

Sri Lankan peace talks stagger on to another round

Wije Dias
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Two days of talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—the first in nearly three years—broke up in Geneva on Thursday without any substantive agreement. A brief official statement declared that both sides were committed to upholding the current ceasefire agreement signed in 2002 and to meet again on April 19-21.

Erik Solheim, the head of the Norwegian facilitation team, told the media: “This is above my expectations. Confidence has been built.” But the fact that Solheim greeted such an outcome as “above expectations” is an indication of just how bitter the closed-door negotiations were. If the two sides had failed to uphold the ceasefire and agree to meet again, the alternative was escalating violence and a plunge towards all-out war.

In the three months since Mahinda Rajapakse won the Sri Lankan presidency in mid-November, more than 200 people—including military personnel, LTTE fighters and officials, civilians and members of government-aligned paramilitary groups—have been killed in ambushes and assassinations. Under strong international pressure, both sides pulled back from a renewal of the island’s 20-year civil war and agreed, after lengthy wrangling, to the talks in Geneva.

After the end of talks, both sides claimed to have achieved a victory. At his press conference, government spokesman Rohitha Bogollagama declared that his team had succeeded in getting “the LTTE to agree to stop abductions and killings”. LTTE chief negotiator Anton Balasingham insisted the talks were “a success” because the government had agreed to abide by the ceasefire and disarm paramilitary groups operating in army-controlled areas.

In reality, the negotiations did nothing to narrow the wide gulf between the Colombo government and the LTTE that was evident in their opening statements. Their refusal to appear jointly before the media after the talks confirmed that nothing of substance was agreed behind closed doors.

Prior to the talks, the Sri Lankan government made clear that it wanted a wholesale revision of the ceasefire. Rajapakse won the November presidential election with the backing of two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). As part of the price for their support, the JVP and JHU insisted on a far tougher stance against the LTTE, including substantial changes to the ceasefire to strengthen the position of the Sri Lankan military.

Last week the Colombo press reported that the government had drafted an amended version of the ceasefire and provocatively

intended to table the document during the Geneva talks. The LTTE had repeatedly insisted that talks should only be about the full implementation of the existing ceasefire.

The opening statement of the head of the government negotiating team Nimal Siripala de Silva was an uncompromising declaration that the ceasefire had to be amended. He began by “emphasising” that the existing agreement was “contrary to our constitution and law. Furthermore, it is prejudicial to the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the Republic of Sri Lanka.” After acknowledging that “certain benefits to the people” had flowed from the end of fighting, he declared: “[W]e propose to rectify certain grave anomalies arising from the agreement.”

De Silva then proceeded to condemn the LTTE for a series of breaches of the ceasefire agreement, many of them completely unsubstantiated. The speech was calculated more to appeal to the government’s communal allies in Sri Lanka than to set the stage for any serious negotiations. In Colombo, Rajapakse was in close consultation with top JVP leaders Somawansa Amarasinghe and Wimal Weerawansa as they followed proceedings via satellite in the “operations centre” at the official presidential residence.

De Silva accused the LTTE of using the ceasefire to bolster its military capability, being responsible for the bulk of ceasefire violations, recruiting child soldiers, assassinations and killings—including that of former Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, and abusing democratic rights including those of Muslims. He dismissed LTTE complaints that the army was collaborating with paramilitary groups and insisted that President Rajapakse was “committed to maintaining law and order without discrimination in every part of our country”.

There is no doubt that the LTTE, like the Sri Lankan armed forces and allied paramilitary groups, is responsible for abuses and killings. But the litany of unsubstantiated allegations was calculated to deliberately antagonise the LTTE rather than pave the way for any meaningful dialogue. It is after all a matter of public record that the Sri Lankan security forces in the last three months have engaged in the gross abuses of the democratic rights—rounding up hundreds of Tamils in cordon and search operations and firing on protest marches.

While details of proceedings have not been made public, there is every indication that de Silva’s speech brought the talks to the point of collapse. Balasingham later told the media that the LTTE delegation had threatened to walk out of the negotiations if the government insisted on changing the ceasefire agreement. “On the

first day we could not agree on the agenda because the government wanted to take up revising or amending the ceasefire. We said firmly no,” he said.

Balasingham claimed he told his opposite number: “If you are questioning the validity of the ceasefire agreement, then we will walk out.” At that point, the government delegation appears to have pulled back from the brink and backed down. No alternate ceasefire document was tabled and subsequent discussions centred on ensuring the implementation of the existing document.

Balasingham’s opening address was to the point. He quoted a series of clauses from the 2002 ceasefire agreement that the government has never implemented, including the disarming of anti-LTTE paramilitaries, an end to the harassment of the civilian population, the easing of fishing restrictions and the removal of troops from places of worship, school premises and public buildings.

Following the breakdown of previous talks in April 2003, Balasingham noted: “The violence of the Tamil paramilitaries intensified in the form of a dirty subversive war directed against our cadres and supporters, a shadow war in which the Sri Lankan armed forces actively colluded with the Tamil armed groups.” He submitted a “comprehensive report” on the activities of these pro-government militias and their closer relationship, particularly with Sri Lankan military intelligence. “The existence of armed Tamil paramilitary groups is an indisputable fact,” he declared.

Balasingham also observed that the Sri Lankan army had failed to vacate schools, public offices and places of worship and continued to maintain large areas of the Jaffna peninsula as High Security Zones that exclude the return of tens of thousands of people evicted from their homes, businesses and land. He submitted a document entitled “The Human Costs of the High Security Zones” showing that “28,830 house owners in Jaffna have been forcefully evicted from their homes and 13,000 acres of fertile farmlands made inaccessible to them. The creation of the High Security Zones has reduced 20,000 families to conditions of destitution and they have been languishing in refugee camps and welfare centres for a decade.”

Balasingham’s comparatively restrained approach reflects the fact that the LTTE has been backed into a corner by the US and other major powers. Having agreed to talks in 2002 and renounced its demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam, the LTTE leadership expected to reach a powersharing arrangement with Colombo that would enable the Sinhala and Tamil ruling elites to jointly exploit the working class. Instead, negotiations collapsed in 2003 and the LTTE has been left in political no-man’s land—with no peace deal and subject to continual provocations by the military, yet not at war either.

The LTTE has faced mounting hostility from ordinary Tamils over deteriorating social conditions and its imposition of taxes. It has responded by ruthlessly cracking down on any opposition so as to maintain its empty claim to be the “sole representative” of the Tamil people. Like the political establishment in Colombo, the LTTE has deliberately stirred up communal tensions in order to retain its social base. The result has been an escalating cycle of attacks and reprisals by the LTTE and government-aligned groups that threaten to plunge the country back to war.

The outcome of the Geneva talks has been greeted in Sri Lanka and internationally with what can only be described as false optimism. Swiss diplomats welcomed the result and looked forward to the next round of talks. The Colombo stock exchange jumped one percent on the news, reflecting hopes in business circles of an end to the economically ruinous conflict. Ceylon Chamber of Commerce chairman Deva Rodrigo described the decisions to adhere to the ceasefire and hold further talks as “very positive”.

The editorial in today’s *Daily Mirror*, which was headlined “outcome satisfactory”, declared: “It is probably with a sigh of relief that most of the people of this country received the news about the success achieved at the Geneva talks.” Referring obliquely to the near collapse of talks on the first day, it continued: “It was fortunate, however, that after this open and candid venting of grievances—which exercise is even prescribed as a curative process in psychotherapy—the negotiators have succeeded in steering the talks on a less turbulent course.”

Ordinary Sri Lankans have nothing to celebrate, however. Even if the stated aim of a powersharing arrangement were eventually reached, none of the aspirations of working people—Tamil, Sinhala or Muslim—for decent living standards and democratic rights would be met. Such a deal is fraught with difficulties as the talks in Geneva make clear.

For the last half century, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has relied on Sinhala supremacism to divide the working class and buttress its rule. The LTTE, which was born of the frustration and anger of Tamils at decades of discrimination, offers no alternative. Both sides are mired in communal politics, making war more likely than any powersharing arrangement.

This week, even as the talks were underway in Geneva, further killings were taking place on the island. The LTTE accused the military of involvement in an attack on one of their posts in Batticaloa district, resulting in the death of one of their members. The army vehemently denied any knowledge of the incident and in turn blamed the LTTE for killing a Muslim in the same district.

As the defence correspondent for the Colombo-based *Sunday Times* commented: “The spectre of war, at least until the 19th of April, seems to have gone away. But while smiling at each other, both sides will continue making preparations for war.”



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