

Amid danger of civil war, Sri Lankan president visits New Delhi

Wije Dias

4 January 2006

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse chose to make his first foreign visit to New Delhi in late December, in order to seek greater backing from the Indian government as the danger of a return to civil war heightens on the island.

Rajapakse narrowly won the presidential election in November with the backing of the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). In the course of the campaign, he and his allies stirred up communal sentiment with a series of provocative demands on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), including the replacement of the current peace facilitator, Norway, by India.

The JVP and JHU have repeatedly accused Norway of bias towards the LTTE. India on the other hand is seen as far more likely to take a tough stance against any concession to Tamil separatism and, in the event that the “peace process” fails, an important ally in any renewed war. New Delhi, however, which was compelled to withdraw its troops from northern Sri Lanka after a disastrous “peace-keeping” mission in the late 1980s, has been reluctant to become too closely involved.

Rajapakse dispatched Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera to New Delhi in early December to seek Indian involvement, but to no avail. The Indian government not only refused to take over the role of peace facilitator but publicly expressed its support for Norway and for a “united” rather than a “unitary” state as the basis for a peace deal. Rajapakse insists on maintaining the “unitary state” in opposition any form of “united” federated state that might offer a significant political role for the LTTE.

India’s refusal forced Rajapakse to change tack and, despite the JVP’s and JHU’s opposition, invite Norway to continue as peace facilitator. But the Sri

Lankan president, still intent on securing greater Indian participation, called on New Delhi to become one of the co-chairs of the Sri Lankan international donor group. With this in mind, Rajapakse left for New Delhi on December 27.

His visit took place amid the growing risk of a return to all-out war in Sri Lanka. More than 90 people have been killed over the past month including 46 military personnel, LTTE leaders and members, as well as civilians. The Sri Lankan military, with the president’s tacit support, is engaged in crackdowns on Tamils as well as covertly backing anti-LTTE militias, particularly in the East.

As it turned out, Rajapakse failed to gain any significant support from New Delhi. The joint statement at the conclusion of four days of talks relegated political issues in Sri Lanka to the 21st, 22nd and 23rd paragraphs of the 24-point declaration. It focussed instead on matters of Indian concern: economic cooperation, the building of a shipping channel in the Palk Strait between the two countries and a plan for the joint development of the strategic Sri Lankan port of Trincomalee, including a new power station.

Significantly, no move took place on a Defence Cooperation Treaty, which has been in the pipeline for more than two years. The treaty, which has been opposed by the LTTE and political parties in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, would greatly enhance the Sri Lankan military’s capacity. Rajapakse did not even meet with the Indian defence minister during his visit.

The joint statement declared only that “India continues to maintain an abiding interest in the security of Sri Lanka”. Reflecting New Delhi’s concerns about renewed war, it declared “the need for the strict

observance of the ceasefire and immediate resumption of talks aimed at strengthening the ceasefire”. Even though Rajapakse no doubt pushed for it, the declaration did not criticise the LTTE.

As to the basis for peace talks, the statement noted: “India reiterated its support for a process of seeking a negotiated political settlement acceptable to all sections of the Sri Lankan society within the framework of an undivided Sri Lanka and consistent with democracy, pluralism and respect for human rights.” The diplomatic use of the term “undivided” reflects a failure to agree on “united” or “unitary”. Rajapakse also failed to convince New Delhi to become a co-chair of the donor group.

India’s reluctance to openly side with the Colombo government or to become more closely involved in the “peace process” is not because of isolationism. In fact, New Delhi has been seeking to play a larger political role both within the region and on the world stage. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh hinted at a more interventionist approach when he declared prior to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) meeting in November that India is surrounded by “failed states”.

Singh’s Congress-led coalition government in New Delhi, however, is dependent on the parliamentary support of several parties from Tamil Nadu, where there is deep hostility to Colombo’s long record of anti-Tamil discrimination in Sri Lanka. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram, whose All India Dravida Munnethra Kazagam Party (AIDMK) is in the opposition in the national parliament, snubbed Rajapakse by refusing to meet with him during his visit.

Any major concession by Singh to Rajapakse risked alienating his own Tamil Nadu allies. At the same time, New Delhi has outlawed the LTTE as a “terrorist organisation” and repeatedly opposed the LTTE’s demand for a separate state. Concerned not to encourage separatist movements in its own territory, India wants an end to the war but not on terms too favourable to the LTTE. Its overriding concern at present is to prevent a return to war on the island. As a result, Singh gave no hint to Rajapakse that New Delhi was swinging more closely behind Colombo.

So Rajapakse returned to Colombo empty-handed. His allies—the JVP and the JHU—have changed their

demand from replacing Norway, to replacing its chief envoy Erik Solheim. But Norway has turned this down. Among the major powers there are real fears that Sri Lanka is sliding back to war and, with their backing, Norway has intensified its effort to pressure both sides to maintain the current ceasefire and return to the negotiating table.

Despite these pressures, however, the killings continue to escalate in the North and East and thus the danger of a return to open military conflict.



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