

Under the guise of peace, Sri Lankan government accelerates drive to civil war

Wije Dias

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Amid the descent into all-out civil war, the Sri Lankan government, via its peace secretariat (SCOPP), issued a thoroughly cynical statement on June 18, which has been trumpeted in the international press as a “call for peace talks”. It could be more aptly described as a declaration of war on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The statement denounces the LTTE’s “intransigence” for the breakdown of peace talks, condemns its reliance on “violence and terrorism to achieve its political goals” and, without providing any evidence, blames the LTTE for the killing of 64 Sinhalese villagers in a mine blast near the town of Kebitigollewa on June 15.

The atrocity at Kebitigollewa is the starting point for a tirade against the LTTE, which the SCOPP attacks as “an eternal killing machine that kills innocent civilians without rhyme or reason... It appears that the LTTE has decided to exit from the peace process and its strategy appears to be one that aims at an ethnic backlash as a justification for opting out of the peace process. The LTTE can rest assured that the GoSL [Government of Sri Lanka] will not let that happen.”

SCOPP’s concluding appeal for the LTTE to reenter “peace talks” and “to commit itself to an inclusive peace process” is nothing but window-dressing. If one regards the LTTE as an eternal, irrational killing machine then why would one sit down with it at the negotiating table? The logical conclusion would be that the LTTE had to be crushed militarily, which is precisely what the Colombo government is preparing and its Sinhala chauvinist allies—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—are openly advocating.

Even the manner in which the talks are proposed—“an inclusive peace process”—is aimed at undermining negotiations that were opened in 2002 by the former United National Party (UNP)-led government. The LTTE has always insisted—as the self-proclaimed “sole representative of the Tamil people”—on excluding other parties or groups. It opposed UNP efforts to include a separate Muslim delegation at the negotiating table.

As it pushes the island back to war, the present United Peoples Freedom Party (UPFA) government’s posturing as an advocate of peace and restraint serves several purposes. Firstly, it is designed to keep the major powers on side. Secondly, it is aimed at deluding the Sri Lankan people, the vast majority of whom are opposed to any return to the 20-year war that has already claimed 65,000 lives.

At the same time, by denouncing the “terrorist” LTTE as the aggressor, the “peace secretariat” is deliberately inflaming communal tensions and cultivating the political climate for exactly what it accuses the LTTE of—“an ethnic backlash”. It is a polite term for unleashing a vicious anti-Tamil pogrom—one of the trademarks of the Sri Lankan political establishment over the past half-century.

World Socialist Web Site holds no political brief for the LTTE. Its bankrupt perspective of establishing a separate capitalist statelet of Tamil Eelam has led the island’s Tamil minority into a deadly trap. Its reactionary communalism, including violent attacks on innocent Sinhalese civilians, has directly assisted successive Colombo governments to drive a wedge between working people and to block the struggle for a unified political offensive on the basis of a socialist program.

But the political responsibility for plunging the country back to war rests with President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government. Since winning office last November, with the backing of the JVP and JHU, Rajapakse has given the green light for an escalation of provocative attacks on the LTTE and its supporters. The military denies colluding with various anti-LTTE militias in this covert war, but even the latest Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) cites mounting evidence to the contrary.

Rajapakse’s allies, the JVP and JHU, have repeatedly denounced the peace process, provocatively demanding a fundamental revision of the 2002 ceasefire to undermine the LTTE. Talks in Geneva in February nearly broke down, when government negotiators called for changes to the ceasefire. Of course, the “peace secretariat” has nothing to say about the role of the JVP and JHU in whipping up communal hatreds. Nor does it criticise the military and associated paramilitaries for their part in the shadowy conflict in the North and East that has cost hundreds of lives since November.

As for the Kebitigollewa killings, it is by no means certain that the LTTE is responsible. It is quite possible that the JVP, JHU or sections of the military organised this atrocity to achieve their political goals. Certainly in the wake of the murders, the clamour for war from the Sinhala extremists has become deafening and the armed forces have seized on the incident to launch a series of air and artillery attacks on LTTE positions. Over the past week, the slide toward open warfare has been accelerating, with attacks and counterattacks virtually daily.

The most cynical aspect of the SCOPP statement is the section that declares: “It [the government] seeks to engage the LTTE in talks so as to address the root causes of the conflict that may have contributed it to take to arms and the path of terrorism. Paradoxically, the LTTE had never in any negotiations with the Government of Sri Lanka agreed to address and redress the root causes of the conflict.”

The root causes of the war lie in the anti-Tamil discrimination that has been entrenched in the Sri Lankan state since its inception in 1948. Colombo governments have repeatedly whipped up and exploited anti-Tamil racism as the means to divide the working class and shore up their own social base. The Rajapakse government has no intention of ending the systematic discrimination against Tamils and

other minorities that is expressed most clearly in the constitutional clauses making Buddhism the country's state religion.

While the government's peace secretariat speaks of addressing root causes, its security forces are engaged in the systematic harassment, intimidation and repression of Tamils. Over the past six months, the military has reestablished roadblocks, arbitrary checking of individuals, and the wholesale roundups known as "cordon and search operations". The latest allegations of violence come from locals in the village of Pesalai, who accused naval personnel last week of lobbing a grenade into a church where they were sheltering, killing a woman and injuring 40 others. Bishop Rajappu Joseph has written to the Vatican protesting over the "innocent blood shed by unjust aggressors, the Sri Lankan Navy".

Throughout the four years since the signing of the ceasefire in 2002, successive Colombo governments have never addressed the issue of a power-sharing arrangement, let alone the "root causes" of the conflict. In the first round of talks, the LTTE formally abandoned its demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam and declared its willingness to help transform the island into a "tiger economy"—that is, a cheap labour platform for foreign investors. But, from the outset, the UNP-led government confronted a hostile military and chauvinist opposition from the JVP, which regarded the ceasefire as a "betrayal" of the nation.

In league with President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the military was involved in one provocation after another to try to scuttle the talks. Under Rear Admiral Daya Sandagiri, appointed recently as Deputy Secretary of the Defence Ministry, the navy sank several LTTE vessels on the high seas and played a major role in prompting the LTTE to walk out of negotiations in April 2003.

Significantly, it was the LTTE that submitted a set of proposals for an Interim Self Governing Authority for the North and East in late October 2003 as the basis for the resumption of talks. Within days, amid an outpouring of denunciations from the JVP and agitation by the military top brass, President Kumaratunga arbitrarily seized control of three key ministries, including defence, and only drew back from imposing a state of emergency and dismissing the government under international pressure.

Kumaratunga finally dismissed the government in February 2004, laying the basis for new elections and the return of a UPFA government that included the JVP. The president came under considerable international pressure, particularly in the wake of the devastation caused by the December 2004 tsunami, to resume peace talks. But even the efforts to establish a temporary joint mechanism with the LTTE to distribute aid produced a rupture with the JVP and left the government in a parliamentary minority. Prior to last November's presidential election, Rajapakse patched up a coalition at the price of agreeing to the JVP's demand for an aggressive stance against the LTTE.

One other key factor is responsible for the renewed conflict in Sri Lanka—a discernable shift in the stance of the Bush administration. The US backed the ceasefire in 2002 and peace talks not out of any concern for the plight of the Sri Lankan people, but as a means for ending a conflict that threatens to destabilise South Asia, where Washington has growing strategic and economic interests, particularly in India. By branding the LTTE as a "terrorist organisation," the US has made clear that it was always willing to back the military option, if the peace tactic failed.

Since Rajapakse has come to power, the statements of US officials have become far more menacing against the LTTE. The former US

ambassador to Sri Lanka Jeffrey Lunstead warned in January that if the LTTE did not agree to peace talks on Colombo's terms and war recommenced, "they will face a stronger, more capable and more determined Sri Lankan military". The comments are an unmistakable threat of US military aid to help bolster the Sri Lankan armed forces.

Washington has been behind diplomatic efforts to isolate the LTTE internationally. Under US pressure, the European Union recently banned the LTTE as a "terrorist organisation," putting another nail in the coffin of the so-called peace process. Not surprisingly, the LTTE responded by insisting that SLMM ceasefire monitors from the EU be replaced by personnel from the non-EU countries involved—Norway and Iceland. Following the Kebitigollewa killings, the US immediately blamed the LTTE, despite the lack of any evidence.

The US stance has only encouraged the Rajapakse government and its chauvinist allies to accelerate the drive toward war. In a statement to parliament yesterday, JVP leader Wimal Weerawansa rabidly denounced the LTTE, calling for it to be banned, for the de-merger of the northern and eastern provinces and for an immediate military campaign "to liberate the east from the tigers". The JVP is critical of the military's current "limited" retaliation and calls for "an all-out offensive" against the LTTE, declaring that "terrorism is unlimited".

The rest of the political establishment in Colombo is rapidly falling into line. The UNP, which has in the past advocated the peace process, has jumped on the bandwagon for war, sending its MPs out to villages to drum up support for the war effort. The *Daily Mirror*, which has previously pushed for peace talks, issued an editorial on June 15 calling for "national unity" and urging the UNP to drop any criticism of the government that "would assist all those who are suspected to be conspiring to destabilise and divide the country".

The statement issued by the "peace secretariat" is simply part of this frenzied preparation for war.



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