

Oslo talks between Sri Lankan government and LTTE collapse

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Last week's scheduled talks in Oslo between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) broke down even before they started. The two delegations arrived in the Norwegian capital, were escorted to a hotel for discussions on June 8-9, but never sat down together at the negotiating table.

While Norwegian diplomats blamed the LTTE, the collapse of the talks is a product of the escalating violence in the North and East of the island since the election of Mahinda Rajapakse as Sri Lankan president last November. With the 2002 ceasefire agreement in tatters and the entire peace process sponsored by the major powers in doubt, Sri Lanka once again stands on the brink of full-scale civil war.

Norway, the formal facilitator of the peace process, requested talks with both sides for the limited purpose of ensuring the safety of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) which oversees the ceasefire. Norwegian officials complained that an LTTE attack on Sri Lankan navy vessels in May had endangered the lives of SLMM observers on board and that the Sri Lankan military had hampered its activities.

The meeting was also intended as a means for trying to reestablish broader negotiations. The first top-level talks in three years took place in Geneva on February 22-23, but failed to agree on anything other than to reaffirm adherence to the 2002 ceasefire. A further round of discussions was due to take place in April, but was delayed then postponed indefinitely amid spiralling violence in the island's war zones.

Both objectives failed completely. The Sri Lankan delegation threatened to pull out of the talks completely if a damning SLMM report pointing to the military's complicity in attacks on the LTTE by Tamil paramilitary groups was made public before or during the talks. The Rajapakse government has tried to maintain the increasingly threadbare charade that the military has no connection to the militia or their provocative attacks on LTTE officials, soldiers and supporters.

LTTE delegation leader S.P. Thamilchelvan objected to the lack of a cabinet minister in the government delegation, which was led by Palitha Kohona, head of the Sri Lanka peace secretariat. He proposed on protocol grounds that a lesser figure, the LTTE peace secretariat head S. Pulidevan, should lead the LTTE delegation. After being told of the LTTE offer, Rajapakse reportedly directed Kohona to "pack your bags and get back soon".

Rajapakse's reaction came as no surprise. His minority United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government is dependent on

the parliamentary support of two Sinhala chauvinist parties—Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which have been agitating for war. The JVP opposed the Oslo talks and is deeply hostile to the Norwegian government and the SLMM, accusing them of pro-LTTE bias. The JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa declared last Friday: "The Norwegians invited us for Oslo talks only to degrade Sri Lanka."

The so-called peace process itself is now in jeopardy. Prior to the talks, the European Union (EU), under pressure from the Bush administration, announced on May 29 that it was formally declaring the LTTE a terrorist organisation. The ban is a serious blow to the LTTE, which relies heavily on fund-raising and political backing by its supporters in the Tamil diaspora in Europe.

The LTTE delegation called on Norway to replace the SLMM personnel drawn from EU countries, declaring that the EU ban had created "serious apprehension regarding the impartiality". Three countries participating in the Scandinavian-based SLMM—Sweden, Denmark and Finland—are EU members and contribute 37 of its 57 personnel. Norway has declared that it is not in a position to replace them.

Norway's Minister of International Development Erik Solheim declared after the breakdown of talks: "The parties must take responsibility for the worsening situation. They have been acting contrary to our advice. There is at present time no room for a Norwegian initiative." Referring to the EU ban, he noted: "[T]here is no doubt that this is an underlying issue hardening the position of the LTTE prior to the Oslo meeting."

In what it described as an "unprecedented move," Norway has sent a formal letter to both LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran and Sri Lankan President Rajapakse requesting "responses in writing to five critical questions" by June 20. They include whether the parties are still committed to the ceasefire, whether they want the SLMM operations to continue and whether they are prepared to guarantee the SLMM's security. The questions all point to the fact that the ceasefire is at the point of breaking down completely.

The slide to war

The chief responsibility for the plunge toward war rests with the

Sri Lankan government. Rajapakse narrowly won the November presidential election with the backing of the JVP and JHU. Both allies insisted on formal electoral agreements that included a far more aggressive stance toward the LTTE, including a revision of the ceasefire to strengthen the military's hand, removal of Norway as facilitator and reaffirmation of the "unitary state" as the basis for any negotiations. This final condition effectively undercut the previous basis for talks, which included a significant devolution of power to the North and East of the island.

Following Rajapakse's election, pro-government Tamil paramilitaries, with the tacit support of the armed forces, carried out provocative attacks on the LTTE and its supporters. In December, the assassination of pro-LTTE parliamentarian Joseph Pararajasingham in Batticaloa provoked retaliatory attacks by the LTTE. A lull in the escalating violence following the Geneva talks in February quickly vanished after the killing on April 7 of prominent pro-LTTE politician V.Vigneswaran, who was mooted as Pararajasingham's replacement.

The SLMM report covering the period since the February talks up until last week stated that 330 people had been killed, including 88 from the security forces, 19 LTTE cadres and 223 civilians. Since December about 680 persons have died in what the SLMM has itself called a "low intensity war" between the LTTE and the military along with its paramilitary allies.

The report blamed both sides for violations of the ceasefire. But it identified the provocative murder of Vigneswaran as a turning point, noting that the situation again became "very tense" and the killing "triggered a resumption of attacks" on government forces. The report cited cases of anti-LTTE armed groups attacking the LTTE from government-controlled territory and concluded that the military had failed to carry out the ceasefire requirement to disarm such paramilitary groups.

After the breakdown of talks, the LTTE issued a formal "Oslo Communiqué," which sets out a long list of grievances and reads like a declaration that it is about to pull out of the entire peace process. Significantly, the document is written in the name of the "de facto State of Tamil Eelam" that exercises "jurisdiction over 70 percent of the Tamil Homeland" and has its own laws, independent judiciary, police force and full administrative apparatus". In concluding, it reaffirms "its policy of finding a solution to the Tamil national question based on the realisation of its right to self-determination".

The LTTE agreed to the ceasefire in 2002, out of concern that it would be included by the Bush administration in its "war on terrorism". In the first round of peace talks with the United National Party (UNP) government, the LTTE renounced its longstanding demand for a separate statelet of Tamil Eelam and indicated its willingness to reach a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo that would transform the North and East into a "tiger economy"—a cheap labour platform for foreign investors.

The US and other powers backed the so-called peace process not out of concern for the Sri Lankan people but because the 20-year conflict threatened to destabilise a region that was increasingly important economically and strategically. Having failed to achieve its ends through a peace deal, the Bush administration has adopted a more aggressive stand, seeking to isolate the LTTE

internationally and threatening to assist the Sri Lankan military if there is a return to war.

Four years after the ceasefire was signed, the LTTE finds itself declared a "terrorist" organisation and without any serious government offer of a devolution package. It is hardly surprising that the LTTE is cautiously reaffirming its demand for Tamil Eelam and in the face of repeated military provocations, preparing for war. Asked by the *Sunday Times* if it was preparing to withdraw from the ceasefire, spokesman Daya Master said on Saturday that the LTTE was "awaiting the response of Norway" to its demand for the removal of EU personnel from the SLMM. He described the Oslo Communiqué as the last opportunity that the LTTE was giving Rajapakse to address vital issues.

The Sri Lankan government is clearly preparing for all-out war. According to a recent report in *Jane's Defense Weekly*, Sri Lanka has urged that \$60 million worth of military supplies on order from Pakistan be given "utmost priority". These include repairs to battle tanks, anti-tank guided missile systems and tandem warheads. Last month, the government imposed an embargo on the provision of fuel and construction materials such as cement and steel to the North, in violation of the ceasefire. Just prior to Oslo talks, Rajapakse ordered "adequate" fuel to be sent after the issue threatened to become contentious.

Rajapakse is yet to reply to Norway's letter, but already there are indications that it may object to the questions, thus precipitating an end to the SLMM and Norway's involvement as a facilitator. Government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told the *Daily Mirror* the president was preparing to point out "a glaring error" in the letter that gave parity of status to the government and a terrorist organisation. The logic of this argument, however, is that the government itself should not be negotiating with a "terrorist" organisation—with all the obvious implications that involves.

The fact that Sri Lanka once again confronts the return to a war that has already claimed at least 65,000 lives is an indictment, not only of the Rajapakse government, but the entire ruling elite. Since independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan ruling class has relied on whipping up anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working class and provide a social base for its political parties, eventually leading to the outbreak of war in 1983. Organically incapable of addressing the social needs and democratic aspirations of working people, it is once again preparing to plunge the island back into a fratricidal war that will bring nothing but further death and destruction.



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