

The end of the Sri Lankan “peace process”

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If there were an international prize for political cynicism, then the co-chairs of the so-called Sri Lankan peace process—the US, the European Union, Japan and Norway—would be leading contenders. In a joint statement issued last week, the four co-chairs—pushed on by the new Obama administration in Washington—abandoned any pretence of neutrality and called on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to put down their weapons and surrender to the Sri Lankan regime.

Laced with hypocritical concern about the plight of civilians in the fighting, the statement called on the LTTE "to discuss with the government of Sri Lanka the modalities for ending hostilities, including the laying down of arms, renunciation of violence, acceptance of the government of Sri Lanka's offer of amnesty; and participating as a political party in a process to achieve a just and lasting political solution."

What could be more absurd! With the backing of the US, the Sri Lankan government has already rejected any talks with the LTTE and declared it to be a terrorist organisation. President Mahinda Rajapakse has insisted that only a complete and unconditional surrender will end the fighting. His government even rejected a call from the co-chairs for "a temporary no-fire period" to allow the evacuation of sick and wounded. Its offer of an amnesty extends only to the LTTE's lower ranks and not to the LTTE leadership. All of this makes a mockery of calls for discussion, political participation and "a just and lasting political solution".

The statement is just as notable for what it does not say. It does not call for an immediate end to the fighting, for the withdrawal of all Sri Lankan troops to the 2002 ceasefire lines, and for a return to the internationally-sponsored negotiations of 2002-03. In other words, the co-chairs no longer observe even the diplomatic niceties of the so-called peace process that they once sponsored.

The rank hypocrisy of the co-chairs should come as no surprise to anyone. The US, the EU, Norway and Japan have all backed in one way or another Washington's bogus "global war on terrorism" and its neo-colonial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Their support for the "peace process" in Sri Lanka

was not driven by concern over the 25-year suffering of the island's population but by the economic and strategic interests of the major powers, above all of US imperialism.

Several processes contributed to the February 22, 2002 ceasefire. In April and May 2000, the LTTE inflicted a series of devastating military defeats on the Sri Lankan army, capturing the strategic Elephant Pass and threatening to overrun 50,000 troops trapped on the Jaffna Peninsula. The government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga was plunged into a profound political and economic crisis as she scrambled to buy equipment and shore up the military and her administration.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite saw the opportunity to force the LTTE to the negotiating table on their terms, under pain of being made a target of the US "war on terror". When Kumaratunga resisted, her government lost its parliamentary majority and the rival United National Party (UNP) won the poll and signed the ceasefire.

The US conditionally supported the peace process. Washington was concerned about the impact of the Sri Lankan war in neighbouring India, where it was rapidly developing closer economic and strategic ties. The ceasefire was immediately hailed internationally as the dawning of peace, democracy and prosperity on the war-ravaged island and an example to the world. The Co-Chairs pledged \$4.5 billion in reconstruction aid—as a means of gaining political leverage.

It soon became clear, however, that the Co-Chairs were anything but even-handed. While Sinhala extremists in Colombo complained bitterly about the pro-LTTE bias, the process was always heavily weighted against the LTTE, which was required to formally renounce its demand for a separate Tamil statelet in the North and East before negotiations even began. Talks collapsed in April 2003 without discussion of political solution even starting, after a series of naval provocations involving the sinking of LTTE vessels. The final straw was the US refusal to take the LTTE off its list of terrorist organisations, thus blocking its attendance at talks in Washington.

As with all previous attempts to negotiate an end to the war, the Sri Lankan political establishment which has based its rule since 1948 on the ideology of Sinhala supremacism, proved incapable of making any concessions. The UNP government was denounced by President Kumaratunga, the military and the Sinhala chauvinist parties, such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), for betraying the nation for even contemplating a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil elites. Kumaratunga finally dismissed the government in 2004.

Behind the scenes, the Sri Lankan military used the ceasefire to rearm and retrain its shattered forces, with the assistance of the US and other allies. While Washington continued to pay lip-service to the peace process, a string of high-ranking American diplomats and generals made visits to Colombo and military agreements were signed. The stage was set for a re-launching of the war when Mahinda Rajapakse narrowly won the presidency in late 2005 with the backing of the JVP.

Feeble attempts to restart peace talks collapsed by April 2006 when the Rajapakse government insisted on the rewriting of the 2002 ceasefire to favour the Sri Lankan military. But the writing was already on the wall. A series of provocative murders and abductions signalled that Rajapakse had let the military, with its death squads and paramilitaries, off the leash.

In January 2006, US ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead had already signalled Washington's support for war by warning the LTTE that it would face "a stronger, more capable and more determined Sri Lankan military" unless it renounced violence and disarmed. The US backed the threat not only with military assistance but a diplomatic campaign to pressure the EU and Canada to ban the LTTE and thus cut off its vital political and financial support from the Tamil diaspora.

Anyone who has followed the events of the past two years with a modicum of detachment will not be surprised by the latest statement by the Co-Chairs. Occasional mild protests about the Sri Lankan military's most flagrant abuses have been accompanied by denunciations of the LTTE for attempting to defend its territory. The US and its fellow Co-Chairs made no criticism of the Rajapakse government as it launched offensive after offensive from July 2006 in blatant breach of the 2002 ceasefire and then finally tore up the agreement altogether early last year.

The Co-Chairs have not been helpless, passive bystanders, but active participants who bear political responsibility for the Sri Lankan government's war and the humanitarian disaster now unfolding in northern Sri Lanka. Like the US-backed Israeli invasion of Gaza that has resulted in the slaughter of hundreds of civilians, the war in Sri Lanka is a warning of the

criminal methods now being employed by the imperialist powers to advance their economic and strategic interests.

The whole process underscores the fact that the LTTE's setbacks are not simply military but flow from the bankruptcy of its political perspective. Its embrace of the bogus peace process in 2002 was not an aberration, but the outcome of a program for an independent Eelam that was always premised on gaining the support of one or more of the major imperialist powers. Today, the LTTE continues to make futile appeals to the good will of the same "international community" that is backing the government's war. Its Tamil separatism, which represents the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, ruled out any approach to the one social force capable of consistently defending democratic rights—the working class.

The final demise of the peace process is also damning indictment of its foremost advocates in Colombo—the middle class radical outfits, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP). These socialist pretenders, acting in concert with small industry of "peace" NGOs and think tanks, have made a career out duping workers and young people into believing that the only way to end the war was to rely on one or other faction of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and the good services of the major international powers. Even as their latest ally—the right-wing UNP—joins in the chorus of Rajapakse's victory celebrations, the NSSP and USP continue to plead for a resumption of imperialist-sponsored peace talks.

It is time that workers drew the necessary conclusions. To mount a genuine antiwar struggle, the working class must rely on its own strength, mobilise independently of all factions of the bourgeoisie and base itself on a socialist program to abolish the root causes of war—the profit system itself. It is precisely such a perspective that has been elaborated and fought for by the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka and more broadly in South Asia.

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