



Center for Strategic & International Studies
Washington, DC

**Summary of the
Public Forum on the
Sri Lankan Peace Process:
Dead End or Is There Hope?
November 4, 2005**

A panel consisting of Bernard A.B. Goonetilleke, Sri Lankan Ambassador to the United States, Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam, Member of the Sri Lankan Parliament, and Dayan Jayatilaka, Adjunct Professor at The Johns Hopkins University discussed the future of the Sri Lankan peace process on November 4, 2005.

Ambassador Goonetilleke provided a recent history of the initiation of the peace process, which began in December 2001. He stressed that the calls for a ceasefire took place in the backdrop of two events: the July 2001 suicide attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at Colombo's international airport and the September 11 attacks in the United States. He believes that this forced the government to realize that the military option was not plausible anymore and the LTTE to realize that the tolerance of the international community for terrorism after the 9/11 attacks was very limited. The formal ceasefire agreement, which went into effect in February 2002, had caused many to believe a final settlement would finally be reached. However, this brief period of hope came to a dead end in April 2003, when the LTTE unilaterally pulled out after six rounds of talks. He stated that this was very characteristic of the LTTE, which had a history of pulling out from peace talks, having done so in 1987, 1990 and most recently in 1995 during the first administration of President Kumaratunga.

The Ambassador gave four reasons why he thought the stalemate came about. First, there were limitations in the ceasefire agreement itself. It was concluded, he argued, in undue haste, and included several unrealistic provisions. Second, the LTTE has shifted its "goal posts." The LTTE has been making political maneuvers without having the goal to reach a final agreement to end the conflict. Third, there are severe limitations on the monitoring of breaches of the ceasefire agreement by the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) and its enforcement capacity. Finally, the LTTE has not ended its violent tactics. The assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in August 2005 is stark example of LTTE's "scant regard" for the agreement. The Ambassador ended by saying that the continuation of the peace process and final solution of the conflict will depend on "new thinking" initiated by both sides.

Mr. Ponnambalam stated that it is important to understand that the conflict in Sri Lanka is more than 50 years old. The LTTE is the product of the evolution of the conflict. As the conflict has evolved to its current state, so has the LTTE. He argued that before engaging in a peace process it is important to answer two questions. Is the Sinhalese community going to share power? Do they want to still continue with a unitary government that has a monopoly over power? He believed that the Sinhalese community does not want to share power and wants to have a monopoly over power. He asserted that the Sri Lankan government had for the past 50 years marginalized Tamil aspirations. Since 2001, the Sri Lankan government had tried to "militarily vanquish" Tamil aspirations. The ceasefire that went into effect in December 2001 provided the people with a hope that an agreement to end the conflict lay in the very near future. He stated further that a change in course by the LTTE can only take place if the Sri Lankan government can demonstrate that it is willing to share power. The past five years have not seen such a

demonstration and on the contrary has seen an increase in extremism on the part of the Sinhalese to undermine and divide the Tamil people. He concluded by saying that the international community has for too long focused on the “containment” of the LTTE and has disregarded the central issue of the Sri Lankan government’s unwillingness to share power.

The third panelist, Professor Dayan Jayatilleka, began by stating that he was not an “optimist” when it came to the continuation and eventual success of the peace process. However, he believed that in order for the peace process to achieve a successful end, the international community, namely India and the United States, needed to make it clear to the LTTE that a military solution is not an option. He agreed with Mr. Ponnambalam’s assessment that the state had fallen short when it came to power sharing. However, he argued that no cause however justified may warrant terrorism that targets non-combatants. He stated that the LTTE is a terrorist group and does not believe that it is a form of armed resistance. Armed resistance does not target ordinary citizens and non-combatants. He concluded by saying that the international community cannot continue appeasing the LTTE because it sends the wrong message to similar terrorist organizations around the world.

Before the question and answer session, the floor was given to the Norwegian Ambassador to the United States, Knut Vollebaek, who had been Norway’s foreign minister at the time Norway began its facilitating role in Sri Lanka. He stated that the Norwegian government took up the responsibility of mediating the Sri Lankan conflict because it shared the view of the Sri Lankan government that the military option was not a viable way of ending the conflict in Sri Lanka. The government of Norway felt it had a moral obligation to help, and as a major donor to Sri Lanka wanted to ensure that its money was not going to be “spoiled and ruined” by the internal conflict. He stated to the panelists that it is not the time for “political-sociological theory” but it was time to start to see how to move forward in the peace process. In spite of the historical differences and past violence, it is important to recognize that the ceasefire agreement was an achievement in itself. The peace process was initiated and created by both parties involved and the only thing the international community can do is to hold both parties responsible and accountable for adhering and continuing this process.