

Sri Lankan peace talks on the verge of collapse

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19 April 2006

The Geneva peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are on the brink of collapse, amid escalating violence in the war zones of Sri Lanka's North and East. Some 70 people, including military personnel, LTTE cadres and civilians, have been killed since the beginning of April. Many more have been injured and thousands have been displaced.

The second round of negotiations were due to begin today, but were postponed until April 24-25 following a dispute over the transport of LTTE leaders from the East to the northern LTTE stronghold for discussions prior to the Geneva talks. The Defence Ministry, supported by President Mahinda Rajapakse, provocatively turned down an LTTE request for airforce transport, which has previously been provided.

Efforts to provide sea transport collapsed before the government, under international pressure, finally offered to hire a private helicopter as a sign of good faith. There is no guarantee, however, that the negotiations will proceed.

In a letter to the Norwegian ambassador on Monday, LTTE political wing leader S.P. Thamilchelvan stated that "until the hurdles in front of us to attend the Geneva talks are removed and a conducive environment created" the LTTE was unable to attend talks.

Yesterday, in comments to Reuters, LTTE peace secretariat chief S. Pulithevan appeared to go further, saying: "While our people are being killed and our shops looted we are not going to Geneva." He indicated that the LTTE intended to discuss an end to the violence with Norwegian peace envoy Jon-Hanssen Bauer tomorrow.

Bauer arrived in Sri Lanka yesterday for the second time in two weeks to try to patch up arrangements for the Geneva talks. Norway is the formal facilitator of the peace process. The Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which supervises the 2002 ceasefire agreement, pessimistically warned on Monday that the situation in Sri Lanka was spinning out of control.

"Already people are dying in large numbers, so the situation is unacceptable and there is no way we can continue like this. The parties need to work their way out of the deadlock instead of speculating and pondering over why and who carried out the attacks," SLMM spokesperson Helen Olafsdottir said.

In a sign of alarm over the danger of war, the Colombo stock exchange lost 30 billion rupees or \$US300 million over the Easter break. The All Share Price Index (ASPI) dropped by 4 percent or 100 points. "An upsurge in violence and doubt over the Geneva talks saw investors booking profits, leading to sharp declines on both indices," John Keells stockbrokers said.

The first round of talks in Geneva on February 22-23—the first since negotiations were suspended in April 2003—almost broke down after the LTTE delegation threatened to walk out if Colombo insisted on changing the current fragile ceasefire. Under intense international pressure, both sides eventually agreed to maintain the ceasefire and hold further talks.

The Rajapakse administration, however, immediately came under fire from its political allies—the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—for failing to amend the ceasefire agreement and remove Norway as peace facilitator. The JVP and JHU, which provide crucial parliamentary support to the minority government and backed Rajapakse in presidential elections last November, attack the ceasefire and Norway for being pro-LTTE and undermining Sri Lankan sovereignty.

The military top brass has also been openly critical of the ceasefire. Sections of the armed forces, particularly military intelligence, have colluded with Tamil paramilitary outfits, particularly an LTTE-breakaway group in the East headed by Karuna or V. Muralitharan. At the first round of talks in Geneva, the Colombo government agreed to implement the ceasefire requirement to disarm these paramilitaries, but has done nothing to honour the promise.

There was a lull in the violence during and immediately after the February talks, but what amounts to an undeclared war in the North and East is again worsening. The military has baldly denied assisting Karuna and other paramilitaries, and that they have been operating from government-controlled territory. Yet, the incidents have been so brazen that even the SLMM has been forced to comment.

An SLMM statement condemned the blowing up of a trawler that killed eight navy personnel in the northwestern seas on March 25 but also accused the government of failing to act against the paramilitaries. Countering statements by the army head Sarath Fonseka, SLMM chief Hågrup Haukland told the

Sunday Times: “Yes we met them (the paramilitaries), spoke with them.” While acknowledging that he had no evidence of army support for these groups, Haukland declared: “I am sorry to say that it is a mistake by the army commander to say they are operating not in government-controlled area.”

For all the denials by the government and the military, their political sympathy for the paramilitary outfits is obvious. On April 10, the political front of the Karuna group, known as the Thmleela Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (Tamil Eelam Peoples Liberation Tigers), opened a public office in Batticaloa for the first time. The ceremony was conducted under heavy police and military guard.

The present round of violence escalated following the provocative killing of V. Vigneswaran, the president of pro-LTTE Trincomalee District Tamil Peoples Forum (TDTF) on April 7. He was shot dead by an unidentified gunman in Trincomalee, an eastern port city. Vigneswaran was to have filled the post of pro-LTTE MP Joseph Pararajasingham, who was assassinated by unidentified gunmen last December.

Vigneswaran’s murder took place within a military high security zone close to army checkpoints as well as a navy command post. Yet the murderer was not detained. The military denied any responsibility and the government issued a routine condemnation of the killing. The LTTE declared it to be the work of the “army and its intelligence operatives”. Whoever was responsible, their aim was clearly to provoke violence and scuttle the upcoming Geneva talks.

Three days later, a group calling itself Upsurging Peoples Force claimed responsibility for setting off a claymore mine that killed five soldiers travelling in a truck at Mirusuvil on the Jaffna peninsula. In Trincomalee on April 11, eleven navy personnel were killed and eight injured in another mine blast. While the LTTE formally denied any involvement, there is little doubt that it ordered the attacks. Attacks and reprisals have now become commonplace throughout the North and East.

A vicious incident took place in Trincomalee on April 12. A bomb was triggered in a crowded vegetable market killing 18 civilians—six Tamils, seven Sinhalese and six Muslims—and a soldier. Immediately after the blast, a crowd of Sinhala thugs looted and burned about two dozen shops owned by Tamils and Muslims. Both the LTTE and the government have blamed each other.

The bombing has greatly heightened communal tensions in the area. Some 2,000 Tamils have fled to nearby villages, schools and temples. In some villages, Sinhala farmers, fearing retaliation, have also left. The security forces have used the incident to impose curfews. Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and top military officials visited Trincomalee yesterday to “review the security situation”.

The LTTE has carried out communal provocations in the past. In this case, however, serious doubts remain as to who was responsible. According to last weekend’s *Sunday Times*, R.

Rajarammohan, the chairman of the chamber of commerce and industries, formally complained that the “police did not act promptly”. Hatton National Bank branch manager K. Arumugam said police did not arrive for 30 minutes, despite an instant bank alarm connected to the local police headquarters.

The bomb blast could well have been organised by Tamil paramilitaries or Sinhala extremists connected to the JVP, JHU or other outfits such as the North East Sinhala Organisation (NESO) which are active in the East and have close links with the security forces. These groups, as well as sections of the military establishment, are deeply hostile to the peace process.

The JVP has carried out an aggressive campaign in the lead-up to the Geneva talks to demand changes to the ceasefire agreement and a crackdown on the LTTE. Its political bureau issued a statement on April 16 calling “everyone to rally to free the motherland from separatist terrorism”. It insisted that “the government and patriotic masses should not allow Tiger terrorists to swallow the lives of members of security forces and unarmed citizens under the name of false peace.”

The LTTE is under intense international pressure to agree to talks and reach a peace deal to end the country’s 20-year civil war. The US in particular, which regards the conflict as a dangerous impediment to its growing economic and strategic interests in the region, is pressuring the LTTE to negotiate. It has one-sidedly condemned the latest attacks on Sri Lankan military personnel and in January issued a veiled threat to back Colombo in any renewed conflict.

At the same time, however, the LTTE is desperate to shore up its eroding support among the Tamil minority. After three years of ceasefire, the social conditions of working people in the North and East have further eroded, fuelling discontent over LTTE taxes and autocratic rule. As a result, the LTTE has stirred up communal tensions and resorted to anti-Sinhala chauvinism to bolster its standing.

Even if the second round of talks in Geneva does go ahead, there is little prospect for any substantive agreement. The inability of either side to make any significant concession reflects the fundamental inability of any section of the Sri Lankan ruling elite to break with the communal politics on which they have relied for more than 50 years to divide working people and maintain their precarious rule.



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