

Sri Lankan government and LTTE agree to hold talks

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After considerable international pressure, the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last Wednesday agreed to hold talks next month in Geneva for the first time since April 2003.

The talks will focus on “strengthening” the ceasefire, which was signed in February 2002 but has become a virtual dead letter since the election of Mahinda Rajapakse as president last November. More than 200 people, including military personnel, LTTE members and civilians, have been killed in a series of ambushes, bombings and assassinations over the past two months.

Norwegian mediator Erik Solheim and US under-secretary of state Nicholas Burns were both in Sri Lanka last week to push for a revival of peace talks. Even the venue had been a matter of sharp disagreement, with the LTTE demanding negotiations in Oslo or a European capital and Rajapakse insisting on Sri Lanka or another Asian country.

Rajapakse narrowly won the November presidential poll with the backing of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). In their electoral pacts with Rajapakse, both parties insisted on a tough stance toward the LTTE, including a renegotiation of the ceasefire to strengthen the military’s position and replace Norway as mediator. The JHU and JVP have repeatedly accused Norway, and Solheim in particular, of bias in favour of the LTTE.

Any immediate agreement between the two sides is unlikely. While it has agreed to end attacks on the Sri Lankan military, the LTTE is opposed to any rewriting of the ceasefire agreement. In late November, LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran called for the government to propose “a reasonable political framework” to satisfy the aspirations of the Tamil people, or face renewed war.

In comments to Reuters last week, Solheim was cautious about the prospects. “[P]atience was important in this process and it still is. It will not be sorted out in a few months,” he declared. There was “enthusiasm” for peace, he said, “but possibly not real enthusiasm for the necessary compromises”. “The big risk are spoilers who want to produce violence to undermine this positive effort,” he warned.

While neither side has claimed responsibility for the escalating violence, both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military,

along with associated militia groups, have been waging what amounts to an undeclared war over the past two months. Sections of the military hierarchy have been hostile to the ceasefire from the outset and were involved in a series of provocations that contributed to the breakdown of earlier talks in 2003.

US Under-Secretary Burns made no pretence of being even-handed. He praised the Colombo government for its “restraint”, while branding the LTTE as a “reprehensible group” that was “keeping the country on the edge of war”. He declared that the LTTE would bear the “full responsibility” for any return to war. The LTTE, he said, had to choose between peace and continuing with its “repugnant policies of the past decade and a half”.

Earlier in the month, the US ambassador to Colombo, Jeffrey Lunstead, warned the LTTE that it would pay a high price for any return to war. He said the LTTE would face “a more capable and more determined army,” strongly hinting that the US would actively back the Sri Lankan armed forces in any conflict.

The US already spends \$US500,000 annually on training the Sri Lankan military under its IMET (International Military Education and Training) program. According an *Asia Times* report last week, the US has also been providing credit to the armed forces worth \$2.5 million in 2004, \$496,000 in 2005 and \$1 million this year.

While it has backed the so-called peace process, the Bush administration is obviously considering its options should a return to full-scale war take place. For Washington, which for years ignored the protracted civil war, the conflict is a threat to growing US economic and strategic interests on the Indian subcontinent that has to be ended—through one means or another.

Rajapakse is relying on US backing to ensure that negotiations will be favourable to Colombo. In an interview with the pro-LTTE Tamil newspaper *Sudar Oli* published last Monday, he appealed for the LTTE to agree to talks. “Trust me. I wish to be sincere to the Tamil people. Give me the opportunity to achieve peace. Co-operate with me and let me prove to you that I am a realist,” he told the newspaper.

The president is facing conflicting pressures. The corporate

elite in Colombo wants an end to the war, which has become an obstacle to obtaining foreign investment and integrating the island into globalised production processes. Following news of the peace talks, the Colombo stock market registered its highest-ever one-day gain last Thursday of more than 7 percent. Ceylon Chamber of Commerce Chairman Deva Rodrigo enthusiastically greeted the negotiations as the “best news I have had for quite some time”.

At the same time, Rajapakse depends on the support of the JVP and JHU to prop up his unstable minority government. JHU secretary Champika Ranawaka immediately expressed his opposition to talks being held in Geneva, declaring the venue “will give the LTTE the global stamp of authenticity”. “[T]he government and the LTTE will be identified as equal partners and the talks will not be seen as negotiations between a legitimate government and a group of terrorists,” he said.

Last Tuesday, just a day before the talks were announced, the JHU-aligned Movement against Terrorism put up posters around Colombo with Prabhakaran’s picture alongside that of bin Laden, urging the US to act militarily against the LTTE. “Yes Mr. Burns, there is one answer to terrorism,” it declared.

The JVP-led Patriotic National Movement (PNM) is continuing its demonstrations to press the government to stop LTTE killings and revise the ceasefire. Speaking to the BBC, JVP parliamentarian Nandana Gunethilake insisted that any peace deal with the LTTE be based on the “unitary state structure”. Rajapakse had agreed to this demand as part of his electoral pact with the JVP.

Rajapakse has little room to manoeuvre. In the coded language of Sinhala chauvinism, support for the “unitary state” signifies the maintenance of the political supremacy of the Sinhala majority with Buddhism as the state religion. By backing negotiations based on the unitary state, Rajapakse effectively rejected the previously agreed basis for a solution to the war—a federated state that would allow significant autonomy to the Tamil minority in the North and East of the island.

Rajapakse also faces opposition within the upper echelons of the military, which is thoroughly imbued with Sinhala communalism. Shortly after his election, the armed forces submitted a list of proposals to the president for the revision of the ceasefire. Army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka publicly declared that the ceasefire had been written to suit the LTTE and that there was no basis for peace talks at present.

Speaking at a college ceremony last Thursday, Fonseka said the armed forces would achieve an “honorable peace”. That can only mean the complete capitulation of the LTTE. His comment is a not-too-subtle hint that the army might ignore or work to undermine the talks in Geneva.

On the same day, the LTTE’s political wing leader in Batticaloa, Major Kapilan, was ambushed and killed by unknown assailants. The LTTE blamed the military and

associated paramilitary groups and charged Colombo with playing a “double game”. The military responded by accusing the LTTE of having fired rocket-propelled grenades at a bunker near Batticaloa.

On Tuesday, the Trincomalee correspondent for *Sudar Oli*, Subramaniam Sugirdharajan, was shot dead. The previous day he had written about the violent activities of paramilitary groups associated with the Sri Lankan military. The killing prompted Hagurp Haukland, head of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission, to say: “[T]his is madness. There are parties in this country who want not anything but war.”

Obviously concerned that the military may sabotage the Geneva talks, Rajapakse convened an urgent top-level meeting of defence and police chiefs on Thursday. According to a press statement, the president directed the leaders of the security forces “not to allow any form of misdeeds that are likely to impede meaningful and fruitful progress of the peace process”.

The “Situation Report” in yesterday’s *Sunday Times* described the meeting in blunter terms. Rajapakse told those present that “their prime responsibility [was] to ensure troops were not involved in any offensive action against the LTTE. He said they should abide by the government’s peace initiatives. They were also warned to be conscious of sabotage attempts by politically motivated elements and to take stern action against them.”

Rajapakse ordered Chief of Defence Staff Admiral Daya Sandagiri and army commander Fonseka to fly to Batticaloa on Friday. According to the *Sunday Times*, “They spoke to troops about the new peace initiative and the need to maintain the environment without engaging in any provocative acts.” In other words, despite all of the military’s denials, that is precisely what it has been engaged in over recent months.

Whether any agreement will be reached in Geneva, even if the talks take place, is still an open question.



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