

Sri Lanka's Deadlocked Peace Process: An alternative explanation to the current stalemate

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Introduction

In the general elections of December 2001 the United National Front (UNF) coalition government came to power in Sri Lanka with a promise to revive the peace process and end the two decade-long ethnic war between the predominantly Sinhalese Sri Lankan army (SLA) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) - better known as the Tamil Tigers. On 25 December the LTTE declared a unilateral ceasefire, which was subsequently reciprocated by the new government. Following the ceasefire, both the Prime Minister Ranil Wikremesinghe and the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran agreed to invite the Norwegian government as a facilitator to begin the peace process. On 22 February 2002, with Norwegian initiative a Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) was signed between the government and the LTTE paving path to the current peace process, which is widely dubbed in the international media as the best chance to end the war and establish lasting peace in the island.

Despite of the overwhelming optimism at home and abroad, the peace process has today arrived at a critical juncture. After six rounds of face-to-

face talks during 14 months, the LTTE unilaterally suspended the talks on 21 April 2003 leading the peace process to a deadlock. Members of the international community have repeatedly urged the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to restart the peace talks. Norway and Japan have engaged in a desperate shuttle diplomacy while the US, India and a number of European countries have been attempting to persuade the Tamil Tiger to reverse their decision.

This article examines some critical factors contributed to the current deadlock in the peace process in Sri Lanka. In general, two principle arguments have been presented as being the critical factors to lead the peace process to the stalemate. From the Tamil Tigers' point of view, the government's inability to implement the decisions made during the peace talks has compelled them to withdraw from the peace process creating current deadlock. In his letter to the Prime Minister Ranil Wikremesinghe, the LTTE political advisor, Anton Balasingham wrote that,

‘The negotiations have been successful in so far as significant progress has been made in key areas, such as the agreement to explore federalism on the basis of the right to self-determination of our people. But this progress has not been matched by any improvement in the continuing hardships being faced by our people as a result of your government's refusal to implement the normalization aspects of the Ceasefire Agreement and subsequent agreements reached at the talks. As a result, considerable disillusionment has set in amongst the Tamil people, and in particular the displaced, who have lost all hope the peace process will alleviate their immense suffering’.⁽¹⁾

(1) Anton Balasingham's letter to Prime Minister Ranil Wikremesinghe, *TamilNet*, 21 April 2003.

Meanwhile, others believe that the US government's decision to exclude the LTTE from a crucial aid seminar held on 14 April 2003 in Washington instigated the current crisis.⁽²⁾ While organizing a preparatory aid seminar in the run up to the major aid conference in Tokyo, the US State Department excluded the Tamil Tigers who have been enlisted as a terrorist group. The US move undoubtedly offended the Tamil rebels. The LTTE noted that,

'We view that the exclusion of the LTTE, the principle partner to the peace and the authentic representative of the Tamil people from discussions on critical matters affecting the economic and social welfare of the Tamil nation, as a grave breach of good faith. Your government, as well as our facilitator Norway, are fully aware of the fact that the United States has legal constraints to invite representatives of a proscribed organization to their country. In these circumstances, an appropriate venue could have been selected to facilitate the LTTE to participate in this important preparatory aid conference. ...Exclusion of the LTTE from this conference has severely eroded the confidence of our people in the peace process.'⁽³⁾

These two elements have been presented as critical factors instigating the current deadlock in the Sri Lankan peace process. However, the paper argues that the ongoing stalemate in the peace process has deeper roots and more complicated factors have been critical contributors to the deadlock. The paper argues that a revival of the peace process requires a comprehen-

(2) Sudha Ramachandran, 'US muddies the waters', Asia Times Online, 17 April 2003.

(3) Anton Balasingham's letter to Prime Minister Ranil Wikremesinghe, *TamilNet*, 21 April 2003.

sive review of the perceptions of the conflicting parties and significant systemic changes are needed in the attempts to establish lasting peace in the island.

Significance of the latest peace process

There are number of reasons why the latest peace process is considered to be the best chance to end the war and find a stable political solution to the conflict. First of all, the new peace initiative emerged in a different domestic and international environment compared to the previous ones. At home the war-wariness had culminated; both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE had realized that a permanent solution to the conflict could only be found through dialogue, not war. Meanwhile, both Sinhalese and Tamil communities have overwhelmingly supported a political negotiation, while rejecting military means. Opinion polls indicated that the overwhelming majority of Sinhalese and Tamil people supported the peace process.⁽⁴⁾ Furthermore the decade long war had ruined the island's economy and the influential business community had pressured the government to end the war opting a political dialogue.

In stark contrast to the previous peace attempts, the external factors have played a noticeable positive role in the latest peace process. One of the most important elements of the current peace process has been the overwhelming international engagement. It is believed that the unprecedented international attention to the island's new peace initiative is a result of the global changes after the September 11, 2001. Anti-terrorism sentiments generated by the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington was a serious blow to the already dwindling sympathy towards the LTTE cause in the

(4) Peace Confidence Index, Wave 6-7, March-May 2002, Center for Policy Alternatives, Colombo.

international community. The Tamil Tigers had already been listed as an international terrorist group by number of countries. With the US led global war against terrorism, the LTTE realized that there was an urgent need to change their strategy. Thus the LTTE's declaration of unilateral ceasefire came as a major strategic shift in the Tamil struggle. In April 2002, the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran declared his commitment to seek a political solution to the ethnic conflict ending the violent struggle. In addition, the LTTE leader expressed his willingness to renounce the group's goal for a separate state-the Tamil Eelam-settling for autonomy for the Tamils in the north and the east within the united Sri Lanka according to the principle of internal self-determination⁽⁵⁾. This change in the LTTE strategy must be considered as an outcome of the changes in the international attitude towards terrorism after 9/11.

Furthermore the latest peace attempt in Sri Lanka attracted a direct involvement of a large number of international actors. Norway engaged in the peace process as a facilitator, organizing six rounds of peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil rebels where parties discussed number of critical issues related to the conflict. Meanwhile, the Japanese government showing an unprecedented interest in the peace process engaged as the main financial backer. Prime Minister Koizumi appointed a senior diplomat Yasushi Akashi as the special envoy for the Sri Lanka's peace drive. Japan also held a major aid conference in June 2003 gathering large number of countries and international organizations to pledge over US\$ 4 billion for the rebuilding and rehabilitation of the war-torn north and the east of the island. In addition, the US and a number of European states directly involved in the peace process making Sri Lanka one of the most in-

(5) 'Piripaharan commits to peace, self-determination', *TamilNet*, 11 April 2002.

ternationally exposed peace attempts in the world.

This overwhelming international engagement, in stark contrast to the past isolation of the island's conflict has given a unique opportunity to bring about a permanent solution. International community repeatedly urged the conflicting parties to continue negotiation while pledging financial support as an inducement to sustain the peace process. Rigid condemnation of terrorism and violence by the members of the global community has also been a vital instrument to bring the Tamil Tigers to the political process while international vigil has been instrumental to moderate government's attitude towards minority rights. Therefore with an unprecedented international engagement, the latest peace drive has given a better chance to stop decade-long bloodshed and bring about a political solution.

Despite these positive elements and overwhelming optimism both at home and abroad, the peace process has today become defunct. The LTTE's unilateral withdrawal from the peace process has been the initial thrust to the deadlock. Nevertheless, there has been number of other factors which contributed to the present state of the peace process. The analysis first examines the flaws of the government's tactics followed by the LTTE and other parties leading to the current stalemate.

Problems in the government's approach

Despite of the Sri Lankan government's initiative to take up the peace talks, it is argued here that the government is seriously responsible for the current unhealthy state of the peace process. Needless to say that the government has been in the most vulnerable position as Colombo had to deal with both the LTTE and the Sinhala political opposition. While from the beginning, the Tamil Tigers tried to extract maximum concessions through the peace process, the Sinhala opposition parties resisted to concessions and

insisted to end negotiations with the Tamil Tigers. Today after the peace process has been deadlocked, the LTTE views that the government's inability to fulfil their demands has brought the peace talks to the current impasse. Meanwhile, the Sinhala opposition blames the government for giving too many concessions to the Tamil Tigers neglecting national interests and jeopardising national security.

It is argued here that the government's unskilful handling of the LTTE (the main bargaining partner) and the Sinhala opposition (an important element in the conflict and the peace process) has been a serious cause for the present crisis. Furthermore, it is argued that the government's inability to utilise the circumstances, reasons and the objectives of the LTTE's decision to enter in the peace process has weakened its position as a negotiating partner and led to a present crisis.

It was natural to anticipate that the LTTE would try to extract the strongest possible concessions during the peace process. In any bargaining process parties have rights to put forward maximum demands. Government should have been prepared for such hard bargaining as the LTTE has always positioned itself as the sole representative of the Sri Lankan Tamil community and has fought a war of national liberation for nearly two decades. The awareness of these circumstances and the anticipation of such hard bargaining would have led the government to set its own demands, and conditions which would have brought partners to an equal level.

At this juncture, one should recall the circumstances that paved the path to the current peace process. In fact, the doors for peace talks had been open long before the last ceasefire agreement was signed in February 2002. The People's Alliance (PA) administration under Chandrika Kumaratunga repeatedly called the LTTE to resume peace talks. As a matter of fact, it was largely the LTTE's refusal that had made peace talks impossible. Thus

the LTTE's initiative to declare a unilateral ceasefire in December 2001 opened a new chance for peace negotiations.

As mentioned before, among other significant factors the post-September 11 global changes have been a compelling reason for the sudden change of LTTE stance. The US led global anti-terrorism war left no room for noticeable terrorist groups to operate as in the past. The LTTE being a leading international terrorist group had realised that only drastic changes in their strategy can avoid the implications of the global war against terrorism. The LTTE's initiative to negotiate peace with the government has been a result of these considerations.

Therefore, it is fair to say that Sri Lanka has been a beneficiary of those extremely tragic events of the September 11. The 9/11 and the subsequent war against terrorism could persuade the LTTE to take up the political dialogue renouncing violence and terrorism. This is one reason why the international community has been strongly behind the peace process. The world community praised the Tamil Tigers for retuning to the democratic path. But at the same time, the international community gave a clear and stern warning to the LTTE to renounce the violence 'in words and deeds'.

Meanwhile, the global community strongly supported the Sri Lankan government's peace effort. In fact, the members of the international community not only gave a strong financial, military and diplomatic support to the peace drive, but also became Sri Lankan government's 'international safety net' to assist in case if the LTTE would return to violence.

With the international appreciation, sympathy and help, the LTTE proceeded with their demands for the alleviation of decade-long suffering of the Tamil people in the north and east of the island. As a skillful bargaining partner, the LTTE made sure to keep up pressure by maximizing the demands throughout the process. The Tamil Tigers logically substantiated

their demands and used local and international assistance to maximize the pressure on the government.

In total contrast to the Tamil Tigers, Sri Lankan government entered into the peace process as a passive partner. Regardless of its compromises, concessions and strengths, from the beginning the government played a passive role, notably by responding to the demands of the LTTE without setting any conditions or demands. As a result, for Sri Lankan government the current peace process has been an endless attempt to meet the LTTE's steadily enlarging demands. Meanwhile, the LTTE strategy to sustain pressure on the government by enhancing demands has been successful. With the growing demands, Colombo has fallen into a trap with extremely limited room for manoeuvring, striving to fulfill LTTE demands with the opposition resistance.

There are widespread accusations on the LTTE for setting unreasonable demands during the peace process. But one can argue that it is not mainly the unreasonable LTTE demands, but the government's inability to set its own conditions has led the peace process to the current impasse. In the negotiations, parties are not prohibited to put forward their demands. Process of negotiation often brings parties to compromises balancing and reshaping those initial demands.

In the case of recent peace process, the Sri Lankan government has not put forward any single condition or demand against the LTTE ones. Instead, government has desperately tried to meet LTTE demands. None of government's responses has been satisfactory for the Tamil Tigers, because the government has not been able to fulfill them due to opposition resistance. Therefore, each time Colombo had to present half-hearted and diluted resolutions to the LTTE conditions.

Furthermore the government's incapability to put forward concrete condi-

tions and set clear demands in negotiating with the LTTE has given advantage to the Sinhala opposition. In the eyes of the opposition, the government looked weak and incapable to stand the LTTE demands. They criticised the government for giving concessions, but not negotiating a settlement with the LTTE at equal level. With the LTTE's expanding demands, and government's desperate attempts to meet them, the opposition received much-needed ammunition to attack the peace process.

The conflict resolution theory elucidates that the ignoring of self-interest equally undermines a peace process as the overemphasis on self-interest. Charles Hauss said that giving in to the other side tends to leave the party dissatisfied as someone who lost and can thus lay the foundation for further conflict. Successful conflict resolution requires meeting everyone's needs at least in the medium and long term.⁽⁶⁾

A distinct character of the negotiation process between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE during their recent talks has been the absence of equality in demands. Main reason for this has been the government's constant fear to disenchant the Tamil Tigers. Fearing that the government's moves can make the LTTE to abandon the peace process, Colombo has been trying to please them by all possible means. As a result, government's role in the peace has been a desperate attempt to please the LTTE. Naturally, this has disrupted the balance in the bargaining position, leaving the government in a highly vulnerable situation.

Government's inability to assess the LTTE's as well as its own advantages and disadvantages has caused this anomaly. With a strong mandate given by the Sri Lankan people for the peace process, plus the overwhelm-

(6) See for details Charles Hauss, *International Conflict Resolution, International Relations for the 21 st Century*, Continuum, London and New York, 2001, pp. 36-40.

ing international support, the government had strong credibility to talk peace. Meanwhile, declaring a ceasefire and renouncing violence at a crucial juncture, the LTTE gained both local and international appreciation for their decade long cause to find a political solution. Under these circumstances, both parties were in very strong positions to pursue their own credible and legitimate demands. Government had to realize that the current peace process has given a rare chance for both the Tamil and Sinhalese to end the war. The LTTE's retuning to violence would disadvantage not only Sinhalese, but also the Tamil who had suffered already enormously.

Government has shown clear weakness in propagating its goals and objectives it intended achieve by engaging in the peace process. On the contrary, the LTTE has achieved an enormous success in this front. Even by suspending the peace talks and refusing to attend the crucial aid conference in Tokyo, the LTTE clearly indicated that the measures were desperate attempt to achieve their prime goal-the alleviation of suffering of Tamil people. On the contrary, Sri Lankan government has played a responding role trying to adjust to the new situations created by the negotiation partner. As a result, Sri Lankan government has become a reluctant partner to negotiate in the eyes of the LTTE. Meanwhile, for the political opposition (namely for the PA and JVP) the government has become an irresponsible authority that has neglected national interests.

Government has to bear responsibility to a certain extent for not been able to garner support from the political opposition. Wikeremesinghe administration must have known (by its own past experience) that the sad patter of Sri Lankan multi-party politics would be a serious challenge for the peace process. Miracle has not happened so far to bring confronting majority parties to make a concerted effort to end the ethnic conflict. Wikreme-singhe's government having had a rare chance to initiate a new peace proc-

ess should have done its best to earn support from the opposition to the peace process.

Electoral victory of the UNF came as a clear mandate given by the Sri Lankan people (mainly Sinhalese and Buddhists) to restore normalcy and establish peace. Opinion poll revealed that the people were strongly behind the peace process and believed that only a political dialogue can bring lasting peace. In fact due to this popular support the opposition was quite cautious⁽⁷⁾ to criticize the peace effort in the beginning. On several occasions, the opposition (hesitantly) expressed their support to the peace process. The opposition knew that the sabotage of the peace process could be politically disadvantageous for them. However, the new government was unable to capitalize the overwhelming support of the people towards the peace process and pressurize the opposition to continue support the peace effort. Government not only made no attempt to seek opposition's support, but also rejected proposal of the opposition to create a national government to advance the peace process.⁽⁸⁾

More importantly the government has been unable to garner support from the president to the peace process. Cohabitation of the political rivals from ruling party (the prime minister) and the opposition (the president) has been an unusual occurrence in Sri Lankan politics. Forming a government under the Executive President Kumaratunga, the Prime Minister Wikremesinghe must have realized that the support of the president would be crucial for his peace attempt. However, since the new government came to power, the gap between the prime minister and the president expanded. Kumara-

(7) See *Peace Confidence Index (PCI)*, Social Indicator, March 2003, Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo, http://www.cpalanka.org/research_papers/PCI_12_topline_results.pdf.

(8) *The Daily News*, 15 December 2001.

tunga not only criticized the peace process, but also often blamed the prime minister for not adequately informing her on the progress of the peace process. In addition, on several occasions, president has accused the government for misleading her with false information.⁽⁹⁾

This antagonism between the president and the prime minister reached its peak with the Kumaratunga's take over of three crucial ministries (namely the defense, interior and the media) on 4 November 2003. The political crisis instigated by the take over of the ministries had direct links with the peace process while having far reaching implications on the peace drive. The president claimed that the take over was due to grave security threats emerged with the LTTE military advancements during the peace process. As the political crisis in Colombo was deepening, the Prime Minister Wikremesinghe has rejected to continue the peace talks with the LTTE demanding the return of the defense portfolio without which he refused handled the peace drive. Just a few days after instigating the political crisis, Kumaratunga again invited Wikremesinghe 'to form a grand alliance of all patriotic forces and form a Government of National Reconciliation' to help continue the peace process.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, the government declined the invitation, asking president to renegotiate the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE to restart the process.⁽¹¹⁾ Amidst power struggle between the prime

(9) 'Two separate proposals of Interim Administrative Councils', *The Lankaweb* Weekly Editorial, 27 July 2003, <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/editorial/270703-1.html>.

(10) 'President invites for a government of national reconciliation', *Indiainfo.com*, 08 November 2003, <http://news.indiainfo.com/spotlight/lanka-peace/0811lanka.html>.

(11) 'Government shrugs off calls for coalition' Reports said that the government brushed off the idea to make a government of national reconciliation to defuse the tension instigated by the President Kumaratunga. <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/11/09/1068329421935.html?from=storyrhs,Smh.com.au>,

minister and the president, Norway-the mediator suspended its role saying that only after a settlement of the political crisis, Oslo can resume its part in the peace process.

Problems in the LTTE approach

The Tamil Tigers, the main partner in the peace process with the government, is also responsible for the current state of affairs in the peace process. Despite of the LTTE's repeated commitment to the peace process, their unilateral decision to suspend the peace talks is the main reason for the current impasse. The LTTE has outright rejected various national and international calls for the resumption of peace talks. While suspending peace talks, the Tamil Tigers have also refused to attend in a crucial aid conference held in Tokyo. This continuing refusal to resume dialogue has been one of the most serious impediments to the current peace drive.

Despite of the LTTE's pledges to CFA, there have been numerous cease-fire violations allegedly executed by the Tamil rebels. The Nordic ceasefire monitors have noted that out of 556 ceasefire violations, the Tamil Tigers had committed 502. Among them abduction of children for conscription, extortion by compulsory taxation, arms smuggling, shooting at individuals and SLA forces have been significant. In March, the Sea Tigers were accused for sinking a Taiwanese trawler killing 17 Taiwanese nationals.⁽¹²⁾ On a separate occasion, Sri Lankan Navy attacked a LTTE cargo vessel allegedly transporting weapons and ammunition killing 12 LTTE cadres.⁽¹³⁾

10 November 2003.

(12) 'LTTE allegedly attacks Chinese trawler: 17 feared dead', *The Sunday Times*, 23 March 2003.

(13) '12 Sea Tigers killed: LTTE vessel blown up', *Sunday Observer*, 15 June 2003; 'Provocative naval attack threatens future of Sri Lankan peace talks', *World Socialist Web Site*, 09 April 2003.

The UNICEF and various other international human rights organizations have blamed the LTTE for its continuing child soldier recruitments. Furthermore a local human rights organization-the University Teachers for Human Rights-Jaffna (UTHR-J)-has been heavily critical about the Tigers' continuing practice of child recruitment for military ranks.⁽¹⁴⁾ The Tamil Tigers have also been blamed for large number of assassinations of the political opponents and the intelligence officers. One report blamed the LTTE for killing over 50 members of democratic political parties and some 30 informants by June 2003.⁽¹⁵⁾

While reiterating their commitment to peace, the LTTE has openly rejected calls from the international community to lay down their arms and disavow violence.⁽¹⁶⁾ Tamil rebel stance has been that the ethnic conflict has not yet been resolved and therefore the decommissioning or abdication of arms is non-negotiable. Instead there have been reports that the group has been accumulating military power during the ceasefire. The LTTE approach to leave the military option open while agreeing to talk peace has been a serious obstacle to establish trust.

It is said that the LTTE has taken the advantage of the ceasefire to consolidate their hitherto existed administrative structures in the north and has substantially expanded their authority into the eastern part of the island. While doing so, the LTTE has shown strong intolerance to the political opposition. The Tamil Tigers have only tolerated the groups, which acknowledge the LTTE as the 'sole representative of the Tamil people'. Groups

(14) 'Tigers still enlisting children', BBC News, 10 December 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/south_asia/3306725.stm.

(15) 'Fifty democratic politicians killed after the MoU', *The Lanka Academic*, 4 June 2003.

(16) 'Balasingham rejects US call for lay down arms', *The Island*, 29 April 2003.

that oppose to this claim such as the EPDP, EPRLF (Varada), EROS (Shankar Rajee) and PLOTE have not been allowed to function in the northeast. Reports suggested that the leaders and the activists of such groups have been systematically assassinated.⁽¹⁷⁾

Reports also say that the administration the LTTE has been establishing in the northeast since the ceasefire is highly authoritarian and undemocratic. The UTHR-J noted that many Jaffna businessmen were moving to the south of the island fearing that the Sri Lankan army would withdraw from Jaffna peninsula and the LTTE would take over.⁽¹⁸⁾ It is said that the Tamil people also fear to express their views freely due to persecution and punishment by the LTTE.⁽¹⁹⁾

Another serious allegation is attached to the LTTE's involvements in attacking Muslim minority in the east of the island. In 1990 the LTTE forcibly evicted nearly 100,000 Muslims from Jaffna Peninsula. In addition, the LTTE is responsible for number of attacks on Muslim communities in the east since the struggle for Eelam began. However, there have been several incidents after ceasefire was signed where the LTTE allegedly involved in abducting and killing Muslims.⁽²⁰⁾

Another critical issue that generated tension and led the peace process into an impasse has been LTTE's continuing and ever-growing demands. The Tamil Tigers have put forward number of demands and set numerous

(17) 'The murder of T. Subathiran: Sri Lanka's end game', *UTHR*, 15 June 2003.

(18) 'Fear of army withdrawal leads to flight of capital from Jaffna', *Hindustani Times*, 2 May 2003.

(19) 'Sri Lanka's 'state within state'', BBC New World On Line Edition, 2 January 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south asia/3363017.stm>.

(20) 'Muslim-Tamil tensions out east Sri Lanka on edge', *Yahoo News*, 18 April 2003.

conditions since the peace process began. While each time the government has tried to meet the demands by offering new concessions the LTTE has declined them as unsatisfactory.⁽²¹⁾ One may of course argue that heavy bargaining is a part of any negotiation process and the LTTE has the rights to put forward their demands. Although the argument may seem correct, it must be noted that the unreasonable demands and unwillingness to compromise can often be counterproductive for reaching an amicable solution.

It is believed that the Tamil Tiger demand for the legitimacy of their naval wing (Sea Tigers) as a de-facto naval unit has been one such unreasonable demand.⁽²²⁾ While demanding to legitimize the Sea Tigers, the LTTE also asked the government to demarcate areas of northeastern sea for LTTE military training and firing exercises. Another problematic demand of the LTTE has been the withdrawal of Sri Lankan Army (SLA) from the high security zones (HSZs). The Tamil rebels have demanded to vacate positions occupied by the SLA to resettle returning Tamil refugees. However, due to prevailing security concerns government has not been able to meet the demand by withdrawing all forces immediately.⁽²³⁾ After signing the ceasefire agreement, government troops have vacated hundreds of private properties,

(21) Government has come up with number of offers to appease the LTTE and encourage them to continue peace talks. See 'Government to consider alternative site for Jaffna Division Headquarters', *The Island*, 12 April 2003; 'Lankan military to vacate private property in Jaffna', *The Times of India*, 29 April 2003. Media highlighted LTTE's repeated decline of government's proposals. See 'LTTE rejects government's new proposals', TamilNet, 30 May 2003; 'LTTE rejects Sri Lankan government's peace proposal', *Hindustani Times*, 30 May 2003.

(22) 'LTTE wants Sri Lanka to recognise its navy', *Hindustani Times*, 18 April 2003; 'Proposal to recognise Sea Tigers stirs hornet's nest', *Yahoo News*, 21 April, 2003.

(23) 'LTTE's move an act of brinkmanship?', *The Hindu*, 22 April 2003.

schools, places of worship and public buildings in the north east of the island, particularly in Jaffna peninsula while re-deploying troops in the government controlled area.⁽²⁴⁾ But, the LTTE's uncompromising stance to demand immediate withdraw of forces has created tension between two parties and allowed opposition to exploit the issue for their advantage.⁽²⁵⁾ The government's attempt to resolve the problem with the third party consultation has also failed as the LTTE rejected the recommendations made by the Indian advisor, Retired Major General Satish Nambiar, the former head of the UN peacekeeping forces in erstwhile Yugoslavia. Nambiar recommended the parallel decommissioning of the LTTE with the modification of the HSZs.⁽²⁶⁾ The LTTE outright rejected the recommendations.

Meanwhile the Tamil Tigers have not shown flexibility in demands for administrative structures they initiated for reconstruction and resettlement of the north and the east. The LTTE has rejected number of proposals offered by the government. Instead the rebels have demanded the total control over rehabilitation process and insisted that the government should establish the interim administration entirely outside the existing constitution.⁽²⁷⁾ No surprise that such approach can lead to a deadlock.

Role of the Sinhala opposition

The Sinhala political opposition is another factor that is responsible for the current deadlock in the peace process. The opposition People's Alliance

(24) 'Lankan military to vacate private property in Jaffna', *The Times of India*, 28 April, 2003.

(25) '52 Jaffna schools still occupied by SLA', *TamilNet*, 18 April 2003.

(26) 'Looking beyond the peace talks', *Frontline*, Vol. 20, Issue 07, March 29-April 11, 2003.

(27) 'Government should go beyond constitution to set up Interim Administration: LTTE', *Hindustani Times*, 23 May 2003.

(PA), the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the ultra-nationalist Sihala Urumaya (SU-Sinhala Heritage Party) have been highly critical about the peace process from its very outset. The president has not been satisfied with the government's handling of the peace process accusing ruling coalition for giving too many concessions to the LTTE jeopardizing national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity. On number of occasions Kumaratunga blamed the government for compromising security to appease the Tamil rebel. She blamed that the LTTE has used the peace process to advance its military capabilities.

Similarly, the JVP and the SU have been strongly critical of the peace process. Both parties have largely maintained a stance that the peace talks with the Tamil Tigers were futile. The JVP and the SU consider that a military solution would be the most reliable since the LTTE is a terrorist organization.⁽²⁸⁾

Political crisis provoked by the take over of key ministries by the president is a result of the opposition party attitude to the peace process. Although the president has attempted to justify the take over as for the interests of the nation, it is no secret that the political ambitions are at the heart of the action. While the president refuses to return the defense portfolio, the Prime Minister Ranil Wikremesinghe has insisted that he could not continue the peace process with the rebels without defense ministry under government's control. Wikermesinghe has threatened to abandon the peace process and called president to renegotiate ceasefire with the Tamil Tiger to restart peace talks. Meanwhile, the LTTE has blamed the president for scuttling the peace process and warned that they would not negotiate peace with Kumaratunga. Tamil rebels have demanded that president to

(28) 'Northeast conflict cannot be solved through talks-Sihala Urumaya', *TamilNet*, 11 September 2003.

hand back the defense portfolio to the government for the resumption of peace process. Making things worse, the JVP (PA's possible coalition partner) has threatened to impeach the president in case if she concedes to the pressure and hand back the defense ministry to the government.⁽²⁹⁾⁽³⁰⁾

Due to number of factors, Kumaratunga's actions appeal to the majority Sinhala population. LTTE's continuing rejection of the power-sharing proposals offered by the government has evoked a question how committed the Tamil Tigers to a political solution. Uncompromising demands over the HSZs and the sea movements coupled with continuing criminal activities have further undermined the trust. The Sinhala opposition realizes that under these circumstances, an appeal to defend the territorial integrity of the county and Sinhala interests would be applauded. As a matter of fact, the support of the Sinhalese towards the president has been in rise while the government's peace efforts have lost support significantly.

According to a survey conducted by the Center for Policy Alternatives in February 2003, 60.1 per cent of respondents have expressed uncertainty about the ongoing peace process. The opinion poll showed that the government's commitment to find a solution to the conflict through a dialogue with the LTTE has declined from 70.2 per cent in July 2002 to 56.7 per cent in early 2003. Meanwhile those who believe that the LTTE has used the talks 'to fool' people has increased from 16.1 per cent to 28.7 per cent.⁽³¹⁾

History has once again repeated the sad pattern of Sinhala majority poli-

(29) 'Kumaratunga sabotaging peace-LTTE', *The Time of India*, 07 November 2003.

(30) 'Ground for impeachment if CBK hands back defense-JVP', *The Island*, 11 December 2003.

(31) An Opinion Poll on Peace, Peace Confidence Index (PCI), Social Indicator, March 2003, Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo, http://www.cpalanka.org/research_papers/PCI_12_topline_results.pdf.

tics to undermine another chance for peace. In Sri Lanka political opposition has always been the most critical factor in any peace drive. Sinhala political opposition has always given priority to their short-term political expedien- cies against national interests. However, every time the opposition has done this in a manner to pretend that their actions are in the interests of the people. No opposition party has been generous enough to cooperate with the government to address critical national issues. Instead, opposition par- ties have squarely rejected every step of the government as destructive and negative. Sri Lankan opposition parties have not been capable to appreciate even those explicitly positive measures of the government fearing that such appreciation would undermine their own credibility. Current opposition's reaction to the Tokyo aid conference can be a good example. It is widely be- lieved that the Tokyo conference has been an overwhelming success where the island nation received unprecedented financial and moral support from the international community to the peace process. But the opposition not only showed no solidarity towards this extremely important event for the nation, (reports said that the president even refused to send a video-taped message to the delegates) but also harshly criticized the government for ac- cepting massive aid package. President accused the government for leading the country to a debt trap and vowed to re-negotiate the aid accepted in Tokyo. While the international community reassured that the massive aid package was, as Yasushi Akashi mentions a 'tangible vote of confidence in Sri Lankan peace process', the opposition political parties only criticized the government the aid as a burden. As a matter of fact, every Sri Lankan gov- ernment since the independence has resorted to the international aid as a vital source of development funds.

This inability to appreciate progressive aspects of the political opposition in the name of national interests has been an outcome of the confrontational

politics. Every opposition party in the post-independence Sri Lanka has behaved similarly. The opposition parties have attempted to bring down the ruling governments by criticizing, (fairly and unfairly) in order to achieve their short-term political goals. Political opposition in Sri Lankan democracy has shown an unusual lack of generosity.

The most ominous outcome of the power struggle in Colombo has been the withdrawal of Norway from the peace process.⁽³²⁾ On 14 November amidst growing political crisis the Norwegian government declared their decision to suspend its role in the process. Oslo noted that the Colombo's power struggle remains the single most problems to the peace process.⁽³³⁾

The political crisis in Colombo has tremendously strengthened the Tamil Tigers. The LTTE has repeatedly said that the political struggle between two Sinhala parties have disadvantaged the Tamil minority. In 1980s, they rejected the conventional Tamil political leadership advocating that the Tamil minority rights can be achieved only by fighting a war against Sinhalese. Current power struggle between the president and the prime minister has been a clear proof of the rebels' position. There can be no better proof for them to convince that the Sinhala majoritarian politics would never allow a political solution to the conflict. Ironically it was the President Kumaratunga who first initiated the peace process offering a generous devolution package in late 1990s. Kumaratunga also invited the Norwegians to facilitate the peace process. The most critical factor that disrupted her peace initiative was the opposition, ironically enough, by Ranil Wikremesinghe. As the opposition leader Wikremesinghe made exactly the same accusations against Kumaratunga saying the peace process jeopardized the

(32) 'Norway suspends Sri Lanka peace drive due to political crisis'. *France Press*, 14 November 2003.

(33) 'Norway explains peace role', *BBC News*, 14 November 2003.

sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the island. He also blamed the devolution package as the first step to a separate Tamil state. Being unable to receive majority support in the parliament Kumaratunga had to give up the peace initiative. Today Wikremesinghe government has faced the same dilemma. Having only two-seat majority in the parliament, the ruling coalition is unable to implement the peace plan, which is in substance, has little difference from Kumaratunga's. In an interview the Indian daily 'The Hindu' asked President Kumaratunge 'Taking credit for the peace process is an issue, we saw how UNP sabotaged your peace package. This of onepmanship which is a fact of Sri Lankan politics....' Kumaratunga answered, 'whether I also would indulge in that? No, I won't. As I told the Prime Minister right in the beginning when he came into power, I will not sabotage his peace process like the way he sabotaged mine. I told him ask for our assistance, we will give you our eight years of experience of handling the issue'.⁽³⁴⁾

Rivalry of the prime minister and the president has been a proof for the Tamil Tiger's claim that the 'Sinhala hegemonic parties have repeatedly denied the Tamil minority rights.' Commenting on the power struggle, Karuna, a trusted military commander of Prabhakaran said 'This is how in the past they scuttled the peace process despite the concessions and compromises we made during talks with the Sri Lankan government.This proves again that the Tamils have to be strong. We can protect our being as a nation only as long as we can sustain our unique military power'.⁽³⁵⁾

With Colombo's power struggle intensifying, the LTTE can easily mobilize Tamil mass particularly Tamil youth for military actions. Similarly political crisis gives justice to their claims in the international arena too. The

(34) 'India should play a pro-active role', *The Hindu*, 12 April 2003.

(35) *Tamil Net*, 07 November 2003.

LTTE can convincingly prove that the Tamil cause of liberation has been a clear outcome of majority Sinhalese denial of their rights. Earlier, if the international community urged the LTTE to be committed to the peace process, now the world members insist Colombo to stop scuttling the peace drive.⁽³⁶⁾ In case if the LTTE would return to war, it would be difficult for Sinhala leaders to persuade the international community and seek support.

Conclusion

Current deadlock in the Sri Lankan peace process has darkened the widespread optimism both at home and abroad to end the two-decade long ethnic conflict and establish lasting peace. Parties involved in the peace process have reiterated their commitment to the ceasefire. However, the absence of warfare has not been able to dispel growing uncertainty. It is believed that the Tamil Tigers' decision to withdraw from the process instigated the current crisis. However, it is argued here despite its commitment to pursue negotiations government is also strongly responsible for the current stalemate in the peace process. During the peace talks Colombo has played a passive role acting to meet demands of the LTTE while setting no counter-demands. Constant attempt to appease Tamil Tigers have led the government vulnerable while coming under strong criticism from the Sinhala opposition political parties. Meanwhile, the LTTE is also responsible for the current state of affairs in the peace process. Endless unreasonable demands posed by the Tamil Tigers have invited criticism from the Sinhala nationalists. Alleged criminal activities committed by the LTTE have further deteriorated the trust and confidence. Finally, the Sinhala majoritarian politics continues to be a serious obstacle to the peace process.

(36) 'Powell writes to CBK, Ranil', *The Sunday Leader*, 04 January 2004.