
The failure of successive peace processes with the LTTE - A historical overview

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The Thimpu talks
Discussions with the LTTE began with what are termed the Thimpu talks in 1985. The LTTE and other militant groups attended along with the TULF, the main Tamil political party, elected to Parliament in 1977 but no longer there because they vacated their seats consequent to the 6th amendment to the Constitution passed in 1983. In any case, following the anti-Tamil riots of 1983, influence amongst Tamils had passed from the TULF to militant groups, which all attended at Thimpu. Both sides claimed the intransigence of the other led to the breakdown of the talks. However, to quote Kethesh Loganathan, who represented one of the militant groups at the time, 'The Tamil organizations took the position that the burden of presenting a broadly acceptable formula lay with Colombo. The Tamil delegation, instead, subjected the Sri Lankan government delegation to a series of 'lectures' on what constitutes the ethnic question and as to why the burden lay with Colombo to come out with a solution 'worthy of our consideration'. Even more significantly, the LTTE used this period to strengthen itself at the expense of the other Tamil groups. They decimated the EPRLF and eliminated Sri Sabaratnam, the leader of TELO, and by the time the talks broke down had emerged as by far the most powerful of the groups.

The Phase 1 of the Thimpu Talks

Tamil Delegation on Left and Sri Lanka Delegation on Right
The Indo-Lanka Agreement and Discussions with President Premadasa
Following the Indo-Lankan Accord of 1987, the other Tamil militant groups entered the political process, but the LTTE, after initial acquiescence, broke with the Indians and precipitated a fierce conflict with the Indian Peace Keeping Force. Unfortunately, for various reasons, the new Sri Lankan government of President Premadasa, elected in 1988, was not positive about the Indian presence and entered into informal negotiations with the LTTE. The main purpose of this, from the LTTE side, seems again to have been weakening of other Tamil groups. The chief victims this time were the leaders of the TULF, which had done very well in the parliamentary election of 1989. The Indo Sri Lanka Agreement being signed by Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lanka President, J.R. Jayawardene on 29 July 1987. The former Leader of the Opposition, A. Amirthalingam, was killed along with the MP for Jaffna. The Deputy Leader was injured and was never able to play an active role in politics again. In addition, the TULF was rebuilding leadership in the East, but the most prominent of its MPs there, Sam Tambimuttu, was also killed. The LTTE continued on what seemed good terms with the government until the IPFK was withdrawn, and the North-eastern Provincial Council was dissolved, its Chief Minister (Varatharaja Perumal of the EPRLF) having fled to India. However, it claimed that negotiations were not going well, and suddenly it withdrew, in the process killing over 600 policemen in the East who had dropped their defences because of what they thought was a truce. Negotiations with President Kumaratunga
Chandrika Kumaratunga won the Parliamentary election of 1994 on a manifesto of peace negotiations, and promptly, as Prime Minister, dismantled some of the security apparatus. During the Presidential election that followed, her opponent Gamini Dissanayake of the UNP was killed by a suicide bomber during an election rally. Talks continued until mid-1995 though again the LTTE claimed that they were not going well. Though a formal agreement had been signed requiring notice of any abrogation of the truce, very sudden notice was followed by an attack on naval vessels in Trincomalee harbour. Negotiations with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe
Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe handing over government's assent to a truce document to Norway's ambassador to Sri Lanka, Jon Westborg at Vavuniya in 2002. (AFP photo) The Ceasefire Agreement signed in February 2002 should have had two consequences. The first was a cessation of hostilities. This was not the interpretation of the LTTE, which used the government's adherence to the CFA to build up its own strength, with massive importation of weapons, as clearly found also by the Scandinavian Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission. In fact, over five years, the SLMM found the LTTE guilty of 3830 violations, whereas the government was found guilty of just 350 violations. The second purpose of the CFA was negotiations, but after six rounds of talks, in a period of just over a year, the LTTE withdrew from negotiations in April 2003. It should be noted that, even if the LTTE genuinely felt that both Presidents Premadasa and Kumaratunga were not serious in negotiation, the same could scarcely be said of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, who was widely believed and certainly so by the Sri Lankan electorate when it voted largely on this issue in April 2004 and to be bending over backwards to appease the LTTE. To quote former LTTE military commander Col Karuna as to why the LTTE leadership reneged on what seemed the most promising development during the talks, 'LTTE delegate leader Anton Balasingham, without consulting Prabhakaran had issued a statement stating that they were willing to consider a federal system. When he discussed this with Prabhakaran, he rejected the idea of federalism. He wanted the talks dragged for at least five years till the LTTE obtained enough arms to strengthen itself further.' The LTTE took advantage of the CFA once again to attack its Tamil opponents, namely former militant groups such as the EPDP, PLOTE and the Perumal wing of the EPRLF. The TULF was now very much under LTTE control, its last independent leader Neelan Tiruchelvam having been killed by the LTTE in 1999. In 2005, the LTTE killed Lakshman Kadirgamar, President Kumaratunga's Foreign Minister. By then the government was again under President Kumaratunga, who had taken over the Defence Ministry from Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's nominee, following a Supreme Court ruling that the President had to be responsible for Defence. Attempts at compromise between the two leaders failed, so an election was held in April 2004 which was decisively won by the President's party. The LTTE refused to return to formal negotiations, but they did engage in informal discussions following the December 2004 tsunami, regarding a mechanism to deal with aid. The structure that was agreed upon was deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, but before any further negotiations could take place, a Presidential election was held, at the end of 2005. Negotiations with President Rajapakse
Though the LTTE seemed to have contributed to President Rajapakse's victory in the poll by forbidding citizens in the areas under its total control to vote, soon after his inauguration, they launched a series of attacks against the forces which led the SLMM to question as to whether the Ceasefire still existed. However, they finally

agreed to return to negotiations, having insisted that these take place in Europe. The first negotiations took place in Geneva in February 2006, and seemed to set a positive start, but the LTTE refused to attend the next round which had been scheduled for April. Instead, a suicide bomber tried to kill the army commander, who narrowly escaped. The LTTE finally agreed to return to negotiations in Oslo in June, but having been flown there, they refused to appear. Though various reasons have been adduced, one that is not generally known is that the Norwegian ambassador had made clear to them that the issue of child soldiers could not be ruled out of the agenda. Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva shakes hands with Anton Balasingham before the start of truce talks. Former Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen, Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs Director Urs Ziswiler and Norwegian International Development Minister Erik Solheim look on. (February 2006) In August 2006, perhaps assuming that their military build up was now satisfactory, the LTTE launched two massive attacks, in the East and the North respectively. Had either of these succeeded, the capacity of the forces to maintain control of large areas which the government had held in 2002 would have been doubtful. However, the government repulsed the attacks and then decided that the right of self-defence included in the CFA entailed the right to ensure that such sudden assaults could not take place again. The Government's head of delegation Nimal Siripala de Silva shakes hands with LTTE political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan (L) while Norwegian minister Erik Solheim (C) stands behind at the opening of the peace talks in Geneva. (October 2006) Thus began the process of clearing the East of the LTTE, the East having been largely under government control in 2002 although the LTTE had succeeded in increasing its influence in the area over the CFA period. Despite these ongoing hostilities however, the LTTE agreed to return to negotiations in Geneva in October 2006. However, after what seemed a positive first day, the LTTE withdrew on the second, following what one diplomat described as the famous call from Kilinochchi, the LTTE Headquarters. Throughout 2007, the government sought a resumption of talks, but was told by the Norwegian Ambassador, who visited Kilinochchi in August that the LTTE was not willing. Attempts at informal talks, through calls from the government Peace Secretariat to the LTTE Secretariat, and through messages sent through the SLMM, were also repulsed. By then, the SLMM was down to a shadow of its former self, and unable to issue rulings, since the LTTE had refused to allow monitors from countries that were members of the European Union. It had also fired on a vessel bearing SLMM monitors, which led to the cessation of naval monitoring. Abrogation of the Ceasefire Agreement and Political Developments since In these circumstances, the government pressed ahead with negotiations with other parties, and in particular, Tamil parties committed to pluralism and democracy. The CFA was formally abrogated in January 2008, which facilitated moving to interim measures including the election of an Eastern Provincial Council. Since, following LTTE hostility to the Indo-Lankan Accord and its provisions, there had been no Provincial administration in the North or East, this was a historic opportunity for the people in that area to elect their own administration. Unlike in the first election, in 1988, when parties divided on ethnic lines, both major national parties led coalitions consisting of Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese. The government coalition won, and a Tamil former combatant was appointed Chief Minister. Current operations to clear the North too of the LTTE are proceeding apace, and success will be followed by Provincial elections. Preceding these, as happened in the East, it is hoped that Municipal and Local Government elections can be held in areas in which normalcy has been restored. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process (Courtesy : SCOPP) Rajiva Wijesinha, Senior Professor of Languages at Sabaragamuwa University, is the Secretary General of the Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process (SCOPP). He obtained his first degree in classics from University College, Oxford, and went on to do a doctorate in English at Corpus Christi College, where he held the E K Chambers Studentship. He is the author of several books including: Declining Sri Lanka: Terrorism and Ethnic Violence as the legacy of J R Jayewardene, 1906-1996, Cambridge University Press Delhi, July 2007.