

Sri Lankan government makes provocative preparations for Geneva talks

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Two days of negotiations are due to start in Geneva tomorrow between representatives of the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Tigers (LTTE). The talks, which were only agreed after intense international pressure and lengthy diplomatic wrangling, are the first to be held in nearly three years.

The negotiations are limited to a discussion of the increasingly fragile ceasefire agreement signed in February 2002. Since the election of President Mahinda Rajapakse last November there has been a marked escalation of violence involving the deaths of more than 200 people on both sides—military personnel and associated militiamen, LTTE fighters and officials, and civilians.

LTTE leaders insist that discussions should be limited to exploring ways to enable the “full implementation” of the ceasefire. According to the Colombo media, however, President Rajapakse and his United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government provocatively plan to put a revised agreement on the table that will place new restrictions on the LTTE and strengthen the hand of the Sri Lankan military.

No details of the proposed agreement have been released, but the draft has reportedly been prepared with the assistance of legal experts closely associated with the anti-Tamil Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). While not formally part of the government, the JVP and JHU signed formal electoral agreements with Rajapakse prior to the presidential poll and provide parliamentary support to the UPFA government.

Rajapakse narrowly won the election with the assistance of the JVP and JHU, which deliberately stirred up anti-Tamil communalism in the course of the campaign. His formal electoral pact with the JVP included a clause which described the ceasefire agreement as “unfavourable to the country” and called for its overhaul. Several of Sri Lanka’s military chiefs have also called for tougher ceasefire terms to be imposed on the LTTE.

The government delegation to Geneva includes four cabinet ministers, headed by Health Minister Nimal Siripala

de Silva. Also included are Navy Commander Wasantha Karannagoda, Police Chief Chandra Fernando and Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is the president’s brother.

The inclusion of prominent lawyer H.L. de Silva, who has reportedly been involved in drafting the new ceasefire agreement, is significant. De Silva was retained by the JVP and JHU to mount a Supreme Court case against the Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) to provide joint government-LTTE aid to victims of the 2004 tsunami. The JVP and JHU bitterly opposed the P-TOMS agreement with the LTTE as a betrayal of the Sri Lankan nation.

According to last weekend’s *Sunday Times*, the JVP and JHU will be involved in the Geneva talks via telecommunications from an “operations centre” to be set up at Temple Trees, the president’s official residence in Colombo. The centre will provide a direct link to government negotiators at the Chateau de Bosse in Switzerland, enabling the president and ministers, along with JHU and JVP representatives, to monitor the progress of the talks, which will mainly be behind closed doors.

The inclusion of the JVP and JHU in the negotiating process is highly inflammatory. Both parties are hostile to the Norwegian-facilitated peace negotiations and regard any concessions to the LTTE as outright treason. Last Friday JHU leader Ellawala Medhananda, a Buddhist monk, declared that the government should be prepared for war if the peace talks fail. “If [the LTTE leader] Prabhakaran is dead, Sri Lanka is a better place. He is a stumbling block to the peace process. We should take his influence out of society,” he told Reuters.

The LTTE is adamant that there will be no ceasefire revision. LTTE chief negotiator Anton Balasingham told last weekend’s *Sunday Leader*: “We will not accept any amendments or annexure to the ceasefire agreement but rather insist on full implementation of the terms and conditions of the truce.” The LTTE is likely to insist that the Sri Lankan government disarm various paramilitary groups

associated with the military and dismantle substantial high security zones still maintained by the armed forces.

The LTTE is particularly concerned about the activities of a paramilitary group led by V. Muralitheran also known as Karuna, who broke away from the LTTE in 2003. The Karuna group operates in the east of the island and is blamed by the LTTE for the killing of a number of its members and supporters. Despite government denials, evidence continues to emerge of collusion between the Karuna outfit and sections of the military in attacks on the LTTE. Under the present ceasefire, the government is responsible for disarming any group active within the areas under its control.

In the aftermath of the presidential poll last November, Prabhakaran appealed to the “international community” to pressure Colombo to engage in new peace talks. He warned in his annual Heroes’ Day speech on November 27 that if the new Rajapakse government did not “come forward soon with a reasonable political framework”, the LTTE would intensify “the struggle for self-determination, to establish self-government in a [Tamil] homeland.”

However, as violence sharply escalated in December and January, the major powers—the US in particular—sided with the Sri Lankan government, praising its “restraint” while condemning the LTTE. In mid-January, US ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead warned the LTTE that it would face “a stronger, more capable and more determined Sri Lankan military” unless it returned to the negotiating table. During a subsequent visit to Colombo, US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns branded the LTTE as “a despicable group keeping the country at the edge of war”.

The US appears to be playing a low-key, but significant role in preparing the Geneva talks. The government delegation has received an intensive training course from a team hired from the Harvard Negotiation Project, a think tank formed in 1979 as part of the Harvard Business School in the US.

Officially the Bush administration is still pushing for a negotiated end to the island’s 20-year civil war, which threatens to cut across growing US economic and strategic interests in South Asia. President Bush is about to visit the region next month, in particular to consolidate closer relations with India. However, Ambassador Lunstead’s comments make clear that if talks fail, the US is considering support for the Sri Lankan armed forces in any renewed war against the LTTE.

Wide differences exist between the LTTE and Rajapakse on any final peace deal. During the November election, Rajapakse declared that any end to the war would have to be based on the “unitary state,” not a federal solution as discussed in previous negotiations in 2002 and 2003. In an

interview with Reuters just last week, the president inflamed tensions by saying: “There’s only one country, we can share power. Not a separate state. That idea must be taken off... It is completely out.”

The LTTE responded angrily, declaring: “The unitary form of government, if translated into ground reality, means a Sinhala Parliament, Sinhala Constitution, Sinhala Judiciary, Sinhala Bureaucracy and Sinhala armed forces ruling the country. It is within this conceptually rigid supremacy-centred unitary constitution that the Tamil people continue to face a cruel genocide.”

The corporate elite in Colombo wants an end to the war, which has become a barrier to foreign investment and the integration of the island into globalised production processes. Hopes are not high, however. The Colombo stockmarket remains nervous. The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce could offer nothing more than an appeal for the public to light an oil lamp at home and pray for success at the talks in Geneva.

In a similar pessimistic vein, the editorial in last weekend’s *Sunday Times* was headed “Don’t expect much in Geneva”. After noting the gulf between the two sides and the limited scope of the talks, the newspaper appealed to “both parties not to be preoccupied with scoring debating points... However difficult the challenges at Geneva, the bottom line is that the killings must stop. There is nothing else they [the people] can hope for at this stage of the peace process.”

Even this limited aim is fraught with obstacles. While sections of business may want an end to the war, the ruling elites in Colombo are organically incapable of breaking with the Sinhala supremacist politics on which they have relied since independence to divide the working class and prop up their rule. Rajapakse’s provocative stance and the prominence of the JVP and JHU in the preparations for the Geneva talks suggest that the negotiations are more likely to be a prelude to war, than a negotiated end to the conflict.



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