

# Despite talk of peace, Sri Lankan military continues offensive

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The Sri Lankan government tentatively agreed yesterday to hold “unconditional” talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on October 28-30, but ruled out any cessation of attacks on rebel positions. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella warned that the government would “respond appropriately” if the LTTE threatened “national security”.

The talks have been brokered by Norwegian envoy Jon Hanssen Bauer, who arrived in Colombo on Sunday. He held discussions with the chief government negotiator Nimal Siripala de Silva and other ministers on Monday before travelling to Kilinochchi on Tuesday for talks with LTTE leaders. LTTE spokesman Daya Master said the LTTE had agreed to talks but would pull out if the army continued to attack its positions.

According to the pro-LTTE *Tamilnet* website, LTTE political wing leader S.P. Thamilchelvan told Hanssen Bauer: “Colombo is carrying on a unilateral offensive. There is no credible sign of improvement on the Sri Lankan side.” The LTTE also raised concerns about the closure of the main A9 highway, cutting off food and other basic supplies to hundreds of thousands of people in northern Sri Lanka.

As talks between Hanssen Bauer and Thamilchelvan were taking place, military jets pounded LTTE positions at Pooneryn just 30 kilometres away. The military was unapologetic about its actions, claiming it was responding to LTTE mortar and artillery fire. The real purpose of the attacks, however, was to send a message to the LTTE, and Norway, that the military offensive will continue and any talks will be on the government’s terms.

No agreement has been reached on where the talks will be held, let alone their substance. The LTTE has proposed the Norwegian capital, Oslo, whereas the

government is pressing for Geneva. The dispute is not a trivial one. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse is under pressure from his allies in the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has repeatedly accused Norway, the formal peace facilitator, of “pro-LTTE bias”.

Hanssen Bauer’s visit followed a call last month by the Co-Chairs of the Sri Lankan donor group—the US, the European Union, Japan and Norway—for an end to military action and negotiations. The Rajapakse government immediately condemned Norway for “misleading” the Co-Chairs by saying Colombo had agreed to “unconditional talks” and for failing to consult on the time and venue of any talks.

Government officials have since insisted on a long list of conditions, including a written undertaking from LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran to refrain from any violence. While the government has backed away from specific conditions, its insistence on the right to take “appropriate counter measures” against the LTTE hangs like a pall over the talks. The government has launched all of its offensives to capture to seize LTTE territory since late July under the guise of “defensive” and “humanitarian” actions.

The JVP has intensified its campaign to scuttle any talks and press for war. The JVP, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and other Sinhala chauvinist groups are demanding that the military not halt its offensive, that Norway be removed as facilitator and that the government tear up the ceasefire. The JVP launched a new “Movement for the Defense of the Motherland” with a protest in Colombo yesterday. The relatively small turnout of 5,000 is a sign of widespread opposition to the war.

Commenting on the Sri Lankan military’s thinking, Reuters reported on Monday: “Emboldened by the

capture of strategic rebel territory south of the northeast harbour of Trincomalee, some military officials say they are keen to inflict as many casualties on the Tigers as possible before any talks.” At a press conference on Tuesday, Air Marshall Donald Perera expressed the same idea, warning that the “conflict must be resolved through dialogue but there will be no easing of military action to counter rebel attacks”.

Even as talks have been under discussion, the military has carried out daily attacks on LTTE positions.

\* On September 25, the navy claimed to have sunk 11 LTTE vessels in a naval clash off the eastern coast near Pulmoddai.

\* On September 26, air force jets bombed an alleged training camp for the LTTE’s “Sea Tigers” at Vellankulam in Mannar, destroying the base.

\* On September 27, air force helicopters destroyed an LTTE training base in the Kaddawan jungle near Trincomalee, killing a large number of LTTE cadres, according to a military spokesman.

\* On September 27, air force jets bombed LTTE “transit camps and transit bases” at Puthukudiruppu in Mullaitivu.

\* On September 29, Special Task Force (STF) police commandos attacked Pillumalai in the district of Batticaloa, killing 12 LTTE cadres. Although the military claimed the LTTE fighters were killed while preparing to attack an STF camp, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) found that the clash had taken place a kilometre inside LTTE-held territory. The STF has prevented the SLMM from carrying out inquiries inside their camp, citing “security reasons”.

The SLMM, which formally monitors the 2002 ceasefire, issued a report on September 24 which described the violations on both sides as “shocking.” Since December, at least 1,500 people, including 200 civilians, have died due to military clashes. The report raised concerns about the activities of an LTTE breakaway faction headed by V. Muralitharan, or Karuna, in the eastern town of Batticaloa.

Despite government denials, the Karuna group openly functions as an ally of the military in carrying out abductions and murders. “Karuna cadres are now walking freely around Batticaloa town harassing people and among others an ICRC [International Red Cross] national staff member was threatened at gunpoint by a Karuna cadre about 20 metres away from ICRC office.

This is becoming an increasing problem for the local population,” the report stated.

Defence spokesman Rambukwella slammed the SLMM report for blaming both sides and thus equating the “democratically elected government” and “terrorist LTTE”. In reality, the military and its allies such as the Karuna group have carried out a string of atrocities in their efforts to terrorise the local population. Rambukwella’s comments are symptomatic of the government’s aggressive stance and its intention to press ahead with military operations aimed at seizing LTTE territory and significantly weakening its fighting capacity.

While publicly appealing for peace, the US and other major powers have tacitly encouraged Rajapakse to go on the offensive. The Bush administration warned at the beginning of the year that the LTTE would face “a stronger military” unless it “renounced violence”—that is, unilaterally disarmed—and agreed to talks on the government’s terms. The US pressured Canada and the EU to outlaw the LTTE this year as “a terrorist organisation,” cutting off significant financial and political support from the international Tamil diaspora.

The new US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Robert O. Blake, told a press conference on September 19 that the US was “helping the Sri Lankan military to confront terrorism.” He reiterated the demand that the LTTE “renounce terrorism and violence in word and deed”. It is no surprise that the Rajapakse government is now conducting its own “war on terrorism” with devastating consequences for the Sri Lankan population.



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