

International donor group for Sri Lanka issues menacing threat to LTTE

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24 December 2005

The co-chairs of the Sri Lankan donors' group—the US, EU, Japan and Norway—met on Monday and “strongly urged” the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to hold “immediate talks” to review the current ceasefire agreement “without further delay or prevarication.”

The statement points to growing international alarm over escalating clashes between the military and the LTTE that threaten to lead to a complete breakdown of the ceasefire. A renewal of full-scale war on the island would have a destabilising influence throughout the Indian subcontinent where the US and other major powers have expanding economic and strategic interests.

The Brussels statement focussed on the LTTE, condemning its boycott of the recent presidential election, demanding it “put an end to its ongoing campaign of violence” and urging it to “demonstrate its commitment to the ceasefire agreement and peace process.” Co-chairs pointedly warned: “Failure to demonstrate a willingness to change would not be without serious consequences.”

Although the “serious consequences” were not specified, the major powers left no doubt that they intend to intensify the diplomatic arm twisting and threats against the LTTE, which could include assistance to the Sri Lankan military. Ever since the 2002 ceasefire was signed, the LTTE has been under pressure to make major concessions in return for a relatively minor role in any political settlement.

The LTTE has already indicated its willingness to give up its demand for a separate statelet of Tamil Eelam in the north and east of the island. Increasingly, however, it has been backed into a corner, facing provocations by the Sri Lankan military and allied paramilitaries and stalled peace talks. In his “Heroes

Day” speech last month, LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran warned that the LTTE would be forced to resume the struggle for “self-determination” next year unless progress towards a satisfactory political solution was made.

The Brussels statement made little pretence of being even-handed. It noted the “activities of paramilitary groups are another of the causes for deteriorating situation” and “urged the government to ensure such groups cease their activities” as a “demonstration of its commitment to a peaceful way forward.” But there were no threats of “serious consequences” if the Sri Lankan military failed to rein in its proxies.

The Co-chairs' warning to the LTTE can only encourage the Sri Lankan government to pursue its hardline stance. The newly elected President Mahinda Rajapakse, backed by Sinhala chauvinist parties, campaigned last month on the basis of a series of provocative new demands on the LTTE—including the revision of the ceasefire agreement to strengthen the position of the Sri Lankan security forces.

Not surprisingly, the government immediately hailed the outcome of the Brussels meeting. At a press conference on Thursday, government spokesman Nimal Siripala de Silva called for tough action against the LTTE. “We insist that the Co-chairs and the international community put more pressure on the LTTE against its violations [of the ceasefire].”

The Colombo media echoed the demand. The right-wing *Island*, for instance, called for the international community to take “tangible” action against the LTTE. After declaring that the LTTE would simply ignore verbal warnings, the newspaper's editorial yesterday declared: “It is just a matter of tightening screws on the outfit in the West.”

On December 22, EU commissioner for external

affairs, Ferraro Waldner, issued an open letter to Tamil groups in Europe that noted “in the aftermath of the assassination of the [Sri Lankan] Foreign Minister there is an impending need for the LTTE to give a clear and tangible signal of its willingness to change and its commitment to peace.” Despite the lack of conclusive evidence, the EU accepted Colombo’s claims that the LTTE had murdered Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in August and imposed a travel ban on the organisation in Europe.

Waldner’s letter was written in response to appeals by Tamil groups based in Europe for the ban to be lifted and indicates a toughening EU attitude against the LTTE. Waldner stated that “renouncing violence, stopping political killings, putting an end to child soldier recruitment and allowing for political pluralism in the North and East of Sri Lanka” were preconditions for the ban to be lifted. She also reiterated the EU’s disapproval of the LTTE’s boycott of the presidential poll.

While heightening tensions with the LTTE, President Rajapakse has sought to keep the major powers on side. He has backed away from his election rhetoric calling for Norway to be replaced as facilitator of the “peace process” and overseer of the ceasefire. His Sinhala extremist allies—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—routinely accuse Norway of “bias” towards the LTTE.

Following the election in November, Rajapakse assured diplomatic representatives of the Co-chairs that his government continued to accept Norway’s role. He had been in favour of India replacing Norway but New Delhi rejected any direct involvement as mediator. While hostile to the LTTE, the Indian government is concerned not to alienate political allies in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

However, Rajapakse is still seeking to make India one of the co-chairs of the donor group. At a press conference on Wednesday, the president said: “India must get involved in the peace process, at least give its blessings to it. India is our immediate neighbour and we must work closely with it.” He is due to visit New Delhi next week.

A Norwegian delegation is scheduled to visit Sri Lanka to push for the resumption of talks, not to discuss a peace deal, but to salvage the increasingly fragile ceasefire. Even the venue for such talks is a

matter of contention. The LTTE insists that the meeting takes place in Europe, while Rajapakse, seeking to placate the JVP and JHU, is insisting on negotiations in Sri Lanka or Asia.

There is every reason to fear a slide back to open war. After Rajapakse appointed Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka as army head, tensions have noticeably escalated in the north and east of the island. In two separate incidents this week, Sri Lankan police and troops fired on Jaffna university students protesting against increased military harassment and intimidation of Tamils on the Jaffna peninsula.

The Tamil newspaper *Veerakesari* reported that Fonseka told a meeting on Wednesday, involving Rajapakse with the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), that the military was going to establish “law and order” in Jaffna. As well as justifying the provocative attacks on student, the comments are a clear warning that further repression is to come.

At the same time, there have been an escalating number of attacks on the Sri Lankan military, in all likelihood by LTTE forces. Three sailors died in a clash on Thursday morning between the Sri Lankan navy and the LTTE’s seaborne forces. Both sides have blamed each other for provoking the incident. Yesterday afternoon, another 13 navy personnel died in a landmine attack on their vehicles. In the eastern province, there are ongoing clashes and reprisals between the LTTE and a breakaway group that is tacitly backed by the Sri Lankan military.

While all sides are nominally talking about “peace”, the country is sliding back towards war.



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