

Sri Lankan government pulls out of 2002 ceasefire agreement

Wije Dias

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After waging an undeclared civil war for two years, the Sri Lankan government gave notice on January 2 that it would pull out of the 2002 ceasefire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The decision sets the stage for a further escalation of fighting aimed at destroying the LTTE militarily and effectively ends any prospect of peace talks and a negotiated resolution to the 25-year conflict.

The government informed the Norwegian embassy in Colombo of its decision last week. Norway has been the facilitator of the peace process and led the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversaw the ceasefire and is now packing up in preparation for leaving the country. The ceasefire agreement formally ends on January 16, after the required 14-day advance notice runs out.

Fighting has already intensified in northern Sri Lanka. Over the past five days, the military claims to have killed 94 LTTE fighters and lost four soldiers in the districts of Vavuniya, Mannar and Jaffna. One of the dead was said to be the LTTE's intelligence chief Shanmuganathan Ravishankar, also known as Colonel Charles. Yesterday, Sri Lanka's minister of nation building, D.M. Dassanayake, was killed in a bomb blast that struck his car near the capital of Colombo and was probably carried out by the LTTE.

According to the Sri Lankan media, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake made the proposal to annul the ceasefire at a cabinet meeting on January 2. Apart from a reference by Wickremanayake to a bomb blast on the same day, which he immediately blamed on the LTTE, President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government have offered no substantive explanation for the decision. Government spokesman Anura Priyadarshana Yapa simply claimed that the ceasefire was "not practical any more".

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is the president's brother, bluntly blamed the LTTE for the breakdown of the ceasefire, telling the *Sunday Observer* on December 30 that the truce existed only on paper and was "a joke". By the time his brother became president, the defence secretary said, "the CFA was violated 3,000 times and everybody knows that what the LTTE did and they never resorted to peace. What they did was they took advantage of strengthening their military and fire power during the ceasefire period."

In reality, the government's decision to tear up the ceasefire is its response to mounting social and political tensions, which have been compounded by its resort to war over the past two years. Confronted with growing protests and industrial action over deteriorating living standards, President Rajapakse has intensified the conflict against the LTTE and whipped up anti-Tamil sentiment in order to divide working people along communal lines and justify the resort to repressive police-state measures.

The immediate impetus for abrogating the ceasefire was an acute political crisis surrounding Rajapakse's latest budget, which increased defence spending to 167 billion rupees—three times what it had been three years before. The government had faced the prospect of defeat in the final vote on December 14 as members of its own fragile coalition threatened to

defect under the pressure of widespread opposition to the imposition of further economic burdens to pay for the war.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress crossed over to the opposition a few days before the budget vote. Members of Rajapakse's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party were reportedly preparing to jump ship, as indicated by the resignation of Anura Bandaranaike, the son of the SLFP's founding leader. At the same time, the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which supports the government without being part of the ruling coalition, indicated that it would also vote against the budget to shore up its support among the rural poor.

At the last minute, however, the JVP abstained on the vote and allowed the budget to pass after talks with another of the president's brothers—Basil Rajapakse. While the content of that discussion was never made public, the JVP, which was critical of the government not launching all out war to destroy the LTTE, had made a series of four demands. All of them related to escalating the war, rather than ameliorating the impact of the budget. The two most significant—the abrogation of the ceasefire and the expulsion of the SLMM—have now been carried out. Like other Sinhala chauvinist groups, the JVP has been bitterly critical of Norway and the SLMM for its alleged pro-LTTE bias.

The collapse of the truce underscores the inability of any section of the political establishment to end its reactionary war. The ceasefire was signed in February 2002 by the United National Party (UNP)-led coalition of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe after the military suffered major defeats at the hands of the LTTE in 2000 and the economy experienced negative growth in 2001 for the first time in the country's history. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, sections of the ruling elite saw the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" as an ideal opportunity to force the "terrorist" LTTE to the negotiating table on favourable terms. In quick succession, the SLFP-led government collapsed, the UNP and its allies won the general election and the ceasefire was signed as the prelude to peace talks.

The push for a power sharing deal with the LTTE was never motivated by concerns for the impact of the conflict on ordinary working people. Rather the UNP, which had been responsible for launching the war in 1983, represented sections of the corporate elite who then viewed it as an obstacle to attracting foreign investment and integrating the island in the burgeoning economic development in South Asia—India in particular. From the outset, however, the peace talks came into conflict with the political methods of rule on which the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has rested since independence—the resort to anti-Tamil chauvinism. The UNP soon came under fire from the President Chandrika Kumaratunga from the SLFP, the military hierarchy and the JVP for allegedly capitulating to the LTTE in negotiations, "undermining national security" and dividing the nation.

Rajapakse narrowly defeated Wickremesinghe in the November 2005 presidential election by relying on the JVP and another Sinhala extremist party—the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). His election manifesto, entitled

Mahinda Chinthanaya (Mahinda Ideology), incorporated a number of the JVP's demands, including a review of the ceasefire agreement and a bolstering of the military. While claiming to be a man of peace, Rajapakse's provocative program was clearly the preparation for a renewed war against the LTTE.

His government continued to nominally adhere to the ceasefire in order to retain the backing of the major powers overseeing the so-called peace process. Rajapakse was also concerned that a precipitous return to war would provoke popular opposition. At the same time, the military was let off the leash and provocations began almost immediately. On Christmas Eve 2005, prominent pro-LTTE parliamentarian Joseph Pararajasingham was shot dead while attending midnight mass in the eastern town of Batticaloa. In January 2006, five Tamil youth in Trincomalee celebrating their success in the university entrance exam were murdered in cold blood. In both cases, the circumstances strongly suggested involvement of the military and allied Tamil paramilitary groups.

Efforts by the co-chairs of the peace process—the US, European Union, Japan and Norway—to resurrect peace talks quickly floundered. A round of negotiations in Geneva in February 2006 almost collapsed when the LTTE threatened to walk out in response to the government's demand for a rewriting of the ceasefire. Two months later talks in Oslo to review the observance of the ceasefire failed to even get off the ground after the government effectively sabotaged the meeting by not including a single cabinet minister in its delegation. At the same time, the military continued its covert war of provocation aimed at weakening the LTTE, intimidating the Tamil population and goading the LTTE into responding.

Rajapakse was emboldened by the tacit support of the major powers, particularly Washington, which turned a blind eye to the Sri Lankan military's activities, while demanding concessions from the LTTE. Under pressure from the Bush administration, the European Union formally branded the LTTE as a "terrorist organisation" in May 2006, undermining its substantial political and financial base among the Tamil diaspora in Europe.

In late July, the military launched its first open offensive to seize LTTE-held territory in the eastern Mavilaru area. The government seized on a protest by the LTTE, which had shut an irrigation sluice gate over the failure of the government to proceed with a project funded by the Asian Development Bank to provide clean drinking water to local inhabitants. Rajapakse declared that military action was needed to prevent "a humanitarian disaster" for Sinhala farmers whose crops were threatened downstream, but rebuffed the SLMM's efforts to mediate an end to the standoff. In launching its attacks, the military even endangered the lives of SLMM monitors who had reached a deal with the LTTE and were on the spot to open the sluice gate.

The Mavilaru operation was the first of a series of offensives in the East, seizing the areas of Sampur, Vaharai and finally, last July, the remaining LTTE stronghold of Thoppigala. On July 19, the government held a grotesque victory celebration proclaiming the liberation of the East. For the population, however, the "liberation" has only brought death and misery. Since July 2006, more than 5,000 people have been killed and over 250,000 men, women and children have been displaced from their homes and forced to live in squalid refugee camps. The government's real agenda was underscored by its rapid proclamation of a new Free Trade Zone in the East set in a High Security Zone to attract investors.

For the past six months, the military has concentrated on the LTTE's remaining northern strongholds without making any substantial inroads. In the East, the armed forces faced an LTTE that had been debilitated by a major split in its ranks led by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna. Despite government denials, the Karuna group has operated closely with the security forces in attacking the LTTE and is widely believed to have been involved in many of the abductions and murders that have taken place in the East over the past two years.

The end of the ceasefire agreement effectively marks the collapse of the so-called international peace process. Significantly there have been no calls or moves to date either in Sri Lanka or from any of the co-sponsors for a return to the peace table.

The opposition UNP, which signed the ceasefire in 2002, has fallen in behind Rajapakse's renewed war. Following the government's line, UNP national organiser S.B. Dissanayake declared that the "ground reality" had rendered the ceasefire "meaningless" but did not call for a halt to the fighting. He defended the decision to sign the truce not from the standpoint that it held out the hope of peace, but rather that it had weakened the LTTE politically and militarily. "There are advantages which we gained through the peace talks such as the LTTE accepting 'federalism' instead of their previous stand for a separate state. Besides, Karuna broke ranks with Tigers during the ceasefire," Dissanayake declared.

The LTTE has so far issued no official statement on the government's withdrawal from the ceasefire. From the outset, its perspective had been the creation of a capitalist statelet in the North and East of the island with the backing of one or more of the major powers. It accepted the ceasefire in 2002 and formally abandoned its longstanding demand for "Tamil Eelam" at the first round of talks in 2002. The LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham promised to work with the Colombo government to create a "Tiger economy"—that is, to fully support the agenda of free market restructuring—in return for the creation of provincial government in the North and East with considerable autonomy. Since the collapse of talks, the LTTE has been reduced to pleading with the "international community" to haul the government back to the peace table.

The most telling sign that the peace process has disintegrated is the lack of any concerted effort by the "international community" to end the fighting. The office of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a pathetic statement declaring that he regretted the government's decision and was "deeply worried" that the withdrawal from the ceasefire came amid intensifying violence. The governments of Japan, Britain, Canada and India all issued statements but failed to criticise, let alone condemn, the Sri Lankan government or call for a renewed peace drive.

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack simply stated that the US was "troubled" by a decision that would "make it more difficult to achieve a lasting, peaceful solution to Sri Lanka's conflict". This muted and hypocritical response is of a piece with the US record over the past six years. The Bush administration backed the peace talks in 2002-03, not because it was concerned about the plight of the Sri Lankan people, but to end a war that was a destabilising influence in South Asia, including India, where American economic and strategic interests have greatly expanded. When it failed to strong-arm the LTTE into a deal on Colombo's terms, Washington quietly backed the Rajapakse government's renewal of war and has assisted it militarily.

All the major powers, above all the US, are responsible for the return to a war that is bringing escalating death and destruction to the Sri Lankan population.



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