

NEGOTIATIONS BOTH SIDES STAND TO GAIN

The visit of Eric Solheim, the Norwegian peace emissary to Colombo has again aroused much controversy. While the government and opposition leaders have had serious political talks with him, his detractors of the Sinhalese racist fringe have not even spared his private life. Despite hostile media exposure in Colombo, Solheim appears to be sticking to his task of attempting to bring the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to the negotiation table. He might have to work still harder to achieve results.

It has been more than six months since the Norwegian initiative for peace in Sri Lanka has begun. It was initially described as 'mediation.' The Colombo government insisted that it was not mediation, but 'facilitation,' a concept which gave a somewhat limited role to the Norwegian third party. According to the government's thinking, the Norwegians should merely try to facilitate communication between the government and the LTTE. This approach meant that the 'foreign forces' should not impose any program or agenda on the government and the government will ultimately decide when and what to talk to the LTTE. Meanwhile, the LTTE has preferred the language of mediation. From the LTTE's perspective, the active involvement of the international community in Sri Lanka's conflict is ultimately in its, and not the Colombo government's, favor.

While the controversy over the semantics of conflict resolution initiatives continue to remain quite interesting, the progress achieved through the Norwegian initiative does not seem to be all that dramatic. It has been the habit of both the local and international press to dramatize events of war and peace in Sri Lanka and as soon as the Norwegians stepped in, there began media speculations about an imminent breakthrough in the Sri Lankan crisis. But events so far have proved a different, more realistic point. Even to bring the two conflicting parties to the negotiation table, there are barriers to over-

come. Some such barriers might even be quite insurmountable.

For the past few months, the leaders of the government of Sri Lanka as well as of the LTTE have been making a host of public statements concerning their positions and approaches to the conflict and peace. Even a first glance at many of these statements would reveal the ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in the way in which the two sides appear to conceptualize the prospects for peace. A sense of deep mutual mistrust appears to govern their primary political attitudes to one another. For example, the much-awaited speech delivered by the LTTE leader on November 26—the so-called Hero's Day Speech—contained two messages that diametrically opposed one another. The LTTE leader in the first part of his speech expressed his movement's commitment to a negotiated settlement and then ended the speech with a renewed dedication to the goal of a separate state—two irreconcilable propositions—in the same speech. It is either the LTTE now has divided loyalties to its ultimate political goals or Prabhakaran was addressing two distinct constituencies. Or, as the critics of the LTTE were quick to point out, Prabhakaran was not really serious about negotiations or peace; he was merely laying a trap for the government to walk into.

This idea of a 'trap' is in turn linked to the notion that behind the LTTE's call for talks has always been a hidden agenda, a manipulationist strategy to regain a military advantage. The LTTE's unilateral proposal for a cease-fire reinforced these arguments that advocate extreme caution in dealing with the LTTE. The hidden-agenda theorists have been pointing out that the LTTE's real aim is two-fold. In the immediate sense, as the argument goes, the rebels want some respite from the government's continuing military assault in order to obtain new weapons and blunt the military gains made by the army. But more astute observers point out that the LTTE's immediate objective was more a political one,

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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

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designed to gain international legitimacy by stealing the negotiation agenda from the government. It was often interesting to contrast Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar's language of war with the language of negotiations of Anton Balasingham, the London-based international spokesman of the LTTE. The second, long-term aim, according to the LTTE critics, is to engage the government in negotiations so that international pressure could be mobilized forcing the government to withdraw its army from Jaffna. As this argument goes, recapture of the Jaffna peninsula is at the center of the LTTE's agenda. Negotiations would enable the LTTE to use political and diplomatic pressure on the government for an eventual troop withdrawal.

For the watchers of Sri Lanka's conflict, there is also something very familiar in this whole controversy about negotiations and cease-fire. It has always been the case that when one side proposed negotiations, the other party has seen a hidden, mean agenda in it. When one party was for a cease-fire, the other was not for cease-fire. That is precisely why at least this time there is an international facilitator/mediator whose role is to stand above the partisan rhetoric and guide the two sides through the difficult path of nego-

tiations. The role of the third party is to carefully assess the contending positions and approaches of the two sides, address their fears and anxieties and enable them to seize opportunities for peace, if the parties really desire alternative paths in the conflict. If the two parties are not ready to explore the negotiation path, there is hardly anything the third party can achieve, except engaging in preliminary, exploratory work that might become useful on some later occasion.

One of the crucially important developments that many observers appear to have missed is the key political message which the Norwegian emissary is reported to have communicated to the LTTE leader when he met the latter in Sri Lanka's Vanni jungles in last November. The message is that the LTTE should seek a solution within the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and that the world community would not accept a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka. Carl Inderfurth, the U.S. government's Under Secretary of State for South Asia, and Peter Hain, the British Under Secretary of Foreign Affairs also made virtually made the same point in New Delhi and Colombo. The significance of this development is that the international community, or more correctly, its key political players, appears to have come to consensus on Sri Lanka's conflict. The meaning of that consensus is that at present there is no room for a new territorial nation-state in South Asia. What Eric Solheim of Norway has communicated to the LTTE leadership is exactly that consensus.

The political significance of this development cannot be underestimated, particularly in the new world political context of globalization. Contrary to the passionate desires of many Sinhalese nationalists, no solution, military or political, could be found without the direct involvement of the external, global forces. In this age of globalization, no nation-state is immune to the direct pressures of world powers. As very clearly demonstrated at the recently concluded Sri Lanka Aid Consortium meeting in Paris, the global state as well as the global civil society have now come to define the terms of economic as well as political change of Sri Lanka. One key aspect of those terms is the recognition that the nation-state of Sri Lanka should not be bifurcated along ethnic lines. Both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE will have to operate within that framework and it is obviously a gain to the government if it is seriously committed to a constitutional accommodation with the LTTE. When British Deputy Foreign Minister Peter Hain stressed at his Colombo British Council talk that the Sri Lankan government should

respect the Tamil claim for self-determination, he was not campaigning for a Tamil separate state, as alleged by some newspapers in Colombo. The real point Hain made was that the Sri Lankan government would have to find a constitutional solution which will accommodate the Tamil demand for self-determination within the territorial framework of Sri Lanka. The PA government's devolution package comes very close to what the international community would appreciate as a workable political framework for a lasting settlement. The government should not feel shy about negotiations, because it has already developed a credible negotiation position that can command the support and respect from the international community. By reintroducing the project of constitutional reform, the government can indeed relaunch its political initiative.

As for the LTTE, it is extremely important that they begin to re-examine their project for a separate state. Until there are strong signs of such a re-examination, no Colombo government can conceivably be serious about any talks with the LTTE. After all, why should a government negotiate separation by an ethnic minority? Only a state with an acute political crisis would come to the negotiation table on the terms demanded by an ethnic minority. It is very unlikely that the Sri Lankan state would develop any major crisis. In this age of globalization, the global state is there to come to the rescue of the Sri Lankan state and Colombo's ruling class is not stupid enough to force the international community to side with the LTTE. The fact that the global powers have clearly and categorically told the LTTE leader himself that there is no room for a separate ethnic state in Sri Lanka is very likely to serve as a turning point in the LTTE's political project. Someone had to tell this to Prabhakaran and Solheim has done exactly that. Now it is time for an internal debate within the LTTE about the movement's political goals and strategies. Hopefully, such debate may arise sooner or later.

Meanwhile, due to international pressure as well on their own political calculations, the government and the LTTE are very likely to start negotiations within the next few months. Such talks might not produce any tangible results. Yet, it is important that the two sides meet and talk, with or without a cease-fire, and hopefully with no preconditions. It is only through direct talks even a distant possibility of a breakthrough could be set in motion. In the current conjuncture of events, both the government and the LTTE are likely to gain than lose in sending even low-level representatives to the negotiation table. **P**