

Another bogus peace move by Sri Lanka's president

Wije Dias
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A major speech by Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse has once again made clear that the Sri Lankan government has no intention of advancing real proposals to end the country's long-running civil war.

Addressing the inaugural meeting of an advisory committee of 15 "experts" appointed by him to assist the All Party Conference (APC) in drafting a constitutional reform package, Rajapakse avoided even hinting at any concrete proposals or specific time frame for the deliberations.

The composition of the 15-member body underscores the bogus character of the whole exercise.

The main Tamil party, which acts as a proxy for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and represents the electorates of the north and east of the island, was not even invited to the APC.

Moreover, the initial "advisory committee of experts" of 12, appointed by Rajapakse, included only one Tamil, while H. L. de Silva, a notorious Sinhala chauvinist lawyer, who has argued even against the ceasefire agreement, not to speak of any power sharing arrangement with the LTTE, has been placed at its head. At the last minute an attempt was made to cover up the blatant imbalance of the committee by adding three more Tamils.

The United National Party (UNP), the main opposition party which signed the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE when it held power in 2002, boycotted the meeting amid claims that its MPs were being offered lucrative perks by Rajapakse, including ministerial posts, to induce them to join government ranks.

Amazing as it may seem, Rajapakse did not once mention the word "Tamil" in his address, which lasted for more than three quarters of an hour. The only instance it popped up was when he accused the LTTE

of killing Tamil leaders.

Throughout his speech Rajapakse used the words "national problem" and "all our people" as a cover for his parliamentary alliance with the extreme Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) which vehemently oppose any democratic concessions to the Tamil minority. Both organisations have played a pivotal role in pushing the Rajapakse government in the direction of resuming the civil war during the eight months of his rule.

Echoing the line of his alliance partners, Rajapakse laid the blame for the civil war on the LTTE. "Having suffered much over these two decades of a war imposed on them by the LTTE, we must create a safe, stable and meaningful environment that enables the impoverished in the North and the East to participate in economic activity, which will give them the capacity to progress towards their life ambitions," he declared.

He also used the occasion to present himself as a champion of human rights, insisting that "we cannot ignore the human rights standards sweeping through every corner of the globe". "There is justifiable cause for our insistence on these [human right] issues arising from the wanton killings of Tamil political and other Tamil leaders whose only crime was that they held views contrary to that of the LTTE."

Rajapakse, who has been, an MP since 1970, serving as cabinet minister and prime minister in previous governments, noted that "successive governments have taken initiatives to resolve our national problem without much success, which points to a weakness which we need to overcome.... I regard as my bounden duty to do my best with all sincerity and commitment, however difficult the task is, to strive for peace on behalf of all our people."

The hollow character of these pledges was underscored by Rajapakse's commitment to allocate just \$1.25 billion for the development work in the north and east. This is only a quarter of the funds committed by the donor countries as a peace dividend at the Tokyo conference held in 2003. When considered in the light of the destruction faced by the people in the war ravaged north and east, coupled with the devastation caused by the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, which hit the east coast the hardest, Rajapakse's allocation of funds is nothing more than an insult to the people of that region.

However the president was keen to talk up the profit-making opportunities which would be available if ever a settlement is reached. "Rapid development is quite achievable within a short time given the international community's desire to engage in the reconstruction effort and the local entrepreneurs' desire to invest in this [north and east] area," he said.



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