

## 'JAW JAW' IN GENEVA

The compromise which the Norwegians facilitated between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to hold talks in Geneva is an important step in the direction of resuming the stalled peace process. The proposed talks which are likely to be held in mid-February might be confined exclusively to the full implementation of the ceasefire agreement. Even then, to use the famous Churchillian phrase, 'jaw jaw is better than war war.' There has not been any political engagement whatsoever between the two sides ever since the P-TOMs agreement collapsed last year. Moreover, the escalating violence in December and January had all the potential to push the government and the LTTE back to war. At least, the catastrophe that was in the making has now been postponed.

This provides some breathing space for Sri Lanka's peace process. The intense diplomatic activity, or pressure, by the international community and the Norwegian facilitator has once again demonstrated the extent to which the external factor has been crucial to rescue the peace process. Earlier the LTTE insisted on Oslo as the venue of talks. The government wanted an Asian country, possibly Japan, as the venue. When the bitter debate between the two sides went on over this question, a great deal of pessimism emerged about their willingness to return to talks at all. The concession made by the government and the LTTE to the Norwegian proposal for Geneva as the venue for talks also indicated that both sides did

not consider large-scale war as an early option.

The road to Geneva is now cleared. But the trajectories after Geneva are not very clear though. The notion of 'strengthening the implementation of CFA' is a difficult and complex one. At the centre of the Geneva agenda would be the question of violence, that mostly includes the recent killings. During December and January, over 200 killings of government soldiers, LTTE combatants, paramilitary cadres and civilians have occurred. These killings constituted a specific phase of Sri Lanka's conflict, the transition of the no-war no-peace situation into an undeclared war. Thus, the proposed Geneva talks on the CFA would essentially be an exercise in stopping the undeclared war and preventing it from escalating into a full-scale, open war. If the talks fail, a return to the undeclared war, with all its risks of developing itself into the next stage of the civil war, would be a possibility. In a sense, the Geneva talks can make or break Sri Lanka's fragile peace process.

In de-escalating violence, both sides will be hard-pressed to manage their respective paramilitaries. It is an open secret that both the government and the LTTE have been using paramilitaries in their recent strategy of using violence as a political weapon. If the success of Geneva talks is likely to depend on the ability of the two sides to disband, dissolve or control the paramilitaries, a commitment to such a joint initiative

before the actual talks begins will certainly be propitious. At least, a joint appeal by the government and the LTTE to refrain from violence will create conditions conducive for an eventual agreement to strengthen the CFA. It will also erase the political space for spoiler elements to resume violence.

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