

Sri Lanka: Behind talk of peace, threat of full-scale war looms

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Despite international pressure for the resumption of peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), violence in the war zones of the East and North of the island is continuing unabated.

After months of attacks and reprisals, for which both sides denied responsibility, hostilities erupted into open warfare last week. On April 25, a suicide bomber killed eight people in a carefully planned attack on the heavily guarded military headquarters in Colombo. While it denied involvement, the LTTE almost certainly organised the bombing, targetted against army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka.

The Sri Lankan military immediately retaliated with air raids on targets in the LTTE-controlled Sampur area near the eastern city of Trincomalee. At least 11 people were killed and many more were injured. Fearing further attacks, hundreds of people streamed out of the area. Both the suicide bombing and the retaliation are clear breaches of the shaky ceasefire agreement signed in 2002.

The major powers and the international media have blamed the LTTE for the eruption of fighting but the chief responsibility rests with the Sri Lankan government and military, backed by Sinhala extremist parties, that have engaged in a series of calculated provocations. The armed forces routinely deny any connection to various Tamil paramilitaries engaged in attacking the LTTE, but these denials are no more credible than the LTTE's claims that it had nothing to do with the attempted assassination of General Fonseka.

After a meeting in Oslo on April 28, the co-chairs of the so-called peace process—the US, EU, Japan and Norway—condemned “all acts of violence” and appealed for it to end. India diplomats also expressed concern that the conflict was spiralling out of control. However, while the Sri Lankan military has ended air strikes on LTTE positions, the security forces continue to effectively operate on a war footing, and clandestine attacks and counter-attacks continue in the North and East.

Police and soldiers have been involved in a series of dragnet operations, arbitrarily rounding up, interrogating and detaining Tamils as “terrorist suspects”. Following last week's suicide bombing, hundreds were detained in police raids in Colombo in predominantly Tamil areas. On Tuesday, police announced that 83 people had been detained in raids in the surrounding Puttalam district on factories, brick kilns and livestock farms.

On Thursday, the army and police conducted searches in predominantly Tamil areas of Trincomalee, following a mine attack on a navy patrol that killed a sailor and four civilians. According to the pro-LTTE Tamilnet website, searches also took place in villages near Batticaloa, including Kallady, Thirchenthur and Dutchbar.

The activities of the military have been so overt that the Sri Lankan

Monitoring Mission (SLMM) commented in a statement last weekend: “We also fear that government security forces have, in the North and the East, been involved in extra-judicial killings of civilians. This conviction is based on our observation and inquiries on the ground.” In response to savage government and media criticism, the SLMM spokeswoman Helen Oalfsdottir conceded that the government and military command may not have been aware of the killings, but nevertheless maintained that “rogue elements” of the military or “individuals” were involved.

Bloody provocations have continued. On Tuesday, an armed gang stormed the press and the editorial offices of *Uthayan*, a pro-LTTE Tamil daily published in Jaffna and killed the manager and another employee. Two others were seriously injured. While government ministers rather absurdly blamed the LTTE, the newspaper staff had no doubt that a militia outfit aligned to the government and military was responsible.

On Thursday, the military announced that soldiers had killed seven young people in two three-wheelers, saying they were about to attack its camp at Nelliyadi. However, the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) sent a letter to foreign diplomatic missions in Colombo setting out details of the dead youth, demonstrating that they were entirely innocent.

For its part, the LTTE is also preparing for war. Last weekend, its forces launched a major assault on three camps associated with the breakaway LTTE faction led by Karuna, or V. Muralitharan, in the Welikanda area, killing 15 people. The LTTE claimed that five Sri Lankan soldiers, including a captain, had been killed in the clash, but this was denied by the military.

The LTTE has long demanded that the Sri Lankan military disarm the Karuna faction and other Tamil paramilitaries operating from government-controlled territory, as required under the terms of the 2002 ceasefire. LTTE spokesman Daya Mohan told the *Daily Mirror* on Wednesday: “If the government won't do it [disarm the Karuna group], we will.” He claimed that the three camps were in government-controlled territory surrounded by army and police installations.

A naval clash yesterday provided further evidence of open warfare. The navy announced that it had sunk one LTTE vessel and damaged three others off the northwest coast near Mannar, as well as carrying out an air strike on a land-based heavy calibre gun. While the military claimed that the four vessels were about to attack a navy vessel, it is just as likely that the attack was a reprisal for the sinking of a navy gunboat in the same area in March.

Clamour for war in Colombo

President Mahinda Rajapakse has repeatedly declared he is for peace, but his election last November has encouraged the military to adopt a more aggressive stance. He narrowly won the poll in alliance with two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). The terms of their electoral agreements required that Rajapakse insist on the revision of the 2002 ceasefire, to the detriment of the LTTE, bolster the military and dismiss Norway as the formal facilitator of the peace process.

Talks between the government and the LTTE—the first in nearly three years—did take place in Geneva in February but nearly broke down when government representatives moved to revise the ceasefire agreement. A face-saving statement declared that both sides would adhere to the 2002 ceasefire, with further talks in April. That meeting has been delayed indefinitely, amid an unresolved dispute over the transport of LTTE leaders in the East to the LTTE’s northern headquarters in the Wanni region. Unlike on previous occasions, the government refused to provide army helicopters.

The real reason for the delay is not the impasse over transport but the escalating violence in the North and East and the improbability of any significant breakthrough if talks were actually convened. An all-party conference convened by Rajapakse last Friday made clear that, while talking about peace, the entire political establishment is closing ranks in preparation for war. The meeting included the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and its allies—the JVP and JHU—as well as the opposition United National Party (UNP).

A joint statement declared all parties would “act with unity and single-minded purpose against such efforts to intimidate and provoke our democratic society” and support Rajapakse’s “resolve to overcome terrorism and usher peace through negotiations”. It appealed to the “international community to assist to protect the territorial integrity and democracy in Sri Lanka”.

Despite the reference to peace, the meeting revealed a growing consensus for war. Significantly, the UNP, which previously has voiced the demands of the corporate elite for a negotiated end to the war, is falling into line. UNP spokesman Lakshman Kiriella told a press conference on May 2: “The peace process is the only way to solve the problem, but if the government wants to opt for war, we will then back it.”

The government is bolstering the military in preparation for war. Last week Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse appointed the navy’s deputy chief of staff, Sarath Weerasekera as director general of a 25,000-strong home guard battalion to supplement the armed forces in areas bordering LTTE-controlled zones. Weerasekera, like General Fonseka, is notorious for his aggressive, hard-line stance against the LTTE.

The *Indian Express* reported on Wednesday that the Rajapakse government was seeking to purchase military equipment from Pakistan and had sent “a long shopping list”. According to the newspaper, the Chief of Defence Staff Admiral Daya Sandagiri wrote to the Pakistan High Commissioner in Sri Lanka on March 1, asking for “a technical team to Colombo for an immediate survey of T-55 tanks and C-130 Hercules transport aircraft”. The Sri Lankan military is in urgent need of spare parts.

As Sri Lanka drifts back to war, the major powers have been calling for an end to the violence, but there is a discernable shift in tone. There was universal condemnation of last week’s attack on Fonseka

and more menacing threats against the LTTE. US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher declared that the US was “in touch with other governments around the world to bring to bear whatever pressure we can on the Tamil Tigers”.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh convened the country’s National Security Committee to discuss the unstable situation in both Nepal and Sri Lanka. The Indian Coast Guard and Navy have increased their patrols in the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka and are collaborating with the Sri Lankan navy to monitor LTTE movements. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera is due in New Delhi next week and will no doubt seek greater military assistance.

Following last Friday’s meeting in Oslo, Japanese special envoy Yasushi Akashi is due to arrive in Sri Lanka today for talks with the government and the LTTE. One indication of what was being discussed behind closed doors in Oslo was a hint made by Akashi in an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Tuesday that in the event of full-scale war, a UN peace-keeping mission might be considered. Akashi is also to hold talks in New Delhi next week.

It is possible that the government and the LTTE could be pressured to hold another round of talks in Geneva, but any positive outcome is unlikely. Speaking to Associated Press on Wednesday, SLMM head Ulf Henriccsen tried to be optimistic, saying: “When I look into the activities of the two parties, I am not quite so optimistic any longer about the peace talks in the near future. But we are working on it, so we will see.” Yesterday, however, SLMM spokeswoman Helen Oalfsdottir bluntly declared: “The escalation of violence that is occurring now is completely out of control. There is anarchy on the ground.”

The fact that the island stands on the brink of a renewed civil war that has already claimed 65,000 lives is a damning indictment of the entire ruling class. While well aware of the devastating social and economic consequences of a new all-out military conflict, the Sri Lankan elites are organically incapable of abandoning their poisonous communal politics, which they have exploited for more than half a century as the basis for their rule and which led to war in the first place.



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