

London launch: Sri Lankan media coverage

Here's a piece from the weekend edition of [The Island](#), also reprinted in the *Sri Lankan Guardian*. The reporting of Erik Solheim's speech is surprisingly accurate. And he, of course, is very much in the limelight. More of this to come, I suspect

'MR was prepared to give self-rule to Tamils within Sri Lankan state' – Solheim

Without calling for elections in the region

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From left: Mark Salter, Erick Soheim, Vidar Helgersan, Suthaharan Nadaraja and Prof. Michael Hutt (Chair at the meeting)

By Sujeeva Nivunhella in London

Former Norwegian Norwegian Development Minister and peace envoy to Sri Lanka, Erik Solheim claimed last week that the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa was willing to give self-rule

to Tamils within the Sri Lankan state without calling for elections in that region.

“Rajapaksa wanted to do a backroom deal to make Prabhakaran the leader there. He portrayed himself as the great savior of the Sinhalese, but was ready for any dirty deal for his own survival and if it helped his political fortunes”.

Solheim was speaking at the launch of Mark Salter’s book “To End a Civil War – Norway’s Peace Engagement with Sri Lanka” at the Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London on Wednesday.

The other key speaker at the event was former Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister and incumbent Minister for Europe, Vidar Helgesen.

Recalling his engagement in Sri Lanka, Solheim asserted that the then President Rajapaksa told him that he was ready to hand over the North to Prabhakaran as he did not want a long and protracted peace process, which will undermine his support in the South.

He said there is no doubt that war crimes were committed by both sides, but the atrocities of the LTTE leadership cannot be pursued because all their leaders are dead. There should be a mechanism to bring the perpetrators before the law in Sri Lanka itself. That’s the best. If this cannot be done, it should be done internationally.

The responsibility for war crimes from both sides rested with the leadership. No were no freelancers. Any one killed by the LTTE were on Prabhakaran’s orders and for anyone killed outside this scope, the onus was with the government, the former Norwegian peace envoy said.

Solheim described President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as “decent”. With their

election, there is an enormously hopeful situation in Sri Lanka now for economic growth and prosperity. There will be many difficulties, but there is an opportunity to find a solution to the Tamil problem which should be some sort of self-rule in Sri Lanka.

He assured the support of the Norwegian government, but said it will come only on request by the Sri Lankan government.

He recounted that except for Anton Balasingham, nobody else within the LTTE had international exposure. The downfall of the LTTE was due to an isolated war lord sitting there basically taking all the decisions not based on proper information.

Solheim also pointed out that the peace process broke down due to bickering between the SLFP and UNP. When one side agreed to give a substantial offer to the Tamils, the other side always opposed it. They were fighting each other more than fighting the LTTE.

That was an enormous problem. Both the Sri Lankan government and Prabhakaran missed opportunities to resolve the problem.

In 2002, Ranil Wickremasinghe's new government was ready to talk with the LTTE with the blessings of then President Chandrika Kumaratunge, but that opportunity was missed due to Prabhakaran's fault. The commitment displayed by the International community was also poor. Due to the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, they could not give much attention to Sri Lanka, he noted.

There was lack of vision on the part of Prabhakaran. He had a violent response for every issue. He could not embrace vastly accepted federalism. He postponed and postponed, and at the end, it could not be achieved.

He said that based on intelligence at the time, India told them that neither the Sri Lanka government nor the LTTE could

win the war and they would come back to the negotiating table at the end.

However, when the LTTE was cornered, the Norwegians suggested to Prabhakaran to surrender to the ICRC under International supervision so that scores of lives could be saved. But, Prabhakaran refused.

Minister Vidar Helgesen said that Ranil Wickremesinghe made great sacrifices for peace. Chandrika Kumaratunga was willing to make sacrifices when she started the peace process. On the LTTE side, Balasingham was the man willing to make sacrifices. Ranil is back as the Prime Minister. For the people of Sri Lanka and the politicians, it is a challenge to bring about lasting peace. Let's hope Ranil Wickremasinghe be successful as a 'peace hero'

Dr. Suthaharan Nadaraja a lecturer at the SOAS also spoke.

http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=134526

The [Sri Lanka Guardian](http://www.sri.lanka.guardian) version, with a rather mournful looking shot of Erik replacing the launch panel, is here: www.slguardian.org/2015/11/rajapaksa-was-prepared-to-give-self-rule-to-tamils-solheim/