

Washington meeting gives green light for Sri Lankan military offensive

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A meeting in Washington on November 21-22 of the so-called Co-chairs of Sri Lankan donors—the US, EU, Japan and Norway—has encouraged the Colombo government to step up military operations against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The meeting took place three weeks after talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE failed to even set a date for further negotiations. A joint statement issued by the Co-chairs, which oversee the so-called Sri Lankan peace process, expressed “concern” about continuing military hostilities and appealed for both sides “to use the 2002 ceasefire agreement” to resolve the conflict peacefully.

These professions of concern reek of hypocrisy. The statement did not condemn the government for its flagrant breaches of the ceasefire by launching a series of aggressive military operations since July to seize territory from the LTTE. By choosing the ambiguous term “use”, it carefully avoided calling for a return to the terms of the 2002 ceasefire, which would mean the withdrawal of security forces from captured territory.

In an effort to appear even-handed, the Co-chairs condemned the LTTE for “initiating hostilities from heavily populated areas” and the government for firing into such vulnerable areas, killing and wounding innocent civilians in retaliation. These comments lend credibility to the military’s phony justification for shelling civilian areas by claiming that the LTTE uses civilians as “human shields”.

The Co-chairs also patted the government on the back, welcoming its formation of a commission of inquiry into human rights violations. Hundreds of people, including prominent pro-LTTE politicians, have been murdered or “disappeared” by death squads over the past year in the North and East of the island and Colombo. The commission of inquiry, with

“international experts” as “observers”, is just the latest attempt to whitewash the security forces.

As a sop to the LTTE leadership, the statement appealed to the government to keep open sea and land routes to send essential supplies to the Jaffna peninsula and also to LTTE-controlled areas. At talks in Geneva, LTTE negotiators had called for the opening of the main road route to the northern Jaffna peninsula, where half a million people are stranded. The demand was its only requirement for further talks. The government refused.

The Colombo government was quick to recognise that the Co-chairs statement effectively endorsed its military operations. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella commented that the Co-chairs had placed “no strictures” on the government. “It was rumoured that the Co-chairs were going to come down hard on the government. Nothing of the sort happened. As long as terrorists attack, we will respond,” he said.

Following the Co-chairs meeting, US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns openly endorsed the Sri Lankan government and its military offensives. “We support the government... We believe the government has a right to try to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty, the stability and security in the country. We meet often with the government at the highest levels and consider the government to be a friend to our country,” he said.

Asked about US military assistance to Sri Lanka, Burns said it was “in fact, a very intensive one and we intend to continue that of course”. Denouncing the LTTE as “terrorists”, Burns affirmed US partisan participation in the island’s ongoing civil war, declaring: “United States Government is not neutral... We are working with Sri Lanka as a partner in counter-terrorism as well as counter-proliferation.”

US support for the Colombo government has been a key factor in Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's escalating war against the LTTE over the past year. The Bush administration pressed Canada and the EU to declare the LTTE to be a "terrorist organisation" and impose bans on any political or financial support. At the same time, as Burns's comments indicate, the Pentagon has been establishing close relations with the Sri Lankan military, providing training and advice.

Sri Lankan spokesman Rambukwella welcomed Burns's comments as "an immense encouragement" to the government. The actions of the Sri Lankan military speak for themselves. The road blockade of Jaffna peninsula is still in force, offensive military operations continue against the LTTE and there has been no let up in the abduction and killing of civilians.

In the East, security forces are concentrating on the LTTE-held areas of Kathirveli, Vaharai and Mankerni in the Batticaloa district. The area is located south of Sampur, which was captured from the LTTE in August and is part of the military's strategy to drive the LTTE out of the eastern province altogether. Some 30,000 refugees have fled to Vaharai, which has been subjected to aerial bombing and artillery attacks.

A clash took place at Vaharai on November 23, with both sides accusing the other of initiating the encounter. Other attacks in the Batticaloa district have taken place at Kaddamurichikulam, Kirimichchiya and Kadjuwatta. The security forces claimed to have killed 29 LTTE fighters in the clashes but there is no independent verification.

In the North, the military has continued air strikes since November 20 on LTTE-held areas in the Mannar and Mullaitivu districts. A spokesman announced on November 22 that the airforce had hit Sea Tiger (LTTE navy) training camps at Viduthaltivu and Kallar. Another was struck near Mullaitivu. On November 25, war planes bombed what the military claimed was a camp for LTTE suicide bombers at Iranamadu near the LTTE's political headquarters in Kilinochchi.

The Rajapakse government has taken a leaf out of the Bush administration's book of crimes. It justifies its preemptive strikes on LTTE bases and supposed suicide bomber training camps as "defensive" actions. On this basis, any LTTE military installation can be targetted even though such attacks are obvious breaches

of the 2002 ceasefire.

In his annual Heroes Day speech on Monday, LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran stated the obvious—that the ceasefire was "defunct"—and condemned the government for its "unprecedented assaults". "Arrests, imprisonment and torture, rape and sexual harassment, murders, disappearance, shelling, aerial bombing, and military offensives are continuing unchecked," he said. Prabhakaran's appeal to the "international community," however, was directed to the US and other major powers that have effectively sanctioned the renewed war.

Norway peace envoy Jon Hanssen Bauer arrived in Sri Lanka on Wednesday to meet government ministers and to visit the LTTE leaders in Kilinochchi. No one is under any illusion that there will be any return to peace talks. In a speech in Oslo, Bauer's predecessor Erik Solheim declared that Norway would not be involved in any "new peace initiative" but was simply contacting both parties to determine whether or not they wanted to still be involved in the peace process.



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