Analysis: Sri Lanka talks failure

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BBC News, Geneva

The Sri Lanka peace talks in Geneva ended as predicted. No one expected a miracle but Sri Lanka's warring parties could not come to any agreement.

During two days of talks and despite a cordial atmosphere, both sides stuck to their guns.

However both parties promised to abide by the faltering ceasefire agreement.

With the internationally backed peace talks failing, there is every danger that the war-ravaged country could slide back into a full-scale conflict.

Tamil rebels wanted the key A-9 highway linking the Jaffna peninsula with the mainland to be reopened to alleviate the sufferings of the people.

But the government proposed sending relief supplies to Jaffna by ship and wanted security guarantees from the rebels.

Mutual distrust

The Tigers said that with no guarantee to open the highway, they were not willing to come for another round of talks.

> **The Sri Lankan government is not interested in addressing humanitarian issues**
> Rebel political leader SP Thamilselvan

The government also spoke about political proposals and devolution of power to the Tamil areas.

There was no set agenda to the talks during which Norwegian facilitators tried hard to bring both sides to a common position.

But, fuelled by mutual distrust, each side played their cards carefully and avoided reaching a common agenda.

"We can not open the A-9 highway immediately because the ground situation is not conducive," Nirmal Siripala Desilva, Sri Lankan minister and head of the government delegation told the BBC.

At least, both parties have expressed their commitment to the 2002 ceasefire agreement. But the agreement hardly exists on the ground.

Military build-up

Nearly 3,000 people were reported killed in the last year alone in Sri Lanka.

There had been full-scale conflicts in the north and in the east and as a result thousands of civilians have been displaced.

"By now the international community should have understood that the Sri Lankan government is not interested in addressing humanitarian issues," SP Thamilselvan, head of the Tamil rebel delegation said.

Tamil rebels are also once again warning that there is a sizeable military build-up near the frontlines in the Jaffna region.

A similar exercise a few weeks ago ended in a major battle in which security forces suffered heavy casualties.

With recent military successes, both sides now appear to be gearing up for another major battle.

But the danger is if that happens, many international aid organizations may be forced to scale down their operations or close down their offices in the north.

This will be a severe blow for those affected by the tsunami and for internally displaced civilians.

Losing patience

Analysts say neither side were sincere about peace negotiations and neither of them made efforts to honour pledges made in the earlier rounds of peace talks which led to complete mistrust between the two sides.

The government for its part says the agreement between the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the main opposition United National Party (UNP) is a crucial step in proposing long term solutions to the ethnic conflict.

They hope that in the coming months they will be able to put forward a political package for the Tamils.

But no one is sure whether those proposals would satisfy the Tamil rebels.

Meanwhile, the Norwegian facilitators have warned that the international community might lose patience if there is no progress in the peace process.

Bitter divide

They also said there will be a meeting of donor countries next month to discuss the current status of the Sri Lankan peace process.

The main hope for the suffering civilian population is the international community.

With both warring parties bitterly divided, people expected pressure from the international community to keep the peace process moving.

But in Geneva nothing happened.

"The failure of the talks mean people's suffering will continue. People will be pessimistic about the future of the peace process," says Sri Lankan analyst DBS Jeyaraj.

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