

THE STATEMENT BY MR. VIDAR HELGESEN DEPUTY MINISTER OF
FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE PRESS CONFERENCE OF FIRST
ROUND OF PEACE TALKS IN THAILAND



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The international community has its eyes on the peoples of Sri Lanka and their leaders. The presence of so many distinguished observers here at the opening of this first round of formal negotiations between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam demonstrates the widespread support to the parties in their determination to bring Sri Lanka's war to an end. This political support of the international community is much needed.

But in the daily lives of the peoples of Sri Lanka, our moral and political support means little if not accompanied by tangible support to the rebuilding of their society.

A remarkable example of such tangible support is set by the Royal Thai Government, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, Mr. Permanent Secretary, for all the efforts of your government. Your generosity in providing the venue for these discussions should inspire other governments to significantly step up their support for Sri Lanka.

The great leader Mahatma Gandhi once said, there is no path to peace - peace is the path.

The international community should take these words of wisdom as an appeal not to wait for peace to happen tomorrow, but to start investing in peace today. There exists today a state of relative peace in Sri Lanka, built on the ceasefire agreement in force since February. This relative peace indicates that ultimately a political settlement of the ethnic conflict can be found. In this quest, the parties cannot be left alone. Neither can the accompaniment of the Norwegian Government suffice. They need to be accompanied by the entire international community.

It has been a long and, at times, thorny process to get this far. No less difficult times are ahead. The parties will confront problems that can only be solved through painstaking effort and painful compromise. Close to twenty years of armed conflict cannot be resolved overnight. Coming from a very difficult past, Sri Lanka has no easy way forward.

It is likely there will be setbacks, "hiccups", walkouts and breakdowns. However, such incidents should not be seen as signs of failure. On the contrary, it should be seen as a success for both parties each time they settle their differences by heated discussions and not by the heat of the gun. No peace process seeks to achieve a society rid of conflict, because there is no society rid of conflict. What the parties to this process are seeking, is a different way of settling conflicts, namely through peaceful and democratic means.

Experience of other peace processes has taught us that the parties assembled at the table, as well as their constituencies back home, will at times allow minor issues to blur the major ones. Locked in a room for hours and days, there is always the risk of getting lost in the details of draft texts. When such situations arise, it is imperative that we try to look beyond the negotiating table and imagine the horizon of a peaceful and prosperous future for Sri Lanka.

For the rewards of peace are great and amount to far more than the absence of war. Peace is about restoring normalcy in people's daily lives. Peace is about upholding human rights and human dignity, not least for women and children who suffer the most from war. Peace is about securing people a democratic right to influence the running of their community and their country. These rights apply to all citizens, be they Muslim, Tamil, Singhalese, Burgher or Malay.

Peace is an aim in itself. But peace is also a means. A means for the betterment of human life. The main responsibility for achieving this rests with the parties. As leaders for their peoples they stand accountable to those individuals they represent and whose wishes for peace are evident:

The parents whose priority in life is to ensure proper schooling for their son and daughter.

The doctor who wants to attend to basic health services rather than having to heal the wounds of combatants.

The displaced farmer who wants to resettle and feed his family without fear of losing his limbs by landmines.

The soldier who could put his abilities to reconstruct buildings rather than bomb them.

Courage and leadership will be needed by leaders on both sides in order to meet these aspirations of the people. Such courage and leadership was already shown in the past. In the midst of difficult times in 1994-95 Her Excellency the President demonstrated this, by promoting the idea of negotiations as a solution to the conflict. Similarly in 1998-99 she and the leader of LTTE, Mr. Pirabakharan, agreed to explore the possibility of negotiations. Leadership and political courage was again demonstrated when the present Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, and Pirabakharan in late 2001 revitalized the process towards negotiations by responding to each other's initiatives, leading to a formalized ceasefire in February this year. The two sides have shown continued leadership in implementing and sustaining the ceasefire, working constructively together, as well as with the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, to resolve problems along the way.

The days and months and years ahead will present new and mounting challenges for both leaders and their delegations. But standing behind them are some formidable forces for peace. Recent opinion polls indicate that more than 80% of the population shares the parties' desire to find a negotiated solution to the conflict. This is to no little extent a result of the impressive activism of the civil society and the business community. In too many conflicts around the world, we see economic forces fuelling violent conflict. In Sri Lanka today, business leaders are in the forefront of the popular support for peace, recognizing that the path to peace and the path to prosperity is one and the same.

The peace advocacy of NGOs and business leaders will become even more important in the months and years ahead. If the parties are to succeed, popular support for peace must be sustained. When setbacks come - and they will - the parties will need the patience and persistence of the advocates for peace, to prevent public opinion from succumbing to what Freud called the "narcissism of minor differences."

Vital support has also come and continues to come from abroad. India - with its leadership role in the region - has been instrumental in encouraging both sides to seek another solution to the

conflict than that of war. Significant support has also been provided by the United States of America, Japan, and members of the European Union.

When I again feel compelled to reiterate the need for tangible financial support from the international community, this must not be misunderstood as not recognizing the vital support already provided. However, the need of the hour is to make peace a reality in the daily lives of people, and thereby building peace from below while negotiating peace at the top. It is in the interest of the world community at large to see Sri Lanka succeed, and therefore it is in our common interest to provide immediate funding for practical peacebuilding on the ground.

The Government of Norway feels privileged to have the opportunity of facilitating these negotiations, thereby assisting the parties in their quest for peace. We feel privileged to witness at close range the leadership the parties provide as members themselves of the international community. Trying to bring a long and bitter war to an end through peaceful means, they are sending a powerful message to us. At a time when the world is facing a magnitude of armed conflicts and violent threats, and at a time when the use of armed force is too often predicated as a primary means to address such threats, the parties in Sri Lanka are setting an example for the world.

