

Sri Lanka: LTTE Heroes Day speech reveals an organisation in crisis

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Each year the leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), V. Prabhakaran, delivers a “Heroes Day Speech” that is regarded a major statement of policy. This year’s speech on November 27 revealed an organisation in deep political turmoil, caught between a return to war and a “peace process” that has no resolution in sight.

Well aware of mounting hostility among Tamils and frustration in his own ranks, Prabhakaran was compelled to warn, particularly as the day was to mark the sacrifice of the LTTE’s fighters, that the current impasse could not continue indefinitely if peace talks did not resume.

However, prospects for renewed negotiations are bleak. The speech came just a week after Mahinda Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) was elected the new Sri Lankan president. He won the election with the backing of two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which insisted on a series of ultimatums to the LTTE.

Rajapakse announced this week that he would revise the current ceasefire agreement signed in 2002, scrap a joint mechanism with the LTTE for the distribution of tsunami aid agreed last year, and discuss peace with “all parties involved in the crisis”. If the LTTE agreed to any or all of these measures, it would involve a humiliating backdown on previously stated positions.

In his speech, Prabhakaran warned: “Our people have lost patience, hope and reached the brink of utter frustration. They are not prepared to be tolerant any longer. The new government should come forward soon with a reasonable political framework that will satisfy the political aspirations of the Tamil people.” This was “an urgent final appeal,” he declared, and, if rejected, the LTTE “will, next year, intensify ... the struggle for self-determination, to establish self-government in a [Tamil] homeland.”

The LTTE’s frustration stems from the fact that it agreed to a ceasefire in February 2002 with the United National Front (UNF) government. In subsequent negotiations, it abandoned its central demand for a separate Tamil state in return for a powersharing arrangement with Colombo—in

essence, a deal between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ruling elites for the mutual exploitation of the working class.

But the peace talks broke down in April 2003 after a series of provocations by the Sri Lankan armed forces. The UNF government confronted an aggressive campaign against the ceasefire and the negotiations, involving President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Sinhala extremists such as the JVP and sections of military and state bureaucracy. Kumaratunga arbitrarily dismissed the UNF government in February 2004 on the basis that it was “undermining national security”.

Under pressure from the major powers and the corporate elite in Colombo, Kumaratunga then reversed her decision and sought to restart the “peace process”. In June, she signed a joint agreement with the LTTE to distribute aid in the North and East which was viewed a step toward new talks. The JVP, however, denounced the deal as a “betrayal of the nation” and quit the ruling alliance. The Supreme Court finally scuttled the agreement’s implementation by ruling that its core clauses were unconstitutional. Prabhakaran declared the decision “killed the last hope” for resuming talks.

Among ordinary Tamils, discontent is on the rise, not only with the Colombo government and the military, but also with the LTTE. Despite the ceasefire, living conditions have not substantially improved. Hundreds of thousands of people still live in refugee camps or with relatives and friends. The military has insisted on maintaining extensive high security zones in the North and East, preventing thousands of people from returning to their homes, land and businesses. On top of this, the LTTE’s own taxes are a huge double burden, which is compounded by the thuggish methods used by the organisation to maintain its false claim to be “the sole representative” of the Tamil people.

Despite his rhetoric about “intensifying the struggle,” Prabhakaran’s speech revealed a marked reluctance to return to war. He is conscious that there is no enthusiasm for war among any section of the Sri Lankan population, including Tamils in the North and East. Despite the aggressive stance of Rajapakse and the sabre-rattling of his chauvinist allies,

Prabhakaran declared that the LTTE had “decided to wait and observe for some time” if the new government offers “a reasonable political framework”.

Prabhakaran’s moderate tone was bound up with the central thrust of his speech—an appeal to “the international community” to “understand” the LTTE’s problems and to press Colombo for the resumption of peace talks. The LTTE, he said, wanted to participate in peace talks to “secure legitimacy” and “to internationalise the struggle and win the support and sympathy of the international community”.

In a revealing comment, Prabhakaran declared that the LTTE had been “compelled by unprecedented historical circumstances to participate in peace talks with the Sinhala state,” first by the “Indian regional superpower” and “by the pressure of the international community at a later period”. The “circumstances” were the eruption of US militarism following the September 11 attacks on the US. The LTTE, confronted with the prospect of being included in the Bush administration’s list of targets for its “war on terrorism”, rapidly agreed to a ceasefire and the start of negotiations.

While it has backed the “peace process”, Washington has openly sided with Sri Lankan governments in demanding that the LTTE “renounce violence” and begin the process of disarmament prior to any political settlement. By refusing to remove the LTTE from its list of “terrorist organisations,” the US has maintained a thinly veiled threat to assist the Sri Lankan military if war should resume. Over the past three years, there has been a steady stream of US officials—including military top brass—through Colombo.

The Bush administration’s support for the peace process in Sri Lanka has nothing to do with any concern for the impact of the 20-year war on the population. Having ignored the war for years, Washington wants an end to what is a continuing source of instability on the Indian subcontinent where the US has growing strategic and economic interests. The US along with India, Europe and Japan have made it abundantly clear that the LTTE can only expect a relatively minor role out of any final political settlement.

Far from “understanding” the LTTE’s problems, the “international community” is ratchetting up the pressure on it. In September, the European Union imposed a travel ban on the LTTE after the assassination of the Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar—despite the lack of conclusive proof that the LTTE was responsible. Following the November 17 presidential poll, the US sharply criticised the LTTE for its “clear campaign of intimidation” in imposing an informal election boycott.

Yet Prabhakaran was reduced in his speech to making a rather pathetic appeal to the same “international community”. The LTTE is treading a well-worn path that over the past decade or so has seen “national liberation

movements,” such as the PLO in the Middle East and the ANC in South Africa, accommodate to the demands of the imperialist powers in return for a minor place within the capitalist order.

It is not from lack of trying that the LTTE leaders have failed to complete the transition from jungle fatigues to business suits. At the first round of talks in 2003, Anton Balasingham, the LTTE’s chief negotiator, said the hopes of Sri Lankan leaders to convert the country “into a successful Tiger economy” could “best be realised by embracing the Tamil Tigers as their equal partners”. In his latest speech, Prabhakaran explained that the LTTE had on offer a “formidable” administrative structure, a powerful military force and a “police force and a judicial system to maintain law and order”.

From Prabhakaran’s standpoint, the LTTE has gained absolutely nothing, in spite of its concessions, in the three years since the ceasefire was signed. Boxed into a corner, the LTTE may well decide to return to war. Just as politicians in Colombo are stirring up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divert attention from the deepening social crisis confronting ordinary people, so the LTTE leadership is increasingly whipping up anti-Sinhala communalism in a desperate attempt to shore up its social base.

In his speech, Prabhakaran repeatedly equated the Sinhala ruling elites with the mass of ordinary working people, who are not to blame for the anti-Tamil discrimination of successive Colombo governments. He declared that the “Sinhala nation continues to be entrapped in the Mahavamsa mindset” and failed to recognise the “historically constituted nation of Tamil people” and their “homeland”.

Prabhakaran’s resort to communalism is an admission of political bankruptcy. Like its Sinhala counterparts in Colombo, the LTTE is incapable of offering a progressive solution to the island’s devastating war, let alone ending the social misery facing millions of people in the North and East. Its only answer to the aggressive stance of the Rajapakse government is to respond in kind: by poisoning the political atmosphere with reactionary chauvinist rhetoric and threatening a return to bloody fighting.



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