

Sri Lankan government prepares for peace talks with the LTTE

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After a long drawn-out process of mediation by Norway, the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) appear to be moving towards talks over ending the country's brutal 18-year civil war. Both sides, however, are cautious about alienating their supporters and have insisted on preconditions that could drag out the commencement of negotiations.

After refusing for months to respond to the LTTE's declaration of a unilateral ceasefire, the Peoples Alliance (PA) government finally announced last week that it was prepared for talks. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar told parliament on April 3 that "very considerable progress" had been made and he was "optimistic" that the present peace process would result in talks.

The brief comment was made in response to a question from the opposition United National party (UNP). It was the most definitive statement about talks with the LTTE since the PA government renewed the war against the separatists in 1995. Kadirgamar told parliament that he would announce dates and details by the end of April. In what was a small concession to the LTTE, he indicated that the government would ease the economic blockade on LTTE-controlled areas and allow in a few food items and some drugs.

Three days after Kadirgamar's announcement, Norway's ambassador to Sri Lanka, Jon Westborg, met with LTTE leaders at Mallavi in the LTTE-controlled Vanni region in the north of the island. During the course of the discussion, the leader of the LTTE's political wing, S. Tamilchelvam, reportedly set out a number of "essential conditions" for talks to take place. These included the cessation of all armed hostilities, a further easing of the economic blockade to allow in cement and fuel, and the lifting of the government ban on the LTTE. "We will not under any circumstances participate at the peace negotiations as an outlawed outfit," Tamilchelvam said in a statement published on the pro-LTTE *Tamilnet* website. The government banned the LTTE in 1998 amid an outcry by Sinhala chauvinist groups after it bombed a Buddhist sacred place in Kandy.

While these preconditions may yet upset the prospects for talks, Tamilchelvam's comments appear to have the character of a face-saving device aimed at placating the LTTE's fighters

who have been forced to adhere to a unilateral ceasefire for four months while the Sri Lankan army has waged a sustained offensive on the northern Jaffna peninsula. In a further move aimed at facilitating talks, the LTTE has released a number of Sri Lankan soldiers and seamen.

Having substantially improved its military position in recent months and thus its negotiating stand in any talks, the government has made a couple of other minor concessions to the LTTE to enable talks to start. It announced on Wednesday that 10 LTTE detainees would be freed and that the armed forces would observe a ceasefire from April 13, during the four-day Sinhala and Tamil New Year.

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga is under considerable pressure to negotiate an end to the war. Economically, the government is facing a severe crisis produced in part by its heavy spending on arms following the army's defeats last April and May by the LTTE. Defence spending skyrocketed from 52 billion rupees to 83 billion, creating a liquidity crisis as the government borrowed money to finance the arms purchases. Interest rates shot up to 26 percent. To cut imports and save foreign exchange, the Central Bank floated the rupee, resulting in a currency devaluation and soaring domestic prices.

Kumaratunga also faces growing tensions in the precarious ruling coalition stitched together following last year's general election. Prior to the budget vote on Wednesday, she had to hold emergency talks with two coalition partners—the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC)—to ensure their vote for the bill. She was obliged to offer each of the parties additional ministerial positions. The Sri Lankan cabinet is already reputedly the largest in the world as a result of similar payoffs in the past.

The country's political and economic instability has caused foreign investment to flee while local business shows no interest in making fresh investment. As a result the share price index has continued to fall—last week it was 419, as compared to around 450 in January and 550 one year ago. The government is desperately hoping that talks with the LTTE will encourage foreign investors back into the country.

Big business is insisting that the government proceed with negotiations. Ceylon Chamber of Commerce (CCC) chairman

Chandra Jayaratne recently warned that neither the PA nor the opposition UNP could expect any election funding from big business unless they adhered to a program outlined at a business forum on March 22. Number one on the list of demands was an end to the war.

Both Kumaratunga and the LTTE are also being pressed by the major powers to reach a settlement. The US and the European Union have repeatedly stated that they are opposed to the LTTE's demand for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island but at the same time have pushed the Colombo government towards talks. Their chief concern is that the ongoing war in northern Sri Lanka has the capacity to destabilise the Indian subcontinent, which is again becoming an important focus of economic and strategic interests.

The major powers have adopted a carrot-and-stick approach to the LTTE. Britain recently joined the US, Sri Lanka, India and Malaysia in outlawing the organisation—a move that threatens its international headquarters in London. The Indian government has dropped strong hints that it might take action against LTTE members in India and step up its naval patrols, thus threatening the LTTE's supply routes. At the same time, however, the LTTE is being offered a seat at the peace talks and a role in any settlement.

In an unprecedented step, the US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Ashley Wills travelled to Jaffna in early March and addressed a Tamil audience in the public library auditorium. As well as restating the official US position, he gave a strong hint that Washington would be prepared to drop its ban on the LTTE if the organisation were prepared to negotiate. In response to his own rhetorical question “Can the LTTE be transformed into a democratic, political, non-violent organisation?” Wills said: “If it can, those who have seen it at its ugliest and those who are opposed to its tactics, including the United States, will be obligated to reconsider how they regard the LTTE.”

The latest LTTE demands have put the Kumaratunga government in a difficult position. Any major concessions threaten to trigger anti-government protests by Sinhala extremist parties, such as Sihala Urumaya (SU), that are bitterly opposed to any peace talks and insist that the LTTE be wiped out militarily. The whole Colombo political establishment is so heavily based on the ideology of Sinhala chauvinism that both the PA and UNP fear that significant protests would open up divisions within their own ranks.

Kumaratunga has waged an ongoing military offensive in recent months, capturing a number of towns on the Jaffna peninsula, in part to ward off the criticisms of the extremists. She has also been engaged in a diplomatic campaign, visiting a number of European countries including Germany, Netherlands, Belgium and France to urge them to follow Britain's lead in banning the LTTE and thus hampering its ability to obtain funds and other support from Tamil exiles.

The president has insisted all along that she wants talks without any preconditions and has refused to even consider a

ceasefire, claiming that the LTTE would simply exploit it to strengthen its position militarily. Last year she had to withdraw her plans to pass a limited devolution package aimed at establishing the basis for negotiations, after a concerted campaign by the Sinhala extremists caused the UNP to back away from supporting it.

To avoid a similar debacle over a peace deal, attempts are being made to include the UNP in any negotiations. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe is due to leave for Oslo on April 11 for discussions with the Norwegian government. While the purpose of the visit has not been publicly stated, it is clear that the discussions will be aimed at getting the support, and perhaps the direct involvement, of the UNP. The Norwegian special envoy, Erik Solheim, recently commented to the online publication, the *Lanka Academic*: “The Sri Lankan situation emphasises the need for PA-UNP cooperation in solving the ethnic problem of Sri Lanka.”

Also seeking to consolidate support in Sri Lanka for the peace moves, the Indian High Commissioner told a group of UNP parliamentarians on April 4 that India placed its weight behind the Norway initiative. An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* on April 12 stressed the need for the UNP to collaborate with the government, commenting: “The biggest hurdle to ending the war through negotiated settlement, as we see, is not the LTTE. But it is rather the unreliability of our two major parties.”

Although the Norwegian ambassador has briefed Kumaratunga on his trip to the Vanni, the president has yet to officially respond to the LTTE's demands. She does not, however, appear to be particularly perturbed by its rhetoric. An *Associated Press* report quoted an unnamed government official to the effect that the president had “discussed the issue with an open mind” and wanted views from “expert groups on various options.”

While negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE seem to be on the cards, an agreement to end the war will prove far more difficult. Moreover, any deal between the Sinhalese and Tamil elites, as well as being highly unstable, will inevitably be at the expense of the democratic rights and living standards of the working class and oppressed masses throughout the island.



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