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6.11.15

Obstacles to peace in Sri Lanka — a bird's-eye view

President Chandrika Kumaratunga declared a state of emergency the day after she sacked three ministers and suspended parliament. The move has taken the country into uncharted constitutional territory, and thrown the peace process with Tamil Tigers into question. BBC News Online takes a look at key issues.

What have the Tigers been fighting for?

Until a ceasefire first declared in December 2001, the Tigers had been fighting for a separate state for Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east. They argued that the Tamils are discriminated against by the majority Sinhalese population. But, as peace talks progressed, the Tigers dropped their demand for independence and say they will now settle for regional autonomy — a major concession. The government also gave ground — this was the first time it had agreed to share power with the Tamil Tigers.

Why has President Kumaratunga sacked the ministers?

President Kumaratunga has long been a loud critic of the peace process spearheaded by her political rival, Prime Minister Ranil

Wickramasinghe. She has repeatedly accused his government of compromising Sri Lanka's security and sovereignty by making too many concessions to the Tigers. In particular, she has said the Tigers must show they renounce violence for good by surrendering their weapons, before any of their demands are met. She has also accused the head of the Scandinavian ceasefire monitoring team of being biased towards the Tigers, and called for him to be sacked. Her decision to dismiss three ministers and suspend parliament has shocked observers — never before has a Sri Lankan president exercised the constitutional right to dismiss members of an elected government.

What stage is the peace process at?

The government and the Tamil Tigers had just agreed to renew negotiations, after months of uncertainty. The agreement follows the Tigers' release of a document detailing their plans for a power-sharing arrangement with the government in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Many of the Tigers' proposals went much further than the government's position. Nonetheless, analysts hailed their decision to share power — effectively

dropping demands for a separate state — as a spur to the peace process, and a signal that they were ready to resume talks. The Tigers pulled out of talks with the government in April 2003, claiming they were being sidelined.

What next for the peace process?

Observers say Mr Wickramasinghe will need to fend off further blows from his rival, and repair the damage to his cabinet, before any return to peace talks. Whether he succeeds will depend on how much support there is for him in the Sri Lankan military, which has always been divided along party lines. It will also depend on how much support Mr Wickramasinghe can rely on from foreign allies who have largely backed peace efforts. The US, a key player off-stage, gave the peace process its backing days after the Tigers' released their power-sharing document. Washington was playing host to the prime minister at the time of Mrs Kumaratunga's shock dismissals — this could favour his chances of striking back, analysts say. Mrs Kumaratunga also has the power to call early elections. Having placed her nominees at the top of the interior, defence and information

ministries, her party has a better chance of winning, some analysts say.

Where have negotiations been held?

The sixth round of the Norwegian-brokered talks took place in the Japanese mountain spa resort of Hakone in March. Earlier rounds, brokered by Norway, were held in: Sattahip naval base, Thailand, October 2002; Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, October-November 2002; Oslo, Norway, December 2002; Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, January 2003; Berlin, Germany, February 2003. A seventh round should have been held next week, but has been postponed. Norway has been seeking to broker peace between the Tamil Tigers and Sri Lankan Government for a number of years.

How much progress was made at the talks?

The talks set out to: consolidate the February 2002 ceasefire; make arrangements for a provincial administration; discuss a final political settlement. The Tigers dropped their demands for a separate state and agreed to settle for regional autonomy in the early stages. In later talks, both sides looked at reducing the military build-up in

the conflict zone. Rapid progress was also made on reconstruction and rehabilitation issues. But the prospect of tens of thousands of refugees returning to the north-east of the island worried the Sri Lankan army. Both sides also agreed to make room for human rights groups to help those hit by the conflict, particularly children.

What's the human and economic cost of the war?

The conflict has killed about 64,000 people, displaced one million and held back the island's growth and economic development. Some estimates suggest that the government has spent up to 5% of gross domestic product on defence in recent years. Sri Lanka's once successful tourist industry has also been badly hit by the violence.

How have the talks been possible?

Observers say battle fatigue had set in on both sides, and it was becoming increasingly difficult for the army and the rebels to find new recruits to fight a war that looked more and more unwinnable. Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe won parliamentary elections last December, promising an end to conflict. His keenness to make peace gave Norwegian medi-

ators a huge boost. They brokered a permanent ceasefire in February 2002. Initial fears that the Tigers would use the truce to regroup militarily proved unfounded, and consistent Norwegian pressure finally brought both sides to the negotiating table. And the impact of 11 September in refocusing the world on terrorism and cracking down on the financing of terrorist activities may also have been important. The LTTE are proscribed as a terrorist group in many countries.

What are the other obstacles?

The government and rebels have tried peace talks several times, most recently in 1995, but they have always ended in renewed violence. That often led to accusations by both sides of not being serious about peace. A further problem is the Muslim minority. A bitter power struggle within the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress which provides crucial support for the government, could harm the peace process. Congress leader Rauf Hakeem, a member of the four-man government negotiating team, has come under fire from within his party because agreements reached at earlier rounds of talks have not been implemented. — Courtesy BBC