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Raghavan and Aijitha Kadirgamar, eldest son and daughter of assassinated Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lashman Kadirgamar, by their father's funeral pyre, Colombo, 15 August 2005. Source: FP PHOTO/Indranil MUKHERJEE

Post summer holidays and I find myself once again responding to revisionist accounts of the Norwegian's engagement in the Sri Lankan peace process in the domestic press. This time the subject is the aftermath of the assassination – almost certainly by the LTTE – of noted Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in August 2005. [Below is my riposte](#), published as an op ed in [The Island](#) on 20 August 2016.

Norway 'Secrets' are No Secret!

The Island, August 20, 2016,

Shamindra Ferdinando's column of 16 August, 'A secret Norwegian missive to 'Dear Mr Prabhakaran' in the wake of Kadirgamar assassination ' covers a lot of ground, including some remarkable claims regarding Norwegian dealings with the LTTE, in the aftermath of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar's assassi-nation in August 2005.

First, Ferdinando states that 'the world wouldn't have known about the ['secret'] Norway-LTTE contacts ...if not for whistle blower website Wikileaks'. This is to say the least a surprising claim. First, at this stage of the Sri Lankan conflict i.e. autumn 2005, Norway remained peace process facilitator as officially sanctioned by both the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE. Consequently, it was only natural that Oslo sought to maintain high-level contact with both sides as and when the situation demanded it. From a peace perspective, the crisis provoked by Kadirgamar's assassination clearly necessitated redoubled efforts to bring the two sides back to the negotiating table. And this is exactly what the Norwegians did, including via the 'secret' letter to LTTE leader Prabakharan that Ferdinando cites.

Second, it is hardly surprising – and certainly not unusual – that the content of such a communication was kept confidential. As is widely recognized, a crucial element of facilitating negotiations is retaining confidence of both sides in your ability and willingness to retain confidentiality as and when it is needed; indeed in most conflict contexts a peace process cannot move forward in the absence of a baseline of trust in the facilitator.

That said, Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen and his Deputy Vidar Helgesen in fact shared the main points of the letter to Prabakharan with the other 'Co-Chairs' (EU, USA, Japan) at a meeting in Colombo on 17 August – the day after

Kadirgamar's funeral. The Norwegian letter was handed over to Anton Balasingham in London the next day by the same duo. (Concerning responsibility for the Kadirgamar killing, moreover, Helgesen states that at the 17 August London meeting, 'Balasingham didn't say the LTTE was behind the murder, but he didn't say it was either'.)

In this context, Ferdinando's suggestion that as part of a 'clandestine project', the letter's contents were shared with the Americans only, on the 'under-standing' that they were kept secret from the Sri Lankan Government, is palpably absurd. In fact its first demand, that the LTTE 'accept the Norwegian Government's invitation to participate in a review of the implementation of the ceasefire agreement in order to find practical ways of ensuring full compliance by both parties' perfectly mirrored the main proposal outlined in an 18 August letter from President Kumaratunga to the Norwegian Prime Minister.

This harmony of approach between Oslo and Colombo – nothing could be further from the 'clandestine project' insinuated by Ferdinando – appears to have been the (hardly surprising) outcome of an 16 August Colombo meeting between Kumaratunga, Petersen and Helgesen: an event even noted by Ferdinando himself.

Ferdinando goes on to state that following Kadirgamar's assassination Norway 'continued to mollycoddle terrorists'. And presumably, as part of its supposed 'mollycoddling' strategy, for good measure, he adds the suggestion that Norway 'refrained from criticizing the LTTE'. Where to start? If facilitating a peace process at the invitation of both the Sri Lankan Government and LTTE, in itself amounts to 'mollycoddling terrorists' then I suppose Oslo – and Colombo – indeed stand guilty as charged.

But this is a patently absurd charge. First, any reasonable person can appreciate that negotiations minimally require the

participation of both parties, and that to achieve this requires the facilitator to seek to remain in reasonable – though not necessarily friendly – terms. Second, Ferdinando offers no evidence at all in support of his claims in this regard. Indeed the only evidence he cites – the August 2005 letter to Prabhakaran – hardly reads like the work of people afraid to call a spade a spade. A demand that the LTTE ‘take effective steps to halt killings and to cease the recruitment of underage combatants’, for example, points to a number of things, but Norwegian efforts to ‘mollycoddle terrorists’ is most certainly not one of them.

All in all, Ferdinando’s somewhat slapdash treatment of the circumstances surrounding Kadirgamar’s murder – alongside the ignominious legal demise of the PTOM-S mechanism and Mahinda Rajapaksa’s election as President, unquestionably one of the pivotal political events of 2005 – fails the test of close scrutiny. While not wishing to blow personal trumpets unduly, his account would perhaps have benefitted from a careful reading of the relevant sections of my book *To End A Civil War: Norway’s Peace Engagement in Sri Lanka* (Hurst, 2015), which covers these and other related developments in some detail.

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