

INTERVIEW

Solheim: 'The International Community supports the Tamil right to self-rule'

Norwegian Development Minister Erik Solheim says Norway remains committed to helping end the conflict

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Tehelka.com

Tehelka: The Sri Lankan government was against holding the talks in Norway, as demanded by the Tigers. They insisted that talks be held in Sri Lanka or in some Asian country. How did the two parties agree on Geneva finally?

Solheim: The parties, the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), agreed to meet after being convinced that the CFA must be upheld to prevent further escalation of the situation. Throughout the call for such a meeting, Norway reassured the parties that Norway will be ready to facilitate talks between the parties wherever they agree to meet. The parties found compromise in Geneva with suggestion from the facilitator. Switzerland has always, in the eyes of the parties, played a constructive role in supporting the peace process and maintained an unbiased approach.

Tehelka: Have you decided on the agenda for the talks? When is it going to be held?

Solheim: As you know, the parties have agreed to meet in Geneva 22-23 February. The parties have requested Norway to facilitate talks on how to address the critical security situation and improve the living conditions for the people on the ground. The parties will discuss ways and means to strengthen the implementation of the CFA. This is by no means negotiations to end the conflict, but it is very positive that the parties have agreed to meet at high level to discuss how to improve the serious security situation. This is the first time in three years that the parties meet face-to-face at such a high level.

Tehelka: You have held talks with both the sides. What are the major complaints and grievances of the two parties?

Solheim: The main complaints are related to the high level of killings, abductions and other forms of violence which have occurred during the last month. But I trust you understand that I cannot paraphrase the parties' positions on these matters.

Tehelka: Do you believe a negotiated solution is possible, given the history of aborted agreements, and failure of peace initiatives in the past five decades between the Sinhalese and the Tamils? If you believe so, then

what is the timeframe you would like to give yourself?

Solheim: I sincerely believe in a negotiated political solution. The Norwegian Government is at the same time committed to actively promoting peace and reconciliation internationally. I can assure you that we will continue to give priority to facilitating the peace process in Sri Lanka as long as the parties request our efforts and we see that we can play a constructive role. I hope that the parties can gain mutually confidence in each other during talks on stabilising the security situation to take the peace process forward.

Tehelka: There is clear pressure on President Mahinda Rajapakse from his allies, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Jathika Hela Urumaya, not to concede even the most basic demands of Tamils. For instance, both favour a solution within a unitary state structure, which is a departure from the position of former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, who was in favour of a federal solution. With the present government dependent on these two parties for its survival, how meaningful do you think the talks could get?

Solheim: I cannot in my position as third party facilitator involve myself in political issues regarding internal dynamics on either side.

Tehelka: Do you think a solution is possible within a unitary state structure?

Solheim: I take the view that the parties should not be blinded by the use of different terms. During negotiations, the parties will address the substance and find a durable solution acceptable to all Sri Lankans.

Tehelka: What in your view are the legitimate grievances of Tamils?

Solheim: There is broad agreement in the international community in support for Tamil rights to some form of self rule or power sharing within a united Sri Lanka.

Tehelka: Do you agree with the view that trouble in the Island nation started with the controversial Ceylon Citizenship Act in 1948 (which disenfranchised thousands of Tamils), the declaration of Sinhala as the official language, and the subsequent laws in education favouring the Sinhalese etc, resulting in alien-

ation of Tamils?

Solheim: Both parties would have a different take on this issue. Norway is tasked to bring the parties to the table and assist them in finding a durable solution to the conflict. We have to be careful in our comments to historical matters, however important they may be.

Tehelka: There is a view that the European Union (EU) will revoke its travel ban on LTTE cadres following the resumption of talks between the two parties. Do you see that happening?

Solheim: Norway is not a member of the EU, and thus not involved in EU discussions with regards to travel ban on the LTTE - and neither do we have an official stance on this issue.

Tehelka: The Sri Lankan government's proxy war against the LTTE through the Karuna group is said to be the main cause for the escalation of violence, undermining the CFA. Has the Lankan government given any assurance of disarming the Karuna group?

Solheim: Disarmament of Tamil paramilitary groups is covered by paragraph 1.8 in The Cease Fire Agreement. Both the GOSL and the LTTE have reassured that they will do their utmost to stop violence before the Geneva-meeting. It is very positive that we see a clear reduction in the use of violence from the moment this commitment was made by both parties. I truly welcome the willingness by both parties to discuss these issues in Geneva.

Tehelka: In the absence of any action against Karuna group, the LTTE has come out with its counter strategy of creating its own 'paramilitary' groups. Where will this 'proxy war' by the two parties lead to?

Solheim: I trust that the two parties are able to agree on how to improve the security situation in Geneva. These discussions will by no means be easy for the parties - I expect the negotiations to be tough. We think more than one meeting will be needed. The parties are nonetheless taking a small but very significant step towards putting the peace process back on a positive track.

Tehelka: Article 2:1 of the CFA states that both parties should "abstain from hostile acts against the civilian population." But the Lankan military has



Mr. Solheim addressing the first round of talks on February 22

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been harassing civilians, triggering an exodus of Tamil refugees into India. Nearly 300 refugees have crossed over to India in the last month, bringing with them tales of rapes, and harassment by army men. The SLMM too has admitted to an increase in army harassment of civilians. How do you propose to address this issue?

Solheim: The parties are committed to end the campaign of violence. The parties explicitly stated that they will do their utmost to stop violence, also against civilians.

Tehelka: What did LTTE leader Prabakaran tell you when you met him?

Solheim: Prabakaran promised to do his part to put a stop to the escalating violence. He reaffirmed his commitment to the peace process and his support for a peaceful solution. Both parties repeated their confidence in Norway as an impartial facilitator for the peace process.

Tehelka: America seems to have taken a completely pro-Sinhala stand. The recent statements of US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Jeffrey Lunstead and US Under Secretary for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns have betrayed their bias. How will this stand of the US impact the peace talks?

Solheim: Many governments, including the US, have expressed their support to the parties ahead of the Geneva-talks and welcomed the commitment by the parties to sit

down at the table. We are encouraged by the support of India, US and other international actors for the Norwegian involvement as facilitators.

Tehelka: Both parties, even while they have agreed to hold talks, seem to be preparing for war as well. Sri Lanka has proposed to increase its defence expenditure by thirty percent this fiscal year, while the LTTE has built a new airstrip and reportedly increased the strength of its 'Sea Tiger' naval force. What do these developments augur for a peaceful solution?

Solheim: The aim of the Geneva talks is exactly this: To avoid Sri Lanka slipping back to war.

Tehelka: The Sri Lankan government's failure to implement the Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure agreement that it signed with the LTTE has affected thousands of Tamils in LTTE controlled areas. They could not receive international aid. Will you take up this issue in the Geneva talks?

Solheim: The Geneva-meeting will be addressing the security situation. The parties will decide when and how to approach other issues.

Tehelka: What was the outcome of your recent Indian visit and meetings with National Security Adviser M K Narayanan and Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran? How do you think India could help Norway in the peace process?

Solheim: The Government of India has always been supportive of the peace process and Norwegian as facilitator, and India reiterated her support during the meetings. India also welcomed the flexibility shown by both parties in agreeing to Geneva as a compromise. Norway will continue to keep India informed and consulting throughout the process.