise the PTOMS. She told the gathering that "the country could not afford to continue the war but should seek peace through negotiations [with the LTTE]". At her request, Norwegian ambassador Hans Brattskar travelled to Kilinochchi on the same day to meet LTTE political wing leader S P Thamilchelvan to finalise an agreement on the joint mechanism.

The following day, the JVP denounced Kumaratunga. JVP parliamentary group leader Wimal Weerawansa declared that the PTOMS would help the LTTE establish a separate Tamil state and that the JVP would "defeat this betrayal with the sacred intention of safeguarding our motherland". He accused Kumaratunga of

taking the decision without informing her coalition partners.

Last weekend the JVP announced that it would withdraw its support for UPFA administrations in seven provincial councils. On Tuesday, the party's front organisation of Buddhist monks, the Jathika Bikkhu Peramuna (JBP), launched a fast-until-death protest near Fort railway station in central Colombo.

The JVP's campaign recalls its fascist opposition to the Indo-Lankan Accord, which paved the way for the Indian military to supervise a peace deal with the LTTE. At that time, the JVP denounced the Accord as a betrayal of the country, part of the designs of "Indian imperialism," and mounted a "patriotic" campaign to "defend the nation". Squads of JVP gunmen killed scores of political opponents and workers who refused to support their strikes and protests.

Now in government for the first time, the JVP is confronting growing opposition, including among its own social base in rural areas, over its broken election pledges. The cost of living is climbing, placing intolerable burdens on the rural and urban poor. The government is proceeding with plans to corporatise state-owned oil and electricity bodies and other economic restructuring measures. Nearly six months after the December 26 tsunami, reconstruction has barely begun.

The JVP's chauvinist campaign is aimed at whipping up communal tensions to divert attention from these social issues, which have provoked a series of protests. Last Friday, thousands of bus workers stopped work over the government's broken promise to increase wages. University non-academic staff are threatening to strike by June 16 if their wages are not increased. In eastern Pottuvil, 10,000 people protested on Monday against the government's decision to ban rebuilding in coastal areas.

The JVP confronts political competition from the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—a rightwing Sinhala supremacist party dominated by Buddhist monks that was formed before the general election in April last year. JHU secretary and MP Omalpe Sobhitha, a Buddhist monk, is conducting his own fast-until-death campaign in Kandy for a series of communal demands, including opposition to the joint mechanism. On Monday, the JHU announced that its MPs would boycott parliament until Kumaratunga withdraws her plan.

The JVP-JHU agitation has created sharp tensions within Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which is also deeply mired in Sinhala chauvinism. The president cancelled a government group meeting scheduled for Monday to head off opposition from the JVP and SLFP MPs. She met instead with

senior ministers, including Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama and Tourism Minister Anura Bandaranaike.

After the meeting, Rajapakse told the media he had urged Kumaratunga to be “flexible,” saying “it would be futile to take a hurried decision where even the future of the UPFA is under threat”. In an effort to placate the JHU, the prime minister visited the fasting party leader Omalpe Sobhitha in Kandy.

Ports and Aviation Minister Mangala Samaraweera, previously a close presidential confidante, took a similar stance. In an interview last weekend in *Irida Lankadeepa*, he said: “[I]f the JM [joint mechanism] is the reason to weaken the coalition or destroy it, then the JM will be useless and it is essential to think again. Even if the JM is to be a bridge builder, yet if it is going to lead to a government break up, then I am definitely against it.”

On Monday, Samaraweera resigned his post as media minister, saying he wanted to concentrate on his other portfolios. His decision has been widely interpreted as a protest against the joint mechanism. Samaraweera was a key figure in facilitating a coalition between the JVP and SLFP in 2003 against the previous United National Front (UNF) government.

For its part, the LTTE is insisting that Kumaratunga proceed with the PTOMS. After talks with Norwegian Ambassador Brattskar, the LTTE’s Thamilchelvan warned: “[I]f they [Colombo] do not definitely say they will sign the joint mechanism, the situation will become very serious and dangerous.” The LTTE is desperate for aid to dispel growing resentment in areas under its control.

The LTTE is also exploiting the communal agitation in Colombo to argue that the Kumaratunga government is obstructing aid and the peace process. In May, the LTTE invited major donor agencies, including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and IMF, to Kilinochchi to discuss the outcome of the international aid conference. A meeting was expected last weekend but the agencies cancelled the visit, citing political uncertainty.

The LTTE is confronting deepening political problems, particularly in the east, where a senior military leader V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, has broken away. The LTTE has still not re-established its authority in the east and is engaged in an ongoing armed conflict with the Karuna group, which has the covert backing of elements of the Sri Lanka military. If Kumaratunga refuses to establish a joint mechanism, it could rapidly lead to an escalation of fighting and the breakdown of the tenuous ceasefire.

Whichever way Kumaratunga twists and turns, she confronts a political crisis. If she agrees to the joint mechanism, the president will lose the JVP’s support and risks a split in her own party. She will be compelled to turn to the opposition United National Party (UNP) or call a new election, which her SLFP is likely to lose. If she refuses to sign or procrastinates further, the danger of war looms.

Reflecting frustrations in the ruling elite in Colombo, the *Daily Mirror* on June 7 urged all political parties, particularly the UNP, to “act wisely and responsibly in the present situation”. Warning that “possible armed conflict is looming large on the horizon,” the newspaper declared: “[I]t is incumbent upon all parties who have

the country’s interest at heart, to assist the government to adopt a common approach on the present national issue of establishing a joint mechanism, without allowing the country to slide down the precipice.”

Kumaratunga phoned the US ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead early this week, obviously looking for political assistance. To date, the Bush administration has backed a peace deal with the LTTE as a means of preventing a return to a civil war that threatens growing US interests on the Indian subcontinent. Lunstead spoke to UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, no doubt to seek reassurances that the UNP would not further destabilise the situation.

There is every indication that matters will come to a head next week. Kumaratunga is playing her cards close to her chest and has not even revealed details of the proposed PTOMS. Information leaked to the press indicates the top body will have three nominees—from the government, the LTTE and Muslim organisations. Press speculation is that Kumaratunga has set June 15 as the date to sign an agreement.

At a press conference on Thursday, JVP leaders Somawansa Amarasinghe, Tilwin Silva and Wimal Weerawansa declared that the party would quit the government on June 16 if Kumaratunga did not drop her plans for the joint mechanism on June 15. The JVP called for a mass demonstration in Colombo.

The JHU has also stepped up its opposition. On Thursday, JHU leaders organised a march to the presidential residence to demand that Kumaratunga abandon the joint mechanism. They also sought an assurance that the president would take no action without the support of top prelates from each of the four main Buddhist chapters in the country.

While not formally part of the JHU, these Buddhist prelates took the unprecedented step on Thursday of warning Kumaratunga that they would issue an edict and mobilise protests if she did not withdraw from the joint mechanism. Demonstrating her acute sensitivity to such opposition, the president wrote to the monks pledging not to take any final decision without their consent.

In a particularly ominous sign of what is to come, the media on Thursday reported the menacing comments of a JHU leader and monk, Galagodaatte Gnanasara. He warned Kumaratunga to drop her plan within 24 hours “or we will be forced to resort to undemocratic moves”. While Gnanasara did not elaborate on his threat, the JHU, its predecessors and other chauvinist groups have a long record of provocation and violence.



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