

European Union ban on LTTE heightens danger of war in Sri Lanka

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The European Union (EU) formally listed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) this week as a terrorist organisation with immediate effect. The decision, which was announced on May 30, requires the 25 EU member states to freeze LTTE financial assets, prohibit the provision of funds directly or indirectly to the LTTE, and enforce a travel ban on LTTE officials.

The EU resolution is arbitrary, politically-motivated and will further trample on the democratic rights of immigrant workers throughout Europe. An estimated 300,000 Tamils are part of the huge diaspora throughout Europe that emerged during the two decades of war that engulfed Sri Lanka. Anyone deemed to have connections to the LTTE will now be subject to severe restrictions on their rights to engage in political activities in Europe.

The LTTE, which is based on the bankrupt perspective of creating a capitalist statelet of Tamil Eelam, has a history of communally motivated violence. But the responsibility for the war rests squarely with successive Sri Lankan governments, which have systematically discriminated against the island's Tamil minority and prosecuted a brutal war to ensure the supremacy of the Sinhala ruling elites.

The EU decision to brand the LTTE as “terrorist” comes amid killings and violence in the war zones of the North and East of the island. The fighting has escalated particularly since the election of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse last November. The EU declaration makes a pretence of even-handedness by calling on the Sri Lankan government to end the “culture of impunity” and “curb violence” in areas under its control. But the EU has not condemned the killings carried out by pro-government Tamil paramilitaries or the repressive measures taken by the Sri Lankan security forces against Tamils.

The EU has presented the decision as part of efforts to press the LTTE to refrain from violence and participate in new peace talks. Its declaration refers to a previous

warning last September to resume negotiations, which coincided with the imposition of travel restrictions on LTTE officials throughout the EU. In other words, the decision to brand the LTTE as “terrorist” is not so much for what it has allegedly done, but for its failure to heed the demands of the major powers to return to the bargaining table.

Far from bringing peace, the ban only intensifies the danger of a complete breakdown of the current 2002 ceasefire agreement. The EU decision is the result of a diplomatic campaign being waged by the Bush administration to isolate the LTTE internationally and pressure it to accede to US demands. The ban came just over a month after Canada, which also has a large Sri Lankan Tamil community, took similar steps.

The EU move followed a call from Washington. In Colombo, senior US State Department official Donald Camp told state-owned TV on May 16 that the Bush administration was “pushing hard” for the EU to outlaw the LTTE. “We have encouraged the EU to list the LTTE. We think the LTTE is very deserving of that label. We think it will help cut off financial supplies and weapons procurement and the like,” he said.

The Nordic countries initially opposed an EU ban. Norway has been the official facilitator of the peace process and, along with Sweden, Denmark and Finland, staffs the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) that oversees the 2002 ceasefire. While concerned that the resolution would compromise their official position of neutrality, the Nordic EU members fell into line.

It is not clear, however, whether these countries will enforce the EU ban. Prior to the decision, chief Norwegian negotiator Erik Solheim told the media: “This does not affect Norway. We do not use the EU list of terrorist groups, we use the UN list.” He expressed concern, however “that Norway may become even more isolated in the Sri Lankan peace process”. Norway is not

an EU member.

There is no question that the EU move and the US campaign to isolate the LTTE has encouraged the Sri Lankan government to take a more aggressive stance. Rajapakse immediately hailed the decision. In a prominent comment in yesterday's *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Taming the Tigers," he appealed for other countries to follow suit. While repeating his false claim to be "a man of peace," Rajapakse made clear that the prime objective was to cut off finance and military supplies to the LTTE in the event of war.

"I urge other countries to follow suit, particularly those in the Middle East, where many Tamil expatriates work and are often forced to illegally donate funds to the Tamil Tigers... Foreign governments could do more to crack down on the Tamil Tigers' illegal purchase of weapons from places such as Afghanistan and Eastern Europe and Central Asian republics, as well as their arms-smuggling in Thailand," he wrote.

Rajapakse's Sinhala extremist allies—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which have been agitating for war, also welcomed the EU decision, but declared it should have come sooner. Their comments highlight the fact that the Colombo media and politicians have been demanding for years that European and other countries ban the LTTE. The significant change is that Washington, ominously, has now thrown its weight behind the campaign.

While US officials, publicly at least, are supporting a return to peace talks, the remarks of the US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Jeffrey Lunstead, indicate that the US is also preparing to back a war against the LTTE. Speaking at a conference in Washington on May 16, he warned: "There will be negative consequences if the LTTE takes the path of violence... [I]f the Tamil Tigers fall onto the path of a military offensive against the government, the US will ensure that the Sri Lankan military becomes much superior."

In Colombo for discussions, US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher yesterday welcomed the EU ban. Asked by the media if Washington would provide military aid, he avoided giving a direct answer, but pointed out that the US already cooperated militarily with Sri Lanka. The Pentagon is involved in training Sri Lankan defence personnel, including special forces, and in joint counter-terrorism programs.

Washington's support for the so-called peace process has always been a tactical issue. The Bush administration is primarily concerned to end the war in Sri Lanka

because it is a constant destabilising influence in South Asia, particularly in India, where the US had growing economic and strategic interests. If the LTTE cannot be forced to the negotiating table on acceptable terms, the US could well decide to support a renewed war.

By encouraging the most militarist elements in Colombo, the EU ban makes conflict more likely. While the LTTE is universally painted in the international media as the aggressor, a shadowy coalition of anti-LTTE militia, sections of the military and various Sinhala extremist groups have been engaged in one provocation after another to undermine any peace talks.

The EU ban is a significant blow to the LTTE. As in Canada, the Tamil communities in EU countries provide substantial financial and political support to the LTTE. The LTTE and its supporters have media organisations and businesses that may now be proscribed.

The LTTE has accused the EU of bias and warned of the dangers of war. LTTE chief negotiator Anton Balasingham stated in the *Financial Times* last week: "The more the international community alienates the LTTE, the more the LTTE will be compelled to tread a hardline individual path." But the warning amounts to nothing more than impotent pleading for the "international community" to be more even-handed.

The LTTE's perspective all along has been to garner the support of one or more of the major powers to assist in establishing a capitalist mini-state in the north and east of the island. At the outset of the peace talks in 2002, Balasingham made clear that the LTTE would drop its demand for Tamil Eelam in return for a powersharing arrangement with the Colombo government.

The so-called peace talks broke down in 2003 without such a deal even being discussed. Negotiations in Geneva in February this year came close to breaking down and did nothing more than reaffirm the current ceasefire. A second round in April failed to take place amid disagreements over travel arrangements and escalating violence in the war zones. Both sides have now tentatively agreed to resume discussions in Oslo on June 8-9, but, even with massive international pressure on the LTTE to make further major concessions, the talks are unlikely to halt the slide to war.



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