

Sri Lankan president proposes constitutional plan to end war

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse called a conference of all parliamentary parties last Friday to announce a plan for a “political solution to the ethnic issue”. The “solution,” however, was devoid of any concrete proposals and consisted of setting up an advisory council to draft a new constitutional framework.

The “ethnic issue” refers to the systematic discrimination against the island’s Tamil minority that led to a 20-year civil war that has claimed the lives of at least 65,000 people. Rajapakse’s plan comes amid intensifying clashes with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), provoked by pro-government Tamil paramilitaries backed by sections of the military.

Far from being a serious proposal to resolve the conflict, the establishment of an advisory council is aimed at deflecting international criticism, voiced at a meeting of the major donor countries last week in Tokyo. All the parliamentary parties, including the Sinhala extremists of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), have been invited to join. No starting date has been proposed and there is no deadline for the completion of its work.

Apart from stating a broad objective of “enhancing the standard of living of the Tamil community of the north and east and to see that those areas were developed,” Rajapakse gave no hint of any guidelines to address the grievances that lie behind country’s protracted conflict.

This was not accidental. Rajapakse was censured by his ally, the JVP, before the All Party Conference was even convened. Objecting to the framework, the JVP responded: “The invitation says the emphasis at this discussion would be setting up a framework to devolve powers in an undivided Sri Lanka. Politically and scientifically we cannot understand the meaning of an undivided country.”

Threatening to boycott the meeting, the JVP asked Rajapakse: “What are the powers which would be

devolved? To whom will the powers be devolved? For what? To what extent?” The JVP and JHU are deeply hostile to any concessions to the LTTE or more broadly to the democratic rights of Tamils.

Rajapakse immediately blamed a government official for the wording and issued a new invitation proposing that the conference broadly discuss “how to develop a framework for the final solution”. Desperate to keep the JVP on side, he refrained from making any specific proposals at Friday’s meeting toward a settlement with LTTE.

The presence of the JVP and JHU in the advisory council ensures that its recommendations will be completely unacceptable to the LTTE. Following the signing of the 2002 ceasefire, the LTTE abandoned its long-held demand for a separate statelet of Tamil Eelam in the North and East in return for a powersharing arrangement that would provide for significant autonomy. The JVP and JHU, however, are opposed to any devolution of powers. The JVP is also calling for the LTTE to disarm before further negotiations take place.

Rajapakse only called the All Party Conference in the wake of a Co-Chairs declaration issued by a meeting of the Sri Lankan donor countries in Tokyo on May 30. The Co-Chairs—the US, EU, Japan and Norway—issued a strong warning to both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government to pull back from the escalating violence that is threatening to trigger a return to open war.

The sternest language was reserved for the LTTE. The Tokyo statement warned the LTTE of “deeper isolation” if it failed to “renounce terrorism and violence” and insisted that it “must show it is willing to make the political compromises needed for a political solution within a united Sri Lanka”. The declaration came a day after the EU imposed bans on the LTTE, formally branding it a “terrorist organisation”.

However, in a bid to at least appear even-handed, the

statement declared that the Colombo government “must immediately prevent groups based in its territory from carrying out violence and acts of terrorism”. Since Rajapakse won the presidency last November, Tamil paramilitary groups have been engaged in provocative acts of violence with impunity. Some of these attacks have been so blatant that the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the ceasefire, has tentatively pointed to the involvement of sections of the Sri Lankan security forces.

The Co-Chairs statement accused the government and the LTTE of failing to fully implement the ceasefire, which was reaffirmed at talks in Geneva in February. “The government has failed to prevent attacks of armed groups, including Karuna and violent elements of the EPDP,” it declared. Karuna is the leader of an LTTE faction that broke away in 2004 and the EPDP (Eelam Peoples Democratic Party) is a partner in Rajapakse’s ruling coalition.

Furthermore, the Tokyo statement said: “The government must show that it will address the legitimate grievances of Tamils... It must protect the rights and security of Tamils throughout the country and ensure violators are prosecuted. It must show that it is ready to make the dramatic political changes to bring about a new system of governance which will enhance the rights of all Sri Lankans, including the Muslims.”

The Co-Chairs struck a sensitive nerve for the cash-strapped Rajapakse government, warning that “the failure to take such steps” as instructed “will diminish international support.” In 2003, the donors promised \$US4.5 billion in financial aid to assist the “peace process”.

Immediately after the Tokyo meeting, US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher flew to Colombo for further talks with the Sri Lankan government. The purpose appears to have been to reassure Rajapakse of US support and offer advice on dealing with the criticisms. According to leaked reports in the media, it was Norway, not the US, that insisted that the final declaration censure the Sri Lankan government.

Boucher told a media conference: “The Tiger leadership has to understand that the entire world is united in its determination to combat terrorism whether it emanates from the mountains of Afghanistan or the fields of [LTTE- held] Wannu.” The obvious implication is that if the LTTE fails to fall into line, the US, as in Afghanistan, will support the Sri Lankan military in any renewed civil war. Boucher noted that the Pentagon is already providing

training and equipment.

Boucher may well have encouraged Rajapakse’s proposal for constitutional reform. “A vision needs to be put out and needs to be elaborated by the parties themselves and then negotiated by the parties themselves. But whatever you call it, it is quite a different governing structure than what you have now and one that’s designed to give an enhanced political role to all the people,” he said.

Despite his appeals for the rights of all to be protected, Boucher left no doubt where the US stood. He said he had informed Rajapakse that “we stand squarely behind the government in its struggle to combat terrorism”. Boucher emphasised that the LTTE would have to “renounce terror in word and deed” before the US would have any dealings with it.

The Bush administration’s involvement in the “peace process” is not out of any concern for the plight of the Sri Lankan people. Rather it regards the protracted conflict on the island as a dangerous destabilising influence throughout the region and in India in particular, where the US has been developing close economic and strategic ties.

The LTTE welcomed the Co-Chairs statement. Chief LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham declared: “I think the European Union ban is extremely harsh, unfair, untimely and one sided, unlike the Donor Co-Chair which is a well-crafted, well-balanced statement censoring both parties for the escalation of violence”.

The LTTE has agreed to a further round of talks in Oslo on June 8-9 where it will undoubtedly come under huge international pressure to make major concessions. Nothing is likely to emerge, however, that will halt the continuing slide toward war.



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