



*The Sri Lankan peace process*

# Hopes are dwindling that calm will be restored

BY **ROHAN EDRISINHA**

**The** period since Sri Lanka's presidential election of November 2005 has been a chaotic one for the country's peace process.

Events have been so violent that many fear resumption of the conflict that plagued this country for more than two decades. Hopes are dwindling that the fragile ceasefire will hold at least for another month. Enormous challenges remain if the ceasefire is to survive and if effective peace negotiations are to occur.

Those fears were heightened in late April when a suicide bomber killed eight people in a military compound and seriously injured the head of the Sri Lankan army, Lt Gen Sarath Fonseka. The bombing, which had the markings of an attack by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), came on the heels of the killing of two Sinhalese in Sri Lanka's north, coupled with the slaying of two suspected Tamil rebels in Batticaloa, in the east.

The new Sri Lankan President, Mahinda Rajapakse, was narrowly elected to power last November largely due to his alliance with two hard-line Sinhala nationalist parties, the JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*) and the JHU (*Jathika Hela Urumaya*). Rajapakse was unsure of the full support of his own political party, the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) which remained under the leadership of Chandrika Kumaratunga, whose support for Rajapakse was lukewarm to say the least.

Rajapakse depended on the two smaller nationalist parties — the JVP and the JHU — for organizational support. The two parties in return demanded that several commitments be incorporated into the Rajapakse election manifesto. These included a claim that the Ceasefire Agreement signed by former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe and Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the rebel LTTE was unconstitutional; a promise to end Norwegian facilitation of the peace process; and a commitment that any negotiated settlement to the island's ethnic conflict had to be within the framework of maximum devolution within a unitary state.

The last claim, in conjunction with statements made by Rajapakse following the election, contradicts the

commitment by the LTTE and the government to explore the possibilities of a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka, arrived at during the third round of the Oslo peace talks in 2002 under the previous government in Sri Lanka.

## **New President opposed peace initiative**

The Rajapakse campaign for the November 2005 Presidential election was severely critical of rival

Wickremasinghe's peace initiative of 2002 and 2003 which it said was one of appeasement of the LTTE. Many members of the island's majority community, the Sinhalese, and the third largest community, the Muslims, seemed to share the Rajapakse critique of the Wickremasinghe peace process and Rajapakse's opposition to federalism. In a surprise move, the LTTE intimidated and prevented a large number of Tamils from voting in the north and east of the country, thereby helping Rajapakse, the hawk, to defeat Wickremasinghe, the dove.

Within a couple of weeks of the election however, the situation became tense as violence erupted in various parts of the north and east. There were several LTTE attacks on government security forces and assassinations of political leaders from rival Tamil political groups. As the violence increased, some Tamils in the north and east who feared a resumption of open hostilities fled to southern India, a development not seen for many years.

In the third week of January, a flurry of diplomatic activity bore fruit. First came the visit to Sri Lanka of Erik Solheim, the Norwegian Minister of International Development. Also, other countries such as India and Japan, as well as the EU applied considerable pressure on both sides to agree to talk in order to avert a resumption of open hostilities. Finally, Geneva was agreed upon as the venue. However, the agenda for the talks was to be very narrow and specific, focused on the implementation of the ceasefire agreement rather than on the larger issues central to the conflict.

## **Talks in Geneva bog down**

The talks in Geneva on February 22 and 23 highlighted the gap between the two sides even on the narrow issue of the



**In better times:** Former Sri Lankan government chief negotiator G.L. Peiris (l.) and Liberation Tigers chief negotiator Anton Balasingham at peace talks in Bangkok in 2002.

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