

## Can Sri Lanka Turn Away from War?

*The past few months have seen a rapid deterioration of the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), with whom it had been trying to hold peace talks. Neither side is currently prepared to stand by the landmark political agreement they reached in Oslo in 2002. Both sides claim they want to preserve the cease-fire, but the 2002 agreement has broken down in all but name. There is a serious danger that they are drifting back to an overt war, which is likely to be even bloodier than the last one.*

**A bloody six months:** Violence was escalating in the months before the election of Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse in November 2005. Since then, despite repeated assertions that the cease-fire agreement was still in place and should be honored, the violence has accelerated. Recent examples include the assassination on June 26 of the third highest officer in the Sri Lankan army; an assassination attempt on the Army Chief Sarath Fonseka right in downtown Colombo, an LTTE sea attack on a naval convoy bearing the flag of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission responsible for adjudicating cease-fire disputes, the assassination of two local LTTE commanders, explosions on civilian buses with predominantly Sinhalese passengers in the ethnically mixed eastern part of the country, apparent Sri Lankan army reprisal actions against Tamil communities near these incidents, and ambushes of Sri Lankan military units.

**Focus on the cease-fire:** Norway has been working for the past six months on reestablishing a meaningful cease-fire. The maneuvering before the two meetings that Norway convened in February and June 2006 show how difficult this has become. The two sides have different objectives. The government aims to rewrite the cease-fire agreement and make it more detailed and specific. The LTTE is focusing instead on a handful of trouble-prone provisions in the original agreement, especially the government's undertaking to disarm Tamil "paramilitaries." The LTTE created a series of procedural obstacles, delaying both meetings and ultimately refusing to meet with the Sri Lankan side when it arrived in Oslo for the second one. When the European Union (EU) designated the LTTE a terrorist organization following the assassination attempt against General Fonseka, the LTTE

announced that it would no longer cooperate with cease-fire monitors from the EU countries after a brief transition period. This sparked a stern response from the Norwegians but ultimately left some confusion around the viability of the Monitoring Mission.

As a real cease-fire becomes harder to reestablish, talk about the content of an actual peace settlement has all but disappeared. Both sides have backed away from the key political compromise that had contained so much promise, the December 2002 statement by both the government and the LTTE that they would seek a federal solution involving internal self-determination within the framework of one Sri

Lanka. Rajapakse's election manifesto had rejected the word "federal," and statements from the LTTE going back at least two years implicitly reject any qualifications on "self-determination." In order to ensure an actual and lasting cease-fire as well as a return to constructive peace talks, both sides now need to re-create the basis for a



viable compromise.

**Rajapakse and his allies:** Rajapakse speaks movingly of peace and affirms the importance of the cease-fire, but his political alliances call into question his ability to strike the necessary compromise. A politician with roots in his poor and deeply Buddhist southern constituency of Hambantota, Rajapakse made a preelection pact with two groups strongly committed to Sinhala nationalism. The Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a former insurgent group with radical Marxist ideology and a violent past, has become the third largest party in the Sri Lankan parliament and has traditionally had its greatest support in Rajapakse's part of the

country. The Jatika Hele Urumaya (JHU), a new party consisting primarily of conservative Buddhist monks, has fewer members of parliament but plays on the emotive appeal of the clergy. Both groups have denounced compromising with the LTTE. They have specifically rejected federalism, long a loaded word in Sri Lankan politics. Rajapakse has been faithful to his understanding with them, and has publicly stated that any new constitution must preserve Sri Lanka as a “unitary” state.

Since his election, Rajapakse has reached out to his opponents in the United National Party (UNP), and there has even been talk of a national unity government. Rajapakse is not willing to break with his preelection allies, however, and that leaves him with few options for persuading a very skeptical LTTE that he is serious about a peace settlement they could live with.

Ironically, Rajapakse owes his election in part to the LTTE’s call to Tamils to boycott the November 2005 election. The vote was indeed very low in predominantly Tamil parts of the country, and Rajapakse’s opponent, Ranil Wickremasinghe, widely regarded as the more peace-minded of the two, would



*Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher met President Mahinda Rajapakse and discussed the peace process in early June. (Photo credit: U.S. Department of State.)*

have won had the Tamil community voted in their usual numbers. The LTTE, as expected, remain extremely hostile to the role of both groups; the JVP/JHU presence only strengthens LTTE intransigence.

**Sri Lanka’s policy:** Since the assassination attempt on General Fonseka, the Sri Lankan government has maintained a policy it describes as limited retaliation. This has included one air strike using Israeli-supplied Kfir aircraft, something that had been stopped during the years when the cease-fire was fully in force. The recent engagement between the Sri Lankan Navy and the LTTE Sea Tigers suggests that the

Navy may have improved its ability to deal with its long-time adversary. There are reports that elements within the military are concerned that unless they go on the offensive, the LTTE will gradually strengthen, and that some would see a return to war as an opportunity for a decisive victory.

At the same time, the Rajapakse administration continues to support a return to negotiations and has responded positively to the recent Norwegian efforts to negotiate a return to a real cease-fire. A late June interview with a Tamil newspaper editor led to speculation that Rajapakse was looking for an alternative channel to float an informal two-week truce offer. The government has avoided comment on this story. In any event, the content of any talks that take place will be closely scrutinized by the president’s skeptical Sinhala nationalist supporters.

**LTTE strategy:** The LTTE’s political approach starts with discrediting the government, creating facts that bolster their claim that they effectively already govern the Tamil-dominated parts of the country, and refusing to talk under any but ideal conditions. This approach makes them a frustrating negotiating partner. They feel no need to observe any of the textbook rules of negotiations, such as allowing settled issues to remain settled. These are the classic tactics of the party that feels itself at a disadvantage.

A point of particular importance for the LTTE is the role of a breakaway military commander known as Karuna. The LTTE has always insisted with particular force on its standing to speak for all Tamils and has killed dissident Tamil spokesmen with relentless determination. Early in the cease-fire, Karuna broke with the LTTE. The Tigers defeated his followers, but Karuna himself escaped, and his continuing activities are a thorn in the side of the LTTE in the eastern part of the country. The LTTE’s insistence on government disarming of “paramilitaries” is aimed at him. The government’s denials of any involvement ring hollow, and the newspaper story reporting that Rajapakse had made a truce offer, including an offer to rein in Karuna, will surely be taken as confirmation by the LTTE.

The big question is whether LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, always oriented more toward the military than the political, regards war as inevitable, or even as desirable. The last time the LTTE terminated a formal cease-fire in 1995, the LTTE lost Jaffna, the heart of Tamil Sri Lanka. Within five years, however, it mounted a major military campaign and nearly succeeded in retaking Jaffna. LTTE sympathizers and spokesmen have articulated, in recent months, the need to “reestablish the balance of power” between themselves and the government, a step they regard as a prerequisite to talks. In other words, elements of both sides are making the case that war may serve their purposes.

The LTTE's military actions in the past six months have concentrated on naval engagements and guerrilla or terrorist actions, rather than on major land engagements. Some observers see this as an indication that their military capacity has still not recovered from earlier campaigns. A more likely explanation is that the time is not right, and that the LTTE considers the current half-war to be in its best interest. It may see some hope of resuming negotiations under more favorable conditions; failing that, it may wish to shift the blame for resumed hostilities to the Sri Lankan government.

**The international dimension:** India has responded carefully to the recent violence, stressing the importance of moving toward a cease-fire and peace. India is diplomatically active but has avoided a brokering role. Its difficult experience during the time of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (1987–1990) has left scars both in India and in Sri Lanka. India wants to avoid two contingencies: a return to civil war, and the establishment of a separate state of Tamil Eelam. Either could create political complications in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and a war could create new refugee flows, as occurred during the 1980s.

The United States has traditionally played a supporting role in Sri Lanka. In a recent statement in Colombo, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher reaffirmed U.S. willingness to provide diplomatic support without direct involvement in negotiations. The EU and Canada have joined the United States in adding the LTTE to their lists of terrorist organizations. The United States, the EU, Japan, and Norway all serve as cochairs of the group of external supporters of Sri Lanka's negotiating efforts. India is apparently comfortable with this arrangement, but has no interest in joining a group of this sort.

These countries have far more leverage over Sri Lanka than over the LTTE. During the years when the cease-fire was genuinely holding, the LTTE began to enjoy some international respectability. Their leadership valued this, as they showed in their sharp negative reaction to the EU decision to ban the organization. The availability of some aid funds was also a valuable asset, and one that the LTTE put at risk with its assassinations. This leverage, however, needs to be measured against the LTTE leadership's judgment of the potential benefits of negotiations. In the past, Prabhakaran has valued the LTTE's military potential more than the benefits of working with the international community.

**Where is the half-war heading?** The current half-war could go on for some time, but it could disappear in a moment if a spectacular attack took place. Given the increasing level of violence, the logic of the situation is drifting toward a resumption of real war, and it will take a change of course on both sides to bring the parties to a path that can lead to a real cease-fire or to peace.

An acknowledged breakdown of the cease-fire might play well politically with a jaded and cynical Sri Lankan electorate—but only until the inevitable casualties started appearing. The government therefore looks on the establishment of a fully functioning cease-fire as the best short-term option. It would reduce the risk of war without engaging the more controversial questions involved in a peace settlement.

For the LTTE, the choice is more difficult. It has not given up its long-run goal of statehood. It has worked hard to introduce the trappings of government to the areas it controls, including local taxation, traffic tickets, and apparently, some LTTE-provided social services. Its participation in peace talks in earlier years yielded little or no additional recognition of the LTTE's official, quasi-state standing, leading some of the leaders to conclude that peace talks were a trap.

But the question before them in the short term is not peace. In order to reestablish a real cease-fire, the LTTE will almost certainly want to strike a better deal on issues that have plagued cease-fire implementation, including the government's undertaking to rein in the paramilitaries. The most fundamental challenge for the Sri Lankan government is to maintain, or perhaps establish, a political coalition that will support a serious peace process. To get the LTTE to the table, it will need to persuade the LTTE that eventual peace talks would be worthwhile. For Sri Lanka's outside friends, the urgent task is to persuade both the government and the LTTE that the alternative will be far worse for them. This will only get harder with time.

—*Teresita Schaffer & Aneesh Deshpande*

*For more information about the CSIS South Asia Program, please visit [www.csis.org/saprog/](http://www.csis.org/saprog/).*

---

**South Asia Monitor is published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**

**© 2006 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.**