

SEP presidential candidate speaks on Sri Lankan radio

Our correspondent
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Wije Dias, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) presidential candidate, and K. Ratnayake, SEP Political Committee member, spoke on a Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) program on September 10 on the topic of “international experiences of peace talks”. Both Dias and Ratnayake are members of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The SLBC Sinhala language program, “Subharathi”, is a popular daily morning broadcast heard by hundreds of thousands of people throughout the island. During the one-hour live program, Dias and Ratnayake answered questions from the moderator and listeners on efforts in different areas of the globe, including Sri Lanka, to end conflicts through negotiated settlements

Below are excerpts from the discussion.

Moderator: How could we characterise the nature of conflicts that have emerged throughout the world?

Dias: It is not a matter of surprise that conflicts are raging throughout the capitalist world, which is based on class society. Ethnic and religious clashes have been deliberately provoked to obliterate the class struggle. In some of these countries, peace talks are taking place now.

These conflicts are occurring amid an increasingly dominant tendency towards imperialist wars of aggression to re-colonise the world. The US launched a war against Afghanistan in October 2001 and invaded Iraq early 2003 exploiting the pretext of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The US carried out the Iraq invasion with the support of Britain, Japan, Australia and other countries, ignoring the opposition of tens of millions of people worldwide.

In Indonesia, an agreement was recently signed after peace talks with the Free Aceh movement. In Ireland, peace talks have taken place and the Indian and Pakistani governments are making moves on Kashmir in that direction. But as the saying goes, one cannot see the jungle because of the trees. If one does not look at the broader international context, one gets a false picture of these peace talks.

As socialists, we insist that the only way out of these conflicts is the fight for an international socialist program.

Moderator: In the present world situation can we go forward with this program?

Dias: Yes, as I explained earlier millions demonstrated against the US-led war on Iraq. The protests were an incipient movement worldwide against war and colonialism even though it temporarily subsided. The central question was that those involved lacked a clear perspective. But this movement showed an objective tendency among working people around the world. Our responsibility is to provide the necessary leadership and perspective. The WSWs has taken up this task.

Moderator: Can you speak about the international experience with regard to peace talks?

Ratnayake: Take the situation in Northern Ireland. At the end of July, the IRA [Irish Republican Army] issued a statement that it would “dump” arms and focus on “democratic” ways. With this announcement, we saw the Sri Lankan media clamouring for the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam [LTTE] to follow this example. The IRA announcement came just after the July 7 terrorist bomb blasts in London killing scores.

The Northern Ireland conflict has a long history. But the political representatives of the IRA first came to an agreement—the Good Friday Agreement—with the British government in 1998 for a power-sharing arrangement. It was no accident that former US president Bill Clinton intervened in bringing about the agreement. The peace talks in Sri Lanka, South Africa, Palestine and Northern Ireland have taken place in the context of a changed world situation.

These peace talks were all arranged after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991. The major powers came forward to exploit the opening. The eruption of US military interventions worldwide is a case in point. Facing a deepening economic crisis, the US has intervened increasingly aggressively to secure its economic and strategic dominance against its rivals. When Clinton intervened to bring about negotiations, there were more American corporations in Northern Ireland than British.

Moderator: Is that correct? Can we say that the major

powers intervened to arrange these peace talks?

Dias: Yes, we see this situation in Sri Lanka as well as in Indonesia. The US is intervening in places like Iraq and Afghanistan with military aggression and in other places pressuring for peace talks to secure its interests.

On August 15, the Free Aceh Movement [GAM] and the Indonesian government signed a peace agreement in Helsinki, Finland. The mediator was Finland's former president Martti Ahtisaari. GAM is hoping to control the province's natural resources—oil and gas. Under the peace agreement, 70 percent of revenue from resources will go to the region. GAM has promised to decommission its arms and the government has promised to free GAM prisoners.

But the situation is still unstable. It is unclear if GAM will be able to operate as a political party. According to Indonesian laws, a political party is only recognised if it carries out political activities in half of the country's 32 provinces. GAM is obviously not able to do that. Sections of the Indonesian military are opposed to a withdrawal from Aceh. GAM spokesman Bakhtiar Abdullah expressed doubts as to whether the military will allow the agreement to be implemented.

There are parallels between Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The Free Aceh Movement emerged in opposition to discrimination by Jakarta against the Acehnese. In Sri Lanka too, after independence in 1948, the ruling elite discriminated against Tamil speaking plantation workers by abolishing their citizenship rights. This was done in order to divide the working class on ethnic lines. Then in the 1950s, Sinhala was made the only official language, against discriminating against the Tamil minority. The tensions culminated in the civil war in 1983.

The US, Japan, UK and other major powers largely ignored the civil war in Sri Lanka but now they are pressing for a peace settlement to end the war. After the Soviet Union was dissolved as a result of Stalinist betrayals, US imperialism has intervened to organise the world under its hegemony. In South Asia, the US is building close relations with New Delhi. Washington sees the conflict between India and Pakistan as a barrier to US interests in the region. So they are pushing for a settlement to the Kashmir issue.

Amerasinghe [a listener]: How do you see the LTTE—a local agent of the imperialism—on the national question? What do you say about those who get money from imperialists who do not have any program to deal with the national question pretending to be leftists? Which is more against peace, the LTTE or the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna]?

Dias: Let us look at history. The 1964 betrayal by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party [LSSP] paved way for the emergence of both these organisations. The LSSP

abandoned the struggle to mobilise the working class as a politically independent force to defend the rights of the oppressed Tamil minority.

Among Tamils, the LTTE emerged based on layers of the petty bourgeoisie and, like GAM, it sought a separate capitalist statelet under its control to exploit workers and the oppressed in the North and East. It is now seeking a close relationship with major powers and a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo to pursue its aims. The SEP opposes the LTTE's policies.

On the other hand, the LSSP betrayal meant that the working class no longer offered a solution for Sinhala rural youth who suffered from unemployment and the lack of education facilities. The JVP emerged in this situation and portrayed itself as a left party. But socialism is based on the working class and internationalism in opposition to ethnic, caste or any other discrimination. But where is JVP today? It is pushing for war. The JVP agreement signed with Mahinda Rajapakse, Sri Lanka Freedom Party SLFP presidential candidate, is opposed to any united action by the masses to solve their problems.

Moderator: How can we use the international experience of peace talks for the future?

Dias: Not only to end ethnic conflicts but also to deal with other problems of workers and poor, there is no solution within the confines of a single country. The working class must learn and study from its historic experiences in Sri Lanka and internationally. The SEP as a section of the international Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, is seeking to educate the working class in these lessons.

There is no room for pessimism. Mankind came thus far and will turn to a progressive solution in the future. Workers face serious issues: what is the program, perspective and leadership needed to provide a progressive solution to their class problems? The root cause of these problems internationally is the outmoded system of capitalism and without abolishing and replacing it with socialism there is no way out. To realise this we must build an international movement.



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