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Sri Lanka: Peace through War?

Sri Lanka is back at war. The Sri Lankan government's decision to pull out of the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) became effective January 16. Both the government and the LTTE are pursuing predominantly military strategies at a stepped-up pace. On the political side, the multiparty group charged with preparing peace proposals produced a cautious report that is unlikely to move matters forward, and there are no serious negotiating initiatives. Despite some military success, the government's chances of victory are highly uncertain and, in any event, it lacks a political strategy to produce a peace settlement all parties can live with. Sri Lanka seems set for a protracted period of bloodshed and the international community is not well placed to help turn this around.

The breakdown of the ceasefire: The annulment of the agreement was, in reality, a formality. The Norwegians had brokered the ceasefire in 2002, the first step in their push for a political solution to the 24-year-old conflict between the government and the Tamils, who are fighting for an independent state, "Tamil Eelam," in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Government talks with the LTTE, which has been the vanguard of the Tamil insurrection, reached a high point with a promising joint statement of principles in late 2002 but fell apart in early 2003. Since 2005, there has been a spike in violence by both sides.

Two incidents in particular sealed the fate of the CFA before it was officially called off. One was the assassination of Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in August 2005 by the LTTE. Kadirgamar was himself a Tamil but had always been detached from Tamil politics. The second was the election of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party candidate Mahinda Rajapaksa as president in 2006. Rajapaksa is a pragmatic nationalist but has neither a strategic vision nor a commitment to a compromise settlement. His efforts to forge a consensus within the political mainstream have failed, while taking the government further away from the kinds of proposals that might produce a settlement.

The military gambit: The Sri Lankan government's priority since Rajapaksa's election has been to press for military success, hoping then to settle on its own terms. The army has achieved some gains. It has reduced the LTTE's ability to operate in the eastern part of the island. In the north, Sri Lankan Air Force jets bombed an LTTE base at Kilinochchi in January, targeting a gathering of the organization's leadership as part of a larger decapitation strategy. The LTTE's intelligence chief, who was instrumental in setting up

their suicide bombing unit, was recently killed by a mine laid by an army special forces unit. The group's lead negotiator, S.P. Thamilselvan, was killed in an air raid in November 2007. More recently, the Sri Lankan Air Force claims to have destroyed an important sea base of the LTTE. The Sri Lankan Navy has mined the waters in the Mannar Strait bordering India to deny access to the LTTE's naval arm. The army is trying to recover the strategic Elephant Pass and gain control over the Wanni jungle. The army has had considerable success with claymore mines planted deep in LTTE-controlled territory.

But the Tigers have proven resilient in the past. As the smaller organization, the LTTE has focused on a small number of operations with increasing lethality, which makes them very difficult for the army to defeat. The LTTE is the only known terrorist group with its own air force. In October 2007, the LTTE attacked a key Sri Lankan Air Force installation at Anuradhapura, bombing it from two light aircraft. The LTTE has also carried out attacks on civilians, including one in which a bus was bombed and the fleeing survivors were gunned down. The LTTE chief, V. Prabhakaran, wanted by Sri Lanka and India, has remained elusive despite an Interpol red alert. The LTTE's international channels for funding have been curtailed in recent years, but published sources estimate that it raises \$200 to \$300 million a year, in part through extortion among the Tamil diaspora.

Whither international involvement? Despite both parties' focus on combat, Norway is still trying to facilitate Sri Lanka-LTTE peace talks. But with the collapse of the ceasefire agreement, the largely Scandinavian Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which had been observing the

ceasefire for five years, has left the country. The principal other international support system for the peace process is the group of cochair of the 2003 Tokyo aid conference, the United States, the European Union, Japan, and Norway. This group continues to consult on efforts to bring the parties back to the bargaining table. Despite some public hints from the Japanese, none of the cochair has cut aid to Sri Lanka following the end of the ceasefire. And the cochair have little leverage to use with the LTTE other than the granting or withdrawing of international respectability. This has not often been sufficient to change LTTE policies.

The Sri Lankan government now claims to have lost faith in Western mediators, and Rajapaksa has suggested that he would like neighbors—preferably India—to take on the job. India has not responded with enthusiasm. Its experience with peacemaking in Sri Lanka in the 1980s was unhappy. The Indian peacekeeping force that was sent to Sri Lanka as part of this effort in 1987 lost 1,000 men, and ultimately, the LTTE assassinated former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. India at that time was the object of criticism even more pointed than those currently aimed at the Norwegians.

Human rights crisis: Meanwhile, the conflict has created a massive human rights crisis. The International Crisis Group estimates that more than 1,500 civilians have been killed and 250,000 displaced in the crossfire since 2006. The total death toll is far higher, certainly several tens of thousands. Up to 40,000 civilians have allegedly been displaced by the Sri Lankan Air Force's raids on the LTTE in the east. Claymore mines have taken their own human toll, most recently killing nine Tamil schoolchildren. There have been hundreds of extrajudicial killings and over 1,000 disappearances.

The LTTE has carried out a systematic campaign of assassination of Tamil leaders who challenge its claim to speak for all Tamils. It has been castigated by the international community for recruiting child soldiers and staging suicide bombings targeting civilians. Both sides blame each other for "collateral damage." UN Human Rights Commissioner, Louis Arbour was bitterly criticized by the Sri Lankan government for drawing attention to the killings of humanitarian aid workers in the island nation.

Complicated internal scenario: Rajapaksa came to office determined to develop a broadly based consensus on policy toward the conflict. His party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), has had a fragile majority in Parliament since 2004. Despite some success in wooing members of the largest opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), he still depends for his majority on the Sinhala nationalist People's Liberation Front (JVP), which has a past of militant nationalist resurrection against the government, and the Sinhala Heritage Party (JHU), led by Buddhist monks. Both oppose any compromise with the Tamils. The president

himself has a shaky relationship with the rest of his party leadership.

Within the Parliament, there are two major opposition groups: the United National Party (UNP), which has alternated in power with the SLFP during most of Sri Lanka's independent existence, and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a group of Tamil parties traditionally opposed to the LTTE that reversed course in 2002, joined together, and issued a common declaration accepting the LTTE's leadership. A handful of Tamil-elected politicians remained outside the TNA, at considerable danger to themselves.

The other players: Besides the Sinhala-majority parties and the TNA, two other major groups figure in Sri Lanka's complex political mosaic. The so-called Hill Tamils, who constitute nearly half of the Tamil population, live in the central highlands. They have generally kept aloof from the ethnic conflict, focusing instead on workplace issues in Sri Lanka's tea plantations, but they have been badly affected by omnipresent security precautions. The LTTE asserts the right to speak for all Tamils, including this group.

The Muslim community comprises 7.9 percent of the population, with a major concentration in the Eastern Province. Although many of them are Tamil speakers, the Muslims have generally been part of the government's coalition. They have been the victims of some brutal attacks from the LTTE.

The elusive "Southern consensus:" At Rajapaksa's invitation, an All Party Representative Conference (APRC) met some 60 times since 2006 to try to develop the consensus he sought. The group wrestled with the two major issues that have been at the heart of Sri Lanka's peace efforts. The first is the amount of power to be exercised at the sub-national level and the manner of its exercise. Sri Lankan governments until 2002 spoke in terms of "devolution." The current government has gone back to that term, once again rejecting "federalism," which Tamils consider essential, but nationalist Sinhalese regard as code for dividing the country. The second issue, "merger," refers to whether or not the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka will be joined to form one entity, something that all politically active Tamils favor.

The APRC's report, issued on January 25, recommended that Sri Lanka implement in full the provisions of the 13th amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, passed in 1987. Its proposals are far more cautious than those from earlier governments led by both the SLFP and the UNP. They reinforce the impression that the government hopes to be able to achieve a settlement essentially on its own terms, without any meaningful input from the LTTE or even the TNA. Not surprisingly, the report received a mixed response. The

government and two small Tamil parties welcomed the report. Two larger parties, the JVP, nominally part of the government's majority, and the opposition UNP, had pulled out of the conference before the report was issued. And the TNA, a conglomerate Tamil political party not part of the conference but sympathetic to the LTTE, rejected it out of hand.

The views of the other players: Even a bolder report would probably have been far from what the LTTE seeks. The Tigers insist on the recognition of the Tamils as a "nationality" within Sri Lanka and on self-rule for a merged entity that includes both the Tamil-dominated Northern Province and the Eastern Province where Tamils comprise just over a third of the population. Their concept of self-rule is more far reaching even than the previous government's "federalism" proposals. The Sri Lankan Supreme Court's recent decision to annul the temporary merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces (which had been instituted, at least theoretically, 20 years ago as part of a constitutional package brokered by India) has reinforced the LTTE claim that the government will never deliver on promises of autonomy and that hence it has no alternative to armed insurgency.

Long-term Prospects: The United States has historically not been a major player in peacemaking in Sri Lanka, and recent developments have not figured high on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. The Sri Lankan economy has performed admirably, with 6.1 percent growth in 2007, and recent military successes have boosted the Colombo stock exchange. But the fiscal impact of the latest offensive on the economy will be adverse.

Neither of the major Sri Lankan players is currently in a mood to get serious about peace, so prospects for new talks are poor. A new start would require a renewed commitment from both sides to give priority to a political solution. Continued fighting will not gain international support for either side. The international community has no sympathy for the LTTE's demand for a separate state. On the other side of the fence, even if the Sri Lankan government wins a decisive military victory, it will need to sustain a viable political solution. Ultimately, this will require far-reaching constitutional reform alongside efforts to improve the internal security situation on the island, for Sinhalese and Tamils alike. Protecting moderate Tamils and continued engagement with minorities should be the priorities for the government. Anything short of that would be a pyrrhic victory for Sri Lanka.

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