Despite peace talks, Sri Lanka drifts towards civil war

Wije Dias
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Although the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are due to hold a second round of talks in Geneva on April 19-21 over the current ceasefire, the level of violence is again escalating in the war zones of the North and East of the island.

Last Saturday the naval vessel Dvora, a fast attack craft, was sunk during a confrontation with a trawler off the north west coast. Eight sailors died and another 11 were seriously injured when the trawler they were searching exploded. The sinking, which Colombo immediately branded as an LTTE suicide attack, is the worst of series of incidents involving both sides in recent weeks.

The Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which is responsible for overseeing the ceasefire agreement, issued a statement last Sunday criticising the government and the LTTE. After questioning the LTTE's denial of any involvement in the Dvora attack, the SLMM commented: "There has been a dangerous escalation of violence taking place over the last couple of weeks. This trend is extremely worrying."

In the immediate aftermath of presidential elections last November, more than 200 people, including military personnel, LTTE cadre and civilians were killed in a series of murders, bombings and clashes that had all the hallmarks of an undeclared war. The killings declined during the first round of Geneva talks in February, where government and LTTE representatives pledged to uphold the terms of the ceasefire.

However, the lull has proved to be short-lived. The SLMM statement warned: "Both sides have shown a lack of commitment and their actions have been provocative and not in line with the spirit of the ceasefire agreement... If the parties do not take responsibility we fear that the situation could become gradually worse, resulting in an escalation beyond what we had in December and January."

Far from reining in the armed forces, President Mahinda Rajapakse is under pressure from the military top brass and his Sinhala chauvinist allies to take a more aggressive stance against the LTTE. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) have condemned the joint statement issued after the first round of Geneva talks. These parties have demanded the government revise the ceasefire to strengthen the hand of the security forces and dismiss the Norwegian facilitators whom they accuse of pro-LTTE bias.

Rajapakse narrowly won the November presidential poll after forging electoral pacts with the JVP and JHU. His minority United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government is dependent on the parliamentary support of these parties, which used the campaign for last week's local government elections to heighten communal tensions and demand tougher measures against the LTTE.

The LTTE, which has rejected outright any revision of the ceasefire agreement, threatened to walk out of the February talks if the Colombo government insisted on changes. Chief LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham told Reuters on March 21: "Even if the present talks on the ceasefire progress to negotiations on political issues, President Rajapakse's ultra-nationalist allies, the Marxist JVP and the hard-line monks' party JHU, are likely to be spoilers."

Referring to continuing attacks on the LTTE by Tamil militias, Balasingham warned: "If the paramilitaries continue to launch military offensive operations against the LTTE with the backing of the Sri Lankan armed forces, it will certainly be construed as an act of war against the LTTE. It will lead to conditions of war and violence and it will block any forward movement of the peace talks and lead to the collapse of the peace process itself."

At the February talks, the government pledged to disarm paramilitary groups operating from government-controlled territory, as required under the ceasefire. So

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blatant are their ongoing activities, that the SLMM was compelled to declare last weekend: “We would like to urge the government of Sri Lanka to take this matter seriously and not close their eyes to armed elements that are to our knowledge still operating in government-controlled areas.”

There is entrenched resistance in the armed forces to any disarmament of the paramilitaries. Sections of the military, which are deeply hostile to the “peace process,” have covertly backed these armed militia and their attacks on the LTTE. Top defence ministry adviser H.M.G.B.Kotakadeniya bluntly told the *Morning Leader* on March 14 that the militia should not be disarmed. “Those paramilitary troops have taken up arms [in order] to be protected from the LTTE. They will not survive if they were disarmed while the LTTE is armed,” he said.

Army Commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka has also made clear that the military does not intend to abide by the terms of the ceasefire. Speaking at the armed forces headquarters in Vavuniya in mid-March, he provocatively declared: “People thought, like in the past one and half or two years, we would put up the white flag... But we bravely faced the situation and retaliated against those who attacked us. Thereafter we took a proactive role by looking for those who attacked us and retaliated in places like Jaffna and Batticaloa, protected our bases while gaining the appreciation of the public.”

Fonseka’s comments are an open admission that the military has been involved in attacking the LTTE and will continue to do so. At the army camp at Weli Oya, he spelled out the military hierarchy’s contempt for the peace talks, saying: “The government and ourselves are going for peace with dignity. We are not going for talks because we are scared of the LTTE or have any sympathy towards them.” “Peace with dignity” is the catchphrase of the Sinhala extremists, signifying the complete capitulation or defeat of the LTTE.

Fonseka continued his campaign last week during the launching of a web site for the military. He criticised the ceasefire agreement, which the government promised in Geneva to uphold, for having “many loopholes”. He then pledged that “the LTTE will not be able to achieve its objectives even if the talks fail”.

Commenting on Fonseka’s open intervention in the political arena, the *Sunday Times* political editor wrote last weekend: “The remarks by the head of the army that had fought a near two decades of war with the LTTE, just ahead of next month’s peace talks, assume significance... Even if it is embarrassing for President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government, this is the first time a serving senior officer has come out so openly.”

Following the sinking of the Dvora last Saturday, the campaign against the Geneva talks and the current ceasefire has intensified. An editorial in the *Island* on March 28 declared: “It is suicidal for the government to continue to bury its head in the sand of aid, exposing its vital parts to the Tigers [LTTE]. One may not agree with the JVP on many things but nothing describes Sri Lanka’s predicament better than its comparison of a state with an animal caught in a trap. It even cannot act in its self defence, for fear of such action triggering war.”

The destruction of the Dvora, which may have been carried out by the LTTE, follows a series of naval incidents over the past two weeks. The LTTE lodged a complaint with the SLMM that for three days from March 18 the navy opened fire on the shoreline under LTTE control at Sampur. The navy blandly dismissed the accusation and issued claims of its own against the LTTE.

The armed forces have a history of provocations against the LTTE. In 2003, a series of naval clashes involving the sinking of LTTE vessels took place—in each case coinciding with talks between the government and the LTTE. The incidents greatly heightened tensions and were a major factor in the breakdown of negotiations in April of that year.

The head of the government delegation, Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva, met with the Swiss ambassador this week to finalise arrangements for the next round of talks in Geneva. The UPFA government is under considerable international pressure to proceed with the talks. However, amid escalating violence in the North and East and demands from the JVP and JHU for measures already rejected by the LTTE, any substantive agreement is unlikely. In fact, it is by no means certain that the negotiations will proceed at all.

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