

Provocative abductions delay Sri Lankan ceasefire talks

Sarath Kumara
11 February 2006

The abduction of ten TRO (Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation) members by unidentified gunmen last week put a question mark over talks agreed by the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The TRO is an arm of the LTTE involved in rehabilitation and humanitarian work in the North and East, which has been hard hit by the island's 20-year civil war.

The TRO announced on January 30 that a paramilitary group had kidnapped ten of its members at Welikanda in the Polonnaruwa district while they were travelling from Batticaloa to Vavuniya. According to the TRO, the abduction happened just 100 metres from the Welikanda army checkpoint. Five were later released.

Another four workers from the Pre-school Education Development Centre (PSEDC) and their driver went missing the following day while travelling from Kilinochchi in the LTTE-held Wanni area to Batticaloa.

The kidnappings immediately raised tensions between the LTTE and the Colombo government. After weeks of mounting violence, both sides had agreed on January 25 to hold talks in Geneva on the maintenance of the current shaky ceasefire. No date had been set, however.

The LTTE rejected the government's proposal for talks on February 15. Spokesman Daya Master warned that the abductions would "affect the atmosphere of the peace process" and accused the Sri Lankan military or the Karuna group, a breakaway LTTE faction in the east, of being responsible.

The Colombo government initially attempted to throw doubt over whether the abductions had taken place at all. The information department issued a statement on January 31, denying anything had happened near the Welikanda army checkpoint. The

military also denied any involvement.

However, in an indication of Washington's close involvement in the push for talks, Jeffrey Lunstead, US ambassador in Colombo, issued a statement on the same day, expressing concern over the TRO abductions and asking for the incident to be investigated. The US embassy and UN Resident/Humanitarian Co-coordinators office also called for the immediate release of the abducted persons.

On February 1, two of the pre-school teachers were released. When they reported to the Batticaloa police station the following day, the police aggravated tensions by holding them overnight to await the arrival of Criminal Investigation Division officers from Colombo. Another teacher, Ms. S. Dosini, was released on February 3.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse also heeded Lunstead's advice. At a press conference on February 2, Ports and Aviation Minister Mangala Samaraweera still questioned the TRO claims but announced a high-level team headed by two deputy police inspector generals and including four senior superintendents, 20 investigators and state intelligence officials to probe the abductions.

The "Situation Report" in last weekend's *Sunday Times* confirmed that the military hierarchy was well aware that the TRO's claims were valid. It noted that the release of two abducted teachers and "related developments prompted state intelligence agencies to report that the complaints of abductions were credible and warranted investigation." The columnist, Iqbal Athas, has close ties to the defence and intelligence establishment.

The five TRO members, as well as the remaining pre-school teacher and the driver, are still being held. Employees of local and foreign non-governmental

organisations (NGO) in the Batticaloa district took part in a protest on February 6 against the abduction of the TRO members. Government offices, businesses, shops, banks and schools were also shut. Frustrated by the lack of official interest, the parents of the five abducted TRO members began searching Welikanda area for the pro-government paramilitaries' camps.

If the military or associated armed groups such as the Karuna faction were shown to be involved, it would be a serious embarrassment for the Colombo government, which has repeatedly denied any connection to the ongoing violence.

Sinhala extremist parties and groups, who backed Rajapakse in last November's presidential election, as well as sections of the security forces and allied paramilitaries, are hostile to any negotiations with the LTTE. The abductions are one of the more blatant provocations aimed at blocking any resumption of peace talks.

Even after the agreement to hold the Geneva talks was announced, the military continued its hated cordon and search operations to round up "LTTE suspects" in the North and East. On January 30, the Tamil daily *Thinakural* reported such operations in the Valikamam south division on the Jaffna peninsula, in the Karawetti area and near Manipay. At Karawetti, a locked LTTE area office was broken into.

In response to the abductions, the LTTE-front organisation, Makkal Padai (People's Force), issued a statement on February 3 warning that it would resume its attacks and crack down on paramilitary groups in the East. The organisation has previously claimed responsibility for some of the bomb attacks on the military over the past two months.

The LTTE, however, is under intense international pressure to rein in its forces and to go to the negotiating table. When the LTTE rejected the dates proposed by Colombo, representatives of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations Development Program and Asian Development Bank cancelled a scheduled visit to meet the LTTE leadership on February 2.

During discussions with Norwegian mediator Erik Solheim in London on February 6, LTTE chief negotiator Anton Balasingham finally agreed to hold talks on February 22 and 23. Solheim declared that it was "positive" that a date had been set, but added, "we

expect the negotiations to be tough".

The talks will be the first since April 2003 and will be limited to a discussion on ceasefire arrangements. Neither side is expected to make any significant concessions. Rajapakse is under pressure from the military and Sinhala extremists to impose tougher ceasefire guidelines on the LTTE. The LTTE leadership is demanding that the government and the military disarm paramilitary outfits such as the Karuna group.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact