

Sri Lankan president postures as a peacemaker

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As the country descends into civil war, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse appeared on Tuesday on an Indian television channel, NDTV, absurdly posturing as a peacemaker. His comments, which were given wide coverage in the Colombo media, are designed to obscure his government's preparations for war and to garner international support, particularly from neighbouring India.

Since coming to power last November, Rajapakse has presided over an escalating conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and military and pro-government paramilitaries. He undermined peace talks in February in Geneva by bowing to the demands of his Sinhala extremist allies to place the revision of the 2002 ceasefire on the negotiating table. Since then the provocative killing of LTTE cadre and supporters has led to intensified and increasingly open violence, stalling any further negotiations.

During the NDTV interview, Rajapakse again baldly denied that the military was cooperating with the Karuna group and other anti-LTTE militia. "No faction of the LTTE or Karuna or anyone else can come into [military] controlled areas with weapons," he declared.

This lie is becoming increasingly threadbare as the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) and other bodies have gathered evidence of open collusion between the armed forces and several paramilitaries in the murder of LTTE supporters. The Karuna group operates a political office in the East with military protection and the militia of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), which belongs to the ruling coalition, is implicated in killings near Kayts Island.

The NDTV interviewer pointedly asked: "[T]here is a certain amount of scepticism in the international community that neither side [the government and the LTTE] has a clear conception of how to go beyond stated positions. Do you have a roadmap or even a blueprint?"

Rajapakse answered with another lie. Notwithstanding the fact that his negotiating team blocked any meaningful discussion during the February talks, he readily declared: "Yes, certainly. We have appointed a committee of experts."

He proceeded to explain that "Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim representatives, intellectuals, lawyers, even government servants" were involved in drafting a solution to the 20-year civil war, involving a limited devolution of political powers.

Any examination of this "roadmap" quickly reveals that it is a political fraud. This committee was established following an all-party conference called by Rajapakse in Colombo on June 2. The conference in turn came just two days after a meeting of the Co-Chairs of the Sri Lankan donors group—the US, the European Union, Japan and Norway—which oversee the so-called peace process. The Co-Chairs had been critical of both the government and the LTTE and called for an end to violence and talks.

The committee and the "roadmap" are nothing more than a cosmetic move to keep the Co-Chairs on side, even as the government refuses to make any compromises with the LTTE. To head the committee, Rajapakse has appointed prominent lawyer H.L. de Silva, who is notorious for his hard-line hostility to the LTTE. A related advisory body includes representatives of most parliamentary parties, including Rajapakse's Sinhala chauvinist allies—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). On Thursday, the JVP described the attempt to draw up a devolution plan as "meaningless" and "frivolous" and called on Rajapakse to abandon the proposal.

The most ridiculous aspect of Rajapakse's interview was his appeal to the LTTE to make their own proposals. Posing as the magnanimous president, he declared: "I didn't want to give them something and tell them now to eat it or push them into a tight corner and say you have to accept it.... Let the LTTE also come and participate in the whole process."

The problem in the past, the president said, was that the LTTE had refused to support any of the devolution proposals. He specifically referred to the establishment of provincial councils under the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord in 1987 and to former president Chandrika Kumaratunga's plans for constitutional change in 2000.

Every point is false.

The Indo-Lanka Accord was a deal signed by the United

National Party to bring an Indian peacekeeping force into northern and eastern Sri Lanka to disarm the LTTE and suppress any opposition from the Tamil minority. The offer of provincial councils was the bait offered to the LTTE, which initially accepted the deal and only subsequently came into conflict with the Indian military. Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) joined with the JVP as vehemently opposed to the accord: as a betrayal of the nation. The JVP launched a vicious communal campaign against the Accord and unleashed its fascistic thugs on political opponents, killing hundreds.

In 2000, after the LTTE inflicted a series of devastating defeats on the military, Kumaratunga sought to establish the basis for peace talks by proposing constitutional changes that would allow some concessions to the Tamil minority. The JVP once again opposed the proposal, condemning it as a plan to concede the LTTE's demand for a separate statelet. Under the pressure of the JVP's chauvinist campaign, the UNP dropped its support for the constitution and, within the SLFP, Rajapakse headed an opposition that sought to undermine the proposal. Neither of the proposals, in 1987 or 2000, addressed the systematic anti-Tamil discrimination that finds its expression within the country's communal constitution.

As for Rajapakse's appeal for the LTTE to make its own proposals, the only plan on the table is one for an interim administration in the North and East. The LTTE submitted the proposal in late 2003 as the basis for resumed talks that would eventually lead to a power-sharing deal to end the war. Urged on by the JVP and the military, Kumaratunga responded, just days later, by sacking three key UNP ministers and moving toward imposing a state of emergency. Three months later, she tossed out the entire government then forged an electoral alliance with the JVP to win the April 2004 election. The LTTE's proposal for an interim administration has never been discussed.

While Rajapakse claims that he is not trying to back the LTTE into a corner and provoke a war, that has been his strategy since winning office in November. Pushed on by the JHU and JVP, on which his minority government depends for parliamentary support, he pressed for a renegotiation of the 2002 ceasefire and has been increasingly critical of Norway, which is the formal facilitator of the peace process. He has pointedly insisted that any devolution take place within "unitary" rather than a "federal" state, cutting directly across the previous basis for peace talks and ensuring any LTTE administration in the North and East would have very limited powers.

Rajapakse's NDTV interview took place amid a two-day visit by Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran. While appealing for a continuation of the ceasefire and renewed

talks, Saran also indicated that India would provide military aid to Colombo, saying its "security cooperation is aimed at building the deterrent capacity of the Sri Lanka security forces." New Delhi's military support threatens to trigger opposition, particularly in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu where political parties have called on the Indian government to intervene to prevent war. So the Sri Lankan president appeared on Indian TV to offer some soothing lies and empty promises.

In reality, the government and the military are accelerating their preparations for war. Following the killing of Lieutenant General Parami Kulatunga on June 26, the military has reimposed pre-ceasefire restrictions including check points, the checking of identity papers and the inspection of all goods coming into government-controlled areas or going into LTTE-held territory.

An article in the *Sunday Times* last weekend explained: "[W]ith the threat of a full-scale war looming large, hurried preparations have to be made. New military procurements are rushed through, hurried battle plans formulated to meet attacks and security preparations enhanced for villages bordering guerrilla-dominated areas. Security forces were under government orders this week not to refer to them as 'border villages' but only as 'threatened villages'. Roads are closed and checkpoints have been established in various parts of the country."

Preparations have also included registering all persons in Colombo for security purposes. Colombo Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of police, Pujitha Jayasundara announced last week that as a result of the "terrorist threat", these details were necessary and would be centralised at the presidential secretariat. He indicated that the same measures would be enforced in other areas.

Under the banner of peace, Rajapakse is plunging the country toward war.



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