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## Tigers demand 'substantial autonomy, self rule'

THE Liberation Tigers said Wednesday that they are seeking "substantial autonomy and self government in the Tamil homeland and expressed optimism that a solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict could be worked out by negotiation. Addressing a press conference in Sittahip, Thailand, after the first round of direct Norwegian facilitated talks with the Sri Lankan government, the Chief Negotiator of the LTTE, Mr. Anton Balasingham said the LTTE would only seek an independent state "as a last resort" if the Tamil demand for "regional autonomy is rejected and conditions of oppression continue."

Responding to reporters' questions as to whether the LTTE had given up fighting for a separate state, Mr. Balasingham said: "The LTTE doesn't operate with the concept of a separate state. We operate with the concept of a homeland and self-determination."

"Homeland doesn't mean a separate state as such. It refers to a territory where the Tamil-speaking people live," he pointed out.

"When we use the category or concept of self-determination, we mean that the concept entails substantial autonomy or self-government in our homeland or in the historical areas where we live," he said. "And [we feel] that solutions can be worked out if both the parties agree to a particular political system or model."

"But, if our demand for regional autonomy and self-government is rejected and if conditions of oppression continue, as a last resort our



LTTE Chief Negotiator A. Balasingham (r), Sri Lanka's Chief Negotiator, Prof. G. L. Peiris (l) and Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister V. Helgesen at the press conference. Photo Reuters

people have no option other than to fight for political independence and statehood," he said. "That will be the last resort under the prin-

ciple of self determination." In view of U.N. conventions on self-determination "saying that the LTTE is fighting for an independent

state has no relevance because we operate with different categories and concepts," he added. Asked by a correspon-

dent if Mr. Balasingham's comments gave him hope of resolving the ethnic conflict, Chief Negotiator of the Sri Lankan government, Mr. G.

L. Peiris said: "Definitely. We know that [separation] is not their [Tigers'] objective. They have stated it categorically on this occasion: a sep-

arate state is not what their aspirations are about."

"Their aspirations can be fulfilled within one country if we set about it in the prop-

er way," the Sri Lankan Chief Negotiator said.

Responding to a question as to whether the disarming of the LTTE was discussed at the 3-day talks, Mr. Balasingham said: "There is no question of disarmament at this early stage of the discussion. You know very well both parties- the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE have two standing armies and two navies and this is the first time a stable ceasefire has been established. The question of disarming and decommissioning the LTTE will not arise until we reach a permanent settlement that will satisfy the aspirations of Tamil people."

Mr. Balasingham's views were echoed later by Mr. Peiris who said "At the beginning of a negotiating process you don't ask about disarmament. You have to achieve some progress with regard to substantive issues [first] and decommissioning of weapons or demilitarisation would come a later stage. That is how any realistic, pragmatic negotiation process would be handled."

The talks at a naval base in Thailand were the first direct negotiations between the two sides in seven years and focused on ways to rebuild the war-shattered parts of the island while leaving contentious issues to later rounds. Peiris said the talks had helped build trust between the two sides.

The Norwegian government, which is overseeing the talks, said in a statement the two sides had agreed to meet again from October 31 to November 3, from December 2 to 5 and from January 6 to 9.

### Norway hails 'promising start, practical steps'

WRAPPING up the first round of direct talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers in seven years, the Norwegian government, said two joint committees comprising LTTE and Sri Lankan officials are to be established - one to entrench the permanent ceasefire signed in February and the other to implement humanitarian and reconstruction activities.

"The parties are off to a promising start and they are taking practical steps to bring the process forwards," Norwegian deputy foreign minister Vidar Helgesen told a press conference after the 3 days of talks which he said had been "cordial and constructive" with the delegates bearing "casual dress code and casual tone of voice."

The two chief negotiators, Mr. Anton Balasingham of the LTTE and Prof. G. L. Peiris of the Sri Lankan government flanked Mr. Helgesen at the press conference which was moderated by Mr. Erik Solheim, Special Advisor to the Norwegian Fore-

ign Ministry. Mr. Solheim warned the press at the outset to observe courtesy and discipline in posing questions and subsequently kept a tight reign on proceedings.

All three officials reiterated the urgent need for immediate international financial assistance for rehabilitation and reconstruction of the war torn areas so as to underpin the talks by ensuring a "peace dividend" for the peoples of the island.

But Mr. Peiris said the time was right for international support to be extended. "The conditions in the country today are conducive to starting modest programs of development. So we don't have to wait until peace returns in a formal sense; until some formal agreement is signed."

"We think the donor community will be receptive to that point of view. That is what we hope [for] and that is the basis on which we will be talking to the international community," he added.

Mr. Balasingham told reporters there were several

reasons to be optimistic about the peace process.

"We are now confident that the present peace process is going to advance and succeed because of the main reason that this is the first time a third party is involved and is guiding the peace process between the parties in conflict," Mr. Balasingham said.

"Secondly a stable foundation for peace is established. The third factor is that there is an international monitoring mission comprising Nordic and Scandinavian countries supervising the ceasefire," he said. "[Fourthly] The international community - for the first time - is focusing on the dialogue, on the peace process."

"Fifthly we have a team. I appreciate that this time the Sri Lankan government has produced a team with men of calibre and understanding; and we can relate to them and we can discuss with them," Mr. Balasingham said further.

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### First steps towards interim administration agreed

PRELIMINARY steps towards an interim administration for the Tamil areas of the island were agreed as part of the first direct Norwegian facilitated talks between the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan government, the chief negotiators of both sides told a press conference in Sittahip, Thailand Wednesday.

"We have also discussed the setting up of an interim administration in the course of the coming sessions," Mr. Anton Balasingham, Chief Negotiator of the LTTE said.

"We have not gone into details of the composition or structure (of the interim administration) but we have prepared the ground for it. We have taken the preliminary steps necessary to create the conditions conducive [for it]," Sri Lanka's Chief Negotiator, Prof. G. L. Peiris said. "We have agreed amongst ourselves on how to take this forward."

"[In future sessions] we will also be able to discuss the post-interim administration set up and core issues will be taken up," Mr. Bala-

singham added, pointing out "this process will only succeed if we take up the issues one by one."

When asked about protests in southern Sri Lanka that the interim administration would lead to a permanent division of the country, Mr. Peiris replied: "The interim administration is exactly what it's name connotes: it is a step on the way. It has to be seen as part of a process. It does not stop there. Apprehensions on that score are entirely unfounded."

"There is a misconception in Colombo that the interim administration is going to be an end in itself," Mr. Balasingham said. "The interim administration will be part of an organic process of reaching a final settlement."

"There is nothing wrong in setting up an administrative structure. The LTTE must be given a pivotal role to play," Mr. Balasingham said. "You have to give space and opportunity for our fighters and cadres to run the administration in our own homeland."

"But [the interim admin-

istration] is a useful mechanism," Mr. Peiris said. "Far from doing any damage, it is necessary - amongst other things - to accelerate the economic development of those areas. It will provide a coherent structure within which development programs can be undertaken."

"There will be proper fiscal responsibility. You will know who are the officials entrusted with particular functions. You need a formal structure like that to undertake the kind of development on the scale needed at present," he said further.

Asked by a reporter if the interim administration "would be handed over to the LTTE," Mr. Peiris responded: "I think the phrase 'handing over' is very unfortunate. I think that is the wrong way to look at problems of this kind. What we are thinking of structures which will enable a partnership."

"Parties have to work with each other. They have to be involved in matters. Participation is indispensable

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### Global welcome for Thailand talks

ON THE eve of the first peace talks between the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan government, the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan welcomed the negotiations, saying the United Nations might play a bigger part in the peace process. Meanwhile, the US, welcoming the negotiations, said it would review its ban on the LTTE depending on the progress of the talks as Britain, the EU, China and South Africa also hailed the peace talks.

Mr. Annan hoped that "these talks will lead to a political settlement of the internal conflict in Sri Lanka which will preserve the country's unity and integrity as well as take account of the needs and interests of all its communities," UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said.

Mr. Annan was "pleased that the two sides have successfully implemented the provisions of their ceasefire signed last February and are now entering substantive talks,"

Mr. Annan paid tribute to

Norway for facilitating the talk between government officials and representatives of the rebel LTTE, which were being held at Sattahip in Thailand. "At the same time, he looks forward to enhancing the UN role in support of the peace process, especially regarding peace-building activities," Eckhard said.

Mr. Annan's welcome came in the wake of strong support for the talks from the United States which Friday reiterated its encouragement of negotiations to end Sri Lanka's protracted conflict.

The US will review its ban on the LTTE depending on the outcome of peace talks, the US ambassador to Thailand was quoted by AFP as saying.

"We will discuss that [de-proscription] in the context of the outcome of the peace talks," Ambassador Darryl Johnson said after the official launch of the talks Monday. "A process has begun and we hope it will succeed."

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