

Next round of Sri Lankan peace talks hangs in the balance

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Uncertainty hangs over the second round of the Sri Lanka's peace talks between the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), scheduled for April 19-21 in Geneva. Communalist agitation by the government's Sinhala extremist allies and a series of armed attacks on the LTTE raise the prospect that the negotiations will collapse.

The first round of talks in Geneva on February 22-23—the first since negotiations were suspended in April 2003—almost broke down after the LTTE delegation threatened to walk out if Colombo insisted on changing the current fragile ceasefire signed in February 2002. Under intense international pressure, the two sides finally agreed to hold another round of talks in April.

A brief joint statement released at the end of the talks confirmed that the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government and LTTE had pledged not to violate the ceasefire. The government also agreed to disarm pro-government militia in army-controlled areas, while the LTTE declared that it would not recruit child soldiers. The projected talks in April were to discuss the implementation of the ceasefire.

The February negotiations revealed the extent of the gulf between the two sides. Since Mahinda Rajapakse won the Sri Lankan presidency last November, violence has escalated on both sides, rendering the ceasefire agreement a virtual dead letter. If the two sides had walked away without any agreement, it would have been tantamount to a declaration of war.

Since then the gulf has widened considerably. The government has failed to disarm militia groups operating with the covert support of the Sri Lankan armed forces from areas under its control. Responding to the Geneva statement, one militia leader, LTTE renegade V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, bluntly told Reuters: "Without mincing our words we wish to tell [the LTTE] quite categorically that we have our resolve and moral right to hold onto our arms."

Since then there have been at least two provocative attacks on the LTTE in the East. On March 4, an LTTE sentry point

at Vavunathivu was assaulted, resulting in the deaths of two LTTE cadres. The LTTE alleged that the attackers appeared from a military sentry point 300 metres away and withdrew to the nearby Vavunathivu army camp after the clash.

While the military denied any involvement, the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) warned on March 5: "This attack is yet another blow to the ceasefire agreement and is also seriously undermining both parties' commitment to the joint statement from the Geneva talks. If such attacks and killings should re-occur, the SLMM fears that the next round of talks is at stake."

On March 11, another assault took place. LTTE spokesman Daya Master said LTTE fighters had repulsed an attack on a sentry point at Kattumurippu in the Batticaloa district. LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham responded by saying: "The Geneva peace talks will face grave dangers if the Sri Lankan government refuses to disarm Tamil paramilitary organisations and continues to allow them to launch offensive military operations against our military positions in Batticaloa district."

At the same time, President Rajapakse is under fire from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which are opposed to any deal with the LTTE. These parties, which denounce the ceasefire as unconstitutional and demand it be revised, have attacked the joint statement released in Geneva. They also accuse Norway, the formal mediator of the peace process, of "pro-LTTE bias" and demand another country take its place.

With local elections due on March 30, the JVP and JHU have both stepped up their communal rhetoric. In a media release issued on February 26, the JHU declared it "has not given its consent to the points in the (joint) statement". The JVP attacked the Geneva statement for accepting the ceasefire and claimed that it had been the result of pressure from Norway.

In an effort to pacify the JVP and JHU, H. L. de Silva, a leading lawyer and member of the government delegation to Geneva, claimed that the joint statement constituted "an amendment" to the ceasefire. The opposition United

National Party (UNP), the JVP and JHU, as well as the LTTE immediately rejected this contrived reading of the document.

In comments to the *Tamilnet* website on March 1, the LTTE's chief negotiator, Balasingham, explained that a message had been conveyed to the government, warning: "[T]he attempt to distort and misinterpret the joint statement issued by the parties after the Geneva talks will damage mutual trust and seriously undermine the peace process."

The UPFA attempted to patch up its differences with the JVP and JHU by calling a joint conference of all parliamentary parties on March 6. The communal character of the meeting was demonstrated by Rajapakse's failure to invite the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—a pro-LTTE parliamentary alliance.

The JVP and JHU used the conference as a platform to attack the Geneva talks. JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe insisted that it would be "better to walk away from the negotiation table without any progress being made, rather than agreeing to any conditions detrimental to the sovereignty of the country." Putting a question mark over the whole negotiating process, he added: "We do not believe the Tigers will ever change their stripes."

"The only way to keep the LTTE at the negotiating table is to strengthen the armed forces," Amarasinghe declared, adding: "A strong military is the most important, if not the only, deterrent to the LTTE's separatist ambitions." He denounced previous governments for being "so scared of going back to war that they caved into the LTTE's demands" and called on the government to "speak softly and carry a big stick".

Not to be outdone, JHU parliamentary leader Ellawela Medhananda warned that it would withdraw its support if the government failed to abide by its promises. During the November presidential campaign, Rajapakse signed electoral pacts with the JVP and JHU, which included commitments to revise the ceasefire and to replace Norway as mediator.

The JHU leader also opposed any attempt to disarm the so-called Karuna faction, which broke from the LTTE in 2004. "The LTTE has not been able to wage war because of the 'Karuna' faction," he said. "Hence, the 'Karuna' faction is an important element."

Far from challenging the JVP and JHU, Rajapakse appealed to all parties to name representatives to participate in monitoring the negotiations. "This will enable us to provide solutions for the problems that may confront the government delegation, when engaged in talks with the LTTE in Geneva," he said. JVP leaders Amarasinghe and Wimal Weerawansa were already engaged in "monitoring" the last round.

None of this appeased the JVP and JHU. Weerawansa read out a special statement on March 7 in parliament demanding the removal of Norway as mediator. He denounced the Norwegian government for welcoming the LTTE delegation in Oslo after the Geneva talks. "Our stance is that the motherland could not be protected without defeating both terrorist-backing Norway and the terrorist-backing media," Weerawansa thundered.

LTTE political wing leader S.P. Thamilchelvan responded to the JVP's provocative move, declaring: "If [the] Sinhala extremists are successful in thrusting an all-out war on the Tamil people, that will greatly simplify the decisions our leadership can make." While hinting it is prepared to return to war, the LTTE is under considerable international pressure, particularly from the US, to reach a peace deal with Colombo.

The following day, Amarasinghe and Weerawansa met Rajapakse to press for their demands—amending the ceasefire and removing Norway. According to the *Island*, the JVP leaders "expressed the absurdity of continuing with the Norwegian facilitation". A presidential official told the newspaper: "The government is under heavy pressure. We are in a dilemma. The international community insists on Norwegian facilitation and any move to replace the facilitators is likely to upset them."

Rajapakse cannot afford to ignore the "international community". Media Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa told the weekly press briefing on March 9: "The political parties can let off steam, but as a government there is no change in our policy. Norway will be our facilitator." Nevertheless, the ruling UPFA is so deeply caught up in Sinhala communalism that it cannot simply dismiss the campaign being waged by the JVP and JHU.

In the midst of these acute tensions, Norwegian special envoy Erick Solheim is due to visit Sri Lanka next week. The JVP and JHU will no doubt seize upon Solheim's presence to further inflame communal sentiments, compounding the political dilemma confronting the government and heightening the danger of a return to war.

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