

Sri Lankan peace talks collapse amid intensifying civil war

K. Ratnayake
31 October 2006

Talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Geneva last weekend broke up without agreement on any issue, including the convening of another round. The collapse of talks will inevitably lead to a further expansion of a war that has already cost thousands of lives this year.

Just hours after talks ended, fierce artillery exchanges erupted between the army and the LTTE on the northern Jaffna peninsula at Muhamalai and Nagarkovil. Even as the negotiations were taking place in Geneva, army chief Sarath Fonseka visited Jaffna to meet local military commanders and discuss “the security situation”.

President Mahinda Rajapakse only agreed to send a delegation to Geneva “without conditions” to maintain the increasingly flimsy charade that his government wants a negotiated peace. Since July, he has ordered the military onto the offensive, in breach of the 2002 ceasefire, and seized LTTE-held territory in Mavilaru and Sampur in the East, and parts of Muhamalai district on the Jaffna peninsula.

The government has no intention of returning to the 2002 ceasefire, which would mean giving up areas seized from the LTTE. As a result, the prospects for any, even limited, agreement in Geneva were bleak from the outset.

Sunday Times defence correspondent Iqbal Athas noted last weekend: “[T]here were powerful groups in Colombo who wanted the security forces to continue offensives until the military capability of the guerillas was weakened.” Athas has close ties to the Sri Lankan military and intelligence establishment.

There was no agreement on an agenda for the two-day talks. Norway’s international development minister Eric Solheim attempted to pressure both sides, warning that if talks failed the government would lose aid money and the LTTE would become even more isolated internationally. But the threats were to no avail.

Press reports indicated that the closed-door sessions

involved rancorous exchanges. According to the *Daily Mirror*, chief LTTE negotiator S.P. Thamilchelvan said the LTTE was willing to “forget the past” and did not raise the return of Sampur and other areas. The LTTE’s main demand was the reopening of the A-9 highway running through LTTE territory to Jaffna, in order to allow food and other supplies to reach people cut off in areas of the North.

However, the government delegation rejected the demand, offering only to ferry goods by sea. Chief negotiator Nimal Sirapala de Silva provocatively called on the LTTE to “normalise” the North and East by allowing the functioning of government courts, police and all political parties in areas under their control. Such a move would further undermine the LTTE’s military position and open the door for provocations inside its territory by the government and military.

The talks eventually broke down on the issue of the A-9 road. De Silva insisted that the highway remain closed for “security reasons” and accused the LTTE of previously extracting extortionate taxes on vehicles passing through its territory. He turned down an offer by the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) to supervise the route to allow humanitarian supplies to reach Jaffna.

In its press statement, the LTTE insisted the A-9 had to be re-opened before any new round of talks. “The closure of the A-9 highway has resulted in open prison for more than 600,000 people in the Jaffna peninsula” under army occupation, it declared, branding the blockade as a new “Berlin Wall”.

In concluding the talks, Solheim declared: “Both parties reiterated their commitment to the ceasefire agreement and promised not to launch any military offensives.” But the government and the military have repeatedly demonstrated their intention of flouting the truce, seizing LTTE territory under various “humanitarian” and “defensive” pretexts.

The government's main reason for refusing to reopen the A-9 highway is that its closure allows the army to keep the pressure on the LTTE. The military wants to mount an offensive to recapture key strategic areas along the road. These include Elephant Pass, the gateway to the Jaffna peninsula, which the army lost for the first time in 2000.

The military launched a major operation on October 11 against LTTE positions at Muhamalai north of Elephant Pass, but was beaten back. Claims that the attack was "defensive" were soon shown to be a lie after the LTTE handed back the bodies of 75 soldiers who died inside its territory. In all, around 130 soldiers were killed and more than 500 wounded in the fierce fighting.

The LTTE responded with a suicide bomb blast on October 16 that killed at least 116 sailors near the town of Habarana and an attack on the navy complex in the southern port of Galle on October 25. Following the breakdown of talks, the LTTE has warned that the military is preparing for another offensive on the Jaffna peninsula.

Rajapakse has been careful to disguise his government's aggressive military policies for two reasons. Firstly, the overwhelming majority of the population does not want a return to civil war, which has cost tens of thousands of lives since 1983. Secondly, the president is making sure he retains the backing of the major international powers to press the LTTE to the negotiating table on his terms.

Rajapakse narrowly won the presidency last November with the backing of two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). His Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) held protracted talks with JVP leaders to establish a formal coalition, but negotiations broke down after the JVP insisted that the government had to abrogate the 2002 ceasefire and dispense with the services of Norway as formal facilitator of the international "peace process".

Last week the SLFP signed an agreement with the opposition United National Party (UNP), establishing a grand coalition of the longtime rivals for the first time. In office in 2002, the UNP signed the ceasefire with the LTTE and attempted to negotiate a power-sharing deal to end the war, but talks were constantly destabilised by the SLFP, the JVP and the military. The SLFP-UNP coalition is being packaged as a "consensus" to end the war, but the agreement gives full rein to the military to continue its operations.

Both parties are acutely sensitive to the JVP's

accusations that they are betraying the country. During the Geneva talks, the JVP organised an extensive "meet the people" program to denounce any negotiations. The party condemned the SLFP-UNP coalition as "paving way for the negotiating table which is advantageous to the Tiger terrorists and dilutes the limited war moves to defeat Tiger terrorism". The JVP is demanding nothing less than a full-scale offensive to destroy the LTTE.

The collapse of the Geneva talks has again exposed the LTTE's political perspective, which aims at getting the backing of the major powers for a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo. Its main appeal at Geneva was to the Co-Chairs and the "international community" to pressure the Sri Lankan government to abide by the 2002 ceasefire. The Co-Chairs—the US, the EU, Japan and Norway—preside over the international donors' group for Sri Lanka and the so-called peace process.

The global powers, however, are only interested in peace in Sri Lanka as a means of furthering their own interests in South Asia. The US in particular is intent on pressuring the LTTE to disarm and accept a minimal political role. US officials have hinted that Washington may supply military assistance to Colombo. On the eve of negotiations, the US and Sri Lanka militaries were due for the first time to hold a joint amphibious exercise, which was only postponed at the last minute.

The Co-chairs posture as being even-handed and neutral, but no criticisms have been made of the Sri Lankan military's provocative actions and obvious encroachments into LTTE territory. During a visit to Colombo on October 19-20, US assistant secretary of state department Richard Boucher bluntly declared that the US supports the peace talks but, at the same time "stands with the government and the people of Sri Lanka in resisting terrorism".

Along with the Rajapakse government, the US and other major powers bear political responsibility for the escalating civil war in Sri Lanka.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact