

Sri Lankan government rejects unconditional peace talks with the LTTE

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The Colombo government's response to the announcement on Tuesday of peace talks by the Co-Chairs of the Sri Lankan donors group makes clear that it is not interested in negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but is intent on waging war.

In a formal statement, the Co-Chairs—the US, European Union, Japan and Norway—which in effect oversee the so-called Sri Lankan peace process, welcomed the willingness of both sides to take part in unconditional talks, called for an immediate end to all violence and called for urgent talks in Oslo at the beginning of October. The statement expressed deep alarm over the “deliberate violations” of the 2002 ceasefire and highlighted a number of atrocities, including the air force bombing of a school in August, which resulted in the deaths of scores of children.

Since being elected last November, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has attempted to portray himself as a “man of peace,” even as the military and its paramilitary allies engaged in violence and murders aimed at undermining and provoking the LTTE. He launched a large-scale military offensive to seize Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate inside LTTE territory in late July for “humanitarian reasons”. As troops launched further offensives to seize LTTE positions in Sampur and on the Jaffna Peninsula, the government insisted its actions were purely “defensive” and Rajapakse reiterated his preparedness to hold peace talks.

Now that talks have been put on the agenda, however, the Rajapakse government has raised a series of objections, caveats and ultimatums designed to ensure that no meeting takes place. At a press conference on Tuesday after the Co-Chair's announcement, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella immediately ruled out any “unconditional talks” and accused Norwegian facilitators of misleading the international community.

What Rajapakse had told Norwegian envoy Erik Solheim, Rambukwella said, was that the government was prepared to talk “unconditionally,” but the military would continue to take steps to “neutralise” the threat posed by the LTTE's guns to the Palaly military complex and air base. He also

objected to the suggested meeting, declaring that Solheim had no right to decide the date and venue of talks because “Sri Lanka is a sovereign country”.

On Wednesday, the government's peace secretariat issued a formal response, adding further obstructions. Having already emphasised that the government retained the right to take military action, the statement demanded “a clear commitment by the LTTE leader to a comprehensive and verifiable cessation of hostilities”. In other words, while the army would continue its “defensive” actions, the LTTE should be bound by a written LTTE guarantee not to respond.

The misnamed peace secretariat also specified that any talks should not be on an equal footing. “It is important to note,” it declared, “that the peace process in Sri Lanka is conducted between a democratically elected government of a sovereign state and an armed group practicing terrorism.” The caveat effectively undermines the basis of the peace process agreed after the 2002 ceasefire was signed.

The statement called on the “international community to put in place a practical mechanism to prevent the illegal procurement of arms and an effective blockade to the induction of weapons by the LTTE”. The government, of course, would not be required to halt its arms purchases and military build-up.

The peace secretariat expressed “deep regrets” over the “factual inaccuracies” in the statement of the Co-Chairs “such as the alleged bombing of a school in Mullaitivu, which is grossly misleading.” Both UNICEF and the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) visited the site of the August 14 bombing and confirmed that the victims had been school children, not “child soldiers” as the government claimed.

The government is well aware that any agreement to such terms would constitute a major backdown on the part of the LTTE, which has insisted that the government abide by the terms of the 2002 ceasefire and withdraw from territory seized over the past two months. The belligerent tone of the peace secretariat's statement reflects the clamour for war

that continues in ruling circles in Colombo.

On the same day that the peace secretariat issued its statement, President Rajapakse pointedly met with the leaders of the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) for “informal talks” about the current security situation. A photograph of Rajapakse smiling and hugging JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe was featured in the Colombo press. In current negotiations over a formal alliance with Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the JVP has issued a series of demands that are tantamount to the declaration of war, including the immediate abrogation of the 2002 ceasefire.

In a public tirade against the Co-Chairs statement on Wednesday, JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa blurted out the real content of the government’s response. He urged the government “not to stop the ongoing military onslaught on the Tigers” and “not to have any talks with the LTTE until the Tigers laid down their arms”. In other words, nothing is acceptable short of the LTTE’s complete surrender.

Weerawansa denounced the Co-Chairs for stepping in to save the LTTE. “Whenever the Tigers are in trouble these people who call themselves the international community come to their rescue,” he declared and then criticised the Co-Chairs for failing to consult the government over the time and place of any meeting. “They have no right to poke their fingers into our country,” Weerawansa said.

Weerawansa’s remarks indicate the thinking in government and military circles. The army’s initial small successes in seizing LTTE territory are once again encouraging the illusion that the country’s protracted and bloody civil war can be ended through military means. What the government wants from the international community is not peace talks, but assistance in destroying the LTTE’s military capacities and imposing unequivocal government rule on the Tamil minority through the North and East of the island.

Rajapakse does not openly voice the JVP’s sentiments for two reasons. First, the president is well aware that there are widespread fears and popular opposition to the return to a war that has already cost at least 65,000 lives over the past two decades. Second, despite the public accusations of bias against the Co-Chairs, Rajapakse knows that his government requires the political support of the major powers, the US in particular.

For all their attempts to posture as even-handed, the Co-Chairs have over the past 10 months swung behind the Rajapakse, despite his increasingly open resort to war. While condemning the LTTE for its violence, the major powers praised the government for “showing restraint”. The Bush administration in particular has carried out a diplomatic

campaign to choke off the LTTE’s sources of financial and political support among the Tamil diaspora around the world, pushing Canada and then the European Union to place bans on the LTTE as a “terrorist organisation”.

The statement of the Co-Chairs on Tuesday once again put the onus on the LTTE, demanding that it “renounce terrorism and violence” and “show that it is willing to make the compromises needed for a political solution within a united Sri Lanka”. It had nothing to say about the Rajapakse’s open breaches of the ceasefire in seizing LTTE territory at Mavilaru, Sampur and the LTTE forward defence lines at Muhamalai on the Jaffna Peninsula. It is becoming increasingly evident that the army’s aim is to seize back Elephant Pass—the strategic gateway to Jaffna—which it lost for the first time in 2000.

The US-based thinktank Stratfor was in no doubt about the government’s strategy. After referring to operations against the LTTE in the east, its article entitled “Stalling for Time in Sri Lanka” stated: “The Sri Lankan government smells blood, and is now attempting to seize positions that will allow it to secure all the transportation links into Jaffna that are currently in Tiger claws, such as the Elephant Pass and the town of Muhamalai, and drive the rebels farther into their traditional base in northern Sri Lanka.”

The LTTE’s response has once again revealed its political impotence and bankruptcy. LTTE political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan warned of the dangers of war and appealed to the “international community to ensure the Rajapakse government adhere to the territorial demarcations, terms and conditions of the CFA [2002 ceasefire agreement] and thereby creates a conducive atmosphere for talks.” Its perspective in peace talks all along has been for a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil ruling elites to transform the north and east of the island into a cheap labour platform for foreign investors.

The Rajapakse government, however, with the tacit backing of the major powers, has effectively torn up the peace process and is intent on plunging the island back into a communalist war to ensure the supremacy of the Sinhala bourgeoisie over the Sri Lankan state.



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