

Norwegian envoy meets LTTE leader

Tentative moves in Sri Lanka to put peace talks back on the agenda

By Wije Dias
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Talks held last week between Norway's special envoy to Sri Lanka, Erik Solheim, and the leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Velupillai Prabhakaran, point to a new round of behind-the-scenes manoeuvres in Sri Lanka and internationally to end the country's 17-year civil war. It was the first time that Prabhakaran had met with a foreign emissary in five years.

The meeting in the LTTE-controlled Wannu region of northern Sri Lanka was arranged in complete secrecy by Norway, the LTTE and Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Solheim, along with Norwegian ambassador Jon Westborg and foreign ministry official Kjersti Tromsdal, travelled by Sri Lankan Air Force helicopter, then by car across military front lines and into the jungle. The discussions also included the LTTE's political wing leader Thamil Chelvan and senior LTTE member Sanker.

News of the secret talks on November 1 was first released by the LTTE through its London-based secretariat. According to the LTTE bulletin, Prabhakaran insisted that peace talks would only go ahead if there were a de-escalation of the armed conflict and normalcy in the north and east. "By de-escalation, Prabhakaran meant cessation of armed hostilities, removal of military aggression and occupation, withdrawal of the economic blockade and creation of normalcy in the Tamil homeland," the news release stated.

At a press conference called two hours after returning to Colombo, Solheim indicated that more had been discussed than simply a restatement of the LTTE's pre-conditions for negotiations. While refusing to go into detail, he said: "Mr Prabhakaran gave his opinion on how the LTTE sees the war situation and how we, according to him, can explore the possibility of starting a peace process. We believe that the LTTE is serious and interested in solving this problem through negotiations."

Solheim briefed Kumaratunga and the Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, on the talks before leaving for Oslo last Saturday. On the same day Kumaratunga held a lengthy telephone conversation with the Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee about the meeting.

India joined Norway in attempting to facilitate peace negotiations in May after the LTTE inflicted a series of military defeats on the army and appeared to be on the brink of taking control of the entire northern Jaffna Peninsula.

On the surface very little appears to have changed. All sides have been tight-lipped about the Solheim visit, and neither the president nor any of her ministers have so far commented publicly on the meeting.

The LTTE's statement appears to be aimed more at quelling dissatisfaction in its own ranks over the prospect of talks with the Peoples Alliance government in Colombo. Less than a year ago, just prior to last December's presidential elections, the LTTE denounced Kumaratunga as the "worst enemy of the Tamil people" and is widely believed to have been behind the attempt by a suicide bomber to assassinate her.

It is likely that Kumaratunga is playing her cards close to her chest for similar reasons. Any indication that the government was about to enter peace talks with the LTTE would provoke a wave of hysterical protests from Sinhala extremist organisations and the Buddhist clergy. These groups are opposed to any settlement with the LTTE, demanding an intensification of the war.

Last week the Sihala Urumaya Party (SUP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) denounced the visit by the Norwegian delegation and accused Norway of supporting the LTTE and interfering in the internal matters of Sri Lanka with the intention of dividing the country. The SUP called for Solheim to be immediately deported.

In early August Kumaratunga attempted to push through a package of constitutional reforms aimed at forming the basis for a negotiated end to the war. The so-called devolution package sought to establish a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites by offering limited autonomy to the country's regions. The proposal provoked strident protests from the JVP, SUP and other chauvinist organisations that regard any concession to the Tamil minority as tantamount to a betrayal of the "Sinhala nation".

The opposition United National Party (UNP) refused to back

the devolution package even though it had indicated its support during protracted negotiations with the PA since the beginning of the year. Kumaratunga withdrew the changes when it became clear that she would not get the necessary two-thirds majority, and called early parliamentary elections.

In an attempt to appeal to the Sinhala chauvinist layers, Kumaratunga installed Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, who is known to be close to the Buddhist hierarchy, as prime minister and launched a series of military offensives against the LTTE on the Jaffna Peninsula. In the last week of the election campaign, Wickramanayake contemptuously ruled out any further participation in the Norwegian diplomatic process, effectively shelved the devolution package and called for a stepping up of the war to annihilate the LTTE and Prabhakaran. Kumaratunga returned from overseas and, while not completely ruling out the constitutional changes or the further involvement of Norway in mediation, declared a “no holds barred” approach to the war.

Neither the PA nor UNP won an outright majority at the October 10 election. The PA was able to patch together a bare majority by doing deals with other parties. But both the PA and UNP are under pressure from sections of big business to establish some form of “national unity” coalition to press ahead with a program of economic reforms and a negotiated end to the war.

Shortly after the election, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar flew to Norway, ostensibly to take part in celebrations marking 50 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries. For public consumption in Sri Lanka, Kadirgamar and Kumaratunga commented at the time that the Norwegian initiative had reached an impasse. It is clear now that in private discussions, arrangements were being made for the Norwegian meeting with Prabhakaran. Solheim confirmed at his Colombo press conference that a letter from Kumaratunga had expressed “the continuous interest of the Sri Lankan government in the Norwegian initiative”.

The contradictory character of Kumaratunga's policies reflects sharp divisions in the ruling class itself. Significant sections of big business backed by the major powers have been pushing for the PA and UNP to work out a joint approach to ending the war, which has become a barrier to attracting foreign investment, a drain on government resources and a destabilising factor in South Asian politics. Both parties, however, are steeped in Sinhala chauvinism and bow to the pressures exerted by extreme rightwing parties such as the JVP and the SUP.

The signs are that Kumaratunga is again exploring the possibility of negotiations with the LTTE. However, having been forced to withdraw the constitutional package in August, she is proceeding very cautiously. Discussions are continuing with the UNP over a possible formula for the settlement of the war and the opposition was told of the Solheim-Prabhakaran meeting in advance. Without the support of the UNP, it is

unlikely that Kumaratunga would be able to implement a deal reached with the LTTE. UNP spokesman Karunasena Kodituwakku commented on the Solheim visit: “It is time we make use of this golden opportunity to resume talks with the LTTE to find a political solution to this conflict.”

However, while the UNP was kept informed, it appears that Kumaratunga did not tell her own prime minister, who given his previous statements on the Norwegian initiative, may have objected. Wickramanayake was asked for his opinion of the talks during an interview on a private TV channel and was forced to admit that he did not know the meeting was taking place.

Sections of the military top brass claim not to have been told either. A senior defence official quoted in last weekend's *Sunday Times* commented: “The surprise news of a fresh dialogue with the LTTE via Norway has given cause for concern to not only those in the upper echelons of the security forces but also to other ranks. ... News of peace talks without prior warning has a devastating effect on their morale.”

The major powers have welcomed the Solheim-Prabhakaran talks. The British High Commission issued a statement saying: “We urge both parties to cease hostilities and start long term negotiations...We entirely support the peace process.” US Embassy spokesperson Stephen Holgate remarked: “As we have previously stated we favor a negotiable political solution to the ethnic strife in Sri Lanka that protects the dignity and security of all citizens in the country and that retains its unity and territorial integrity.”

Speaking for big business, an Industrial and Commerce Forum spokesman commented: “We welcome the LTTE leader's willingness [to talk]. It has raised fresh hopes that he is also keen on a negotiated settlement. Taking strength and confidence from his stance, the government and the opposition as well as all political parties must pursue a political solution and bring the war to an end.”

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