

Another bogus peace move by Sri Lanka's president

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A major speech by Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse has once again made clear that the Sri Lankan government has no intention of advancing real proposals to end the country's long-running civil war.

Addressing the inaugural meeting of an advisory committee of 15 "experts" appointed by him to assist the All Party Conference (APC) in drafting a constitutional reform package, Rajapakse avoided even hinting at any concrete proposals or specific time frame for the deliberations.

The composition of the 15-member body underscores the bogus character of the whole exercise.

The main Tamil party, which acts as a proxy for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and represents the electorates of the north and east of the island, was not even invited to the APC.

Moreover, the initial "advisory committee of experts" of 12, appointed by Rajapakse, included only one Tamil, while H. L. de Silva, a notorious Sinhala chauvinist lawyer, who has argued even against the ceasefire agreement, not to speak of any power sharing arrangement with the LTTE, has been placed at its head. At the last minute an attempt was made to cover up the blatant imbalance of the committee by adding three more Tamils.

The United National Party (UNP), the main opposition party which signed the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE when it held power in 2002, boycotted the meeting amid claims that its MPs were being offered lucrative perks by Rajapakse, including ministerial posts, to induce them to join government ranks.

Amazing as it may seem, Rajapakse did not once mention the word "Tamil" in his address, which lasted for more than three quarters of an hour. The only instance it popped up was when he accused the LTTE of killing Tamil leaders.

Throughout his speech Rajapakse used the words "national problem" and "all our people" as a cover for his parliamentary alliance with the extreme Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) which vehemently oppose any democratic concessions to the Tamil minority. Both organisations have played a pivotal role in pushing the Rajapakse government in the direction of resuming the civil war during the eight months of his rule.

Echoing the line of his alliance partners, Rajapakse laid the blame for the civil war on the LTTE. "Having suffered much over these two decades of a war imposed on them by the LTTE, we must create a safe, stable and meaningful environment that enables the impoverished in the North and the East to participate in economic activity, which will give them the capacity to progress towards their life ambitions," he declared.

He also used the occasion to present himself as a champion of human rights, insisting that “we cannot ignore the human rights standards sweeping through every corner of the globe”. “There is justifiable cause for our insistence on these [human right] issues arising from the wanton killings of Tamil political and other Tamil leaders whose only crime was that they held views contrary to that of the LTTE.”

Rajapakse, who has been, an MP since 1970, serving as cabinet minister and prime minister in previous governments, noted that “successive governments have taken initiatives to resolve our national problem without much success, which points to a weakness which we need to overcome.... I regard as my bounden duty to do my best with all sincerity and commitment, however difficult the task is, to strive for peace on behalf of all our people.”

The hollow character of these pledges was underscored by Rajapakse’s commitment to allocate just \$1.25 billion for the development work in the north and east. This is only a quarter of the funds committed by the donor countries as a peace dividend at the Tokyo conference held in 2003. When considered in the light of the destruction faced by the people in the war ravaged north and east, coupled with the devastation caused by the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, which hit the east coast the hardest, Rajapakse’s allocation of funds is nothing more than an insult to the people of that region.

However the president was keen to talk up the profit-making opportunities which would be available if ever a settlement is reached. “Rapid development is quite achievable within a short time given the international community’s desire to engage in the reconstruction effort and the local entrepreneurs’ desire to invest in this [north and east] area,” he said.

Seeking to remain on-side with sections of Sri Lankan business which want a settlement as well as some of the major powers backing the peace moves, Rajapakse included a call to the LTTE to “engage itself in this process” in his speech. But even this limited move brought an immediate hostile response from his parliamentary partner, the JVP.

At a press conference called by its front organisation, the Patriotic National Movement (PNM), the propaganda secretary of the JVP, Wimal Weerawansa, said: “Wasting time by holding fraudulent peace talks is like playing cards at a funeral house and is meaningless.” There was no alternative but to mobilise the people and defeat terrorism in a fight to the finish.

PNM president Gunadasa Amarasekera told the conference that what existed in the country was neither an ethnic problem nor a war but only terrorism and added that “a war mentality must be created throughout the whole country to defeat terrorism.”

Nevertheless, the international and local media hailed Rajapakse’s initiatives. A report filed by the Associated Press stated: “The move is the first concrete step by Rajapakse to tackle the 23 year old Tamil insurgency since his election in November.”

The Colombo government owned *Daily News*, in its editorial on July 12 declared it was “essential that the peace-loving sections of this country readily rally around President Mahinda Rajapakse in his efforts at finding a negotiated settlement. If the public gather round the President in his peace making endeavors, expecting nothing in return but Sri Lanka’s well-being and happiness, there is no doubt that extremist opinion and other obstacles to peace would be triumphantly overcome.”

When the UNP, feeling the pressure of this campaign, reversed its position and decided to join the APC meetings, the *Daily Mirror* wrote in its editorial, of July 13: "It is encouraging that wiser counsel had finally prevailed and that the UNP has decided to participate in the future deliberations of the All Party Conference."

The government and media are straining hard to sell this latest exercise in the face of skepticism generated by the fact that all the previous attempts to draw up constitutional packages and peace negotiations have only been a cover for the next stage of the war.

And once again there are preparations for a resumption of all-out war. The government has intensified recruiting drives to boost military personnel and has engaged in a buying spree on new, more sophisticated weapons for the armed forces. The government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told a press conference the president did not want to set a time frame for the drafting of constitutional reform "because he does not want to put any constraints on the advisory committee and the APC."

Meanwhile the *Daily Mirror* has taken on the task of rationalising the predominance of Sinhala chauvinists on the "advisory committee." According to a recent editorial: "Although, the members appointed to this committee of experts are persons with divergent views on the national issue, they, as responsible citizens, well aware of the gravity of the present situation, should be able to reach a compromise on the issue."

In fact, the composition of the "advisory committee" demonstrates both the fraudulent character of the entire exercise and the entrenched Sinhala chauvinism in the Sri Lankan political establishment, the fundamental cause of the conflict.