

LTTE expresses “regret” over killing of Indian prime minister

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In an interview on the Indian TV channel NDTV on June 27, Anton Balasingham, the chief negotiator for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), made the first public acknowledgement that his organisation was responsible for the assassination of former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. With Sri Lanka once again descending into civil war, his oblique expression of regret is a rather desperate attempt to break the LTTE's international isolation.

Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a female suicide bomber in May 1991, while campaigning in the southern state of Tamil Nadu during national elections. Suicide bombing has long been the LTTE's trademark. While the LTTE leadership never took responsibility, the assassination was widely considered to be retaliation for Gandhi's “betrayal” when Indian troops sent to Sri Lanka as peace-keepers under the 1987 Indo-Lankan Accord set about forcibly suppressing the LTTE.

In his comments, Balasingham said the assassination was a “great tragedy, a monumental historical tragedy,” which LTTE leaders “deeply regret”. He appealed to the Indian government “to be magnanimous [and] to put the past behind” and to put the killing in “the political and historical context of the time, involving the military intervention of India and a war between the Indian Peace Keeping Force and the LTTE.”

While Balasingham failed to mention it, the LTTE had initially agreed with the Indo-Lankan Accord and the dispatch of Indian troops, thinking New Delhi was sympathetic to the LTTE's aspirations for a separate state of Tamil Eelam. India had covertly supported armed Tamil groups in Sri Lanka, as a means of putting pressure on the Colombo government of President J.R. Jayawardene. In the context of the Cold War, New Delhi had close relations with the Soviet Union, while Jayawardene was a close US ally.

The Indian government was not, however, about to sanction a separate Tamil statelet in Sri Lanka, which would only fuel Tamil nationalist sentiment in southern India. Bitter fighting soon broke out as the Indian “peacekeepers” sought to disarm the LTTE as part of the pact with the Jayawardene government. As Balasingham rather mildly explained: “We were not very happy with the political solution proposed by India because it did not satisfy the political aspirations of our people.”

The Indian peacekeepers were eventually compelled to leave as the Colombo government manoeuvred under pressure from a Sinhala extremist campaign by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) against the “Indian imperialism” intervention. Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa eventually unleashed the armed forces, not just against the JVP, but to suppress widespread discontent among unemployed Sinhala youth. An estimated 60,000 were killed or “disappeared”. Having suppressed a potential rebellion in the south, Premadasa called on India to withdraw its troops and fighting between the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE rapidly reemerged.

The entire episode underscored the political bankruptcy of the LTTE's perspective, which sought the backing of one or other of the major powers for the establishment of a capitalist statelet in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Far from reflecting the aspirations of the Tamil masses for decent living standards and an end to discrimination, the LTTE's program represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, which sought its own state as the means to exploit the working class.

By killing Gandhi, the LTTE was lashing out rather impotently at the Indian ruling class for its failure to back the establishment of Tamil Eelam. The closest that the LTTE has previously come to acknowledging

responsibility for the assassination was during a press conference in 2002 after it signed a ceasefire agreement with the Sri Lankan government. Dodging a direct question, Balasingham and LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran simply described the murder as a tragedy and a thing in the past.

The 2002 ceasefire, however, proved to be another political deadend. The LTTE formally abandoned its demand for a separate Tamil Eelam and announced its willingness to enter a power-sharing arrangement with the government. Negotiations, however, collapsed in 2003 without ever discussing a deal to end the protracted civil war. Thoroughly mired in communal politics, Colombo governments bowed to the campaigns of chauvinist parties such as the JVP that regard any concession to the LTTE as a betrayal.

Increasingly the LTTE has been boxed into a corner. Since coming to power last November, President Mahinda Rajapakse, whose government rests on JVP support, has fuelled an escalating conflict between the LTTE and the army with its allied paramilitaries. The LTTE also confronts a campaign by Washington to outlaw it internationally as a “terrorist organisation”. Under US pressure, Canada and the European Union recently banned the LTTE, effectively cutting off funds and political support from the Tamil exile community in Europe.

Balasingham’s expression of regret over Gandhi’s assassination is an obvious attempt to open up diplomatic channels to India. After the murder, New Delhi branded the LTTE as a “terrorist organisation” and has retained the ban despite previous pleas from the LTTE to lift it. As in 1987, the Indian government has repeatedly made clear its opposition to the formation of a separate Tamil Eelam as part of any political solution to the civil war in Sri Lanka.

In a pathetic display of grovelling, Balasingham took great pains to assure India that the LTTE would never repeat the 1991 experience. “We have made pledges to the Government of India that under no circumstances we will act against the interests of the government of India and that ever since the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, India played a detached role. What we feel is India should actively involve in the peace process.”

Balasingham noted that it would be difficult for India to play a mediating role while it retained a ban on the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. He then appealed to

New Delhi to put pressure on Colombo, saying: “The only role which India can play [now] is diplomatically and politically persuading Sri Lanka and the LTTE to seek a negotiated settlement.”

India’s response amounted to a slap in the face. Minister of State for External Affairs Anand Sharma told the media that accepting Balasingham’s apology “would be tantamount to endorsing the philosophy of terror, violence and political assassination”. Indicating India would make no concessions, he added: “The people of India cannot forgive the dastardly crime committed by the [Tigers].”

India has been quietly strengthening cooperation with the Sri Lankan military. It recently provided two radar systems and increased the number of places available to Sri Lankan military personnel to train in India.

The Sri Lankan government responded to Balasingham’s comments by again denouncing the LTTE. Spokesman Anura Priyadarshana Yapa declared: “Innumerable assassinations and attempted assassinations of Sri Lankan leaders, political personalities, especially those from the Tamil community, plus mass murders of innocent civilians, that are indisputably the work of the LTTE.”

For the purposes of retaining international support, Rajapakse and his ministers put on a display of offering to renew peace talks with the LTTE. Its response to Balasingham’s overture demonstrates once again that far from proposing for genuine negotiations, the Colombo government, with the tacit support of India, the US and other powers, is preparing the plunge the island back to full scale war.



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