



Situation in Sri Lanka Options for India

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INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka formally slipped into a war mode on 16 January 2008 when the government unilaterally abrogated the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Casualties since then have been rising and displacements are appalling. As a consequence, Sri Lankan economy has been hit hard. Human rights abuses in the island are a cause for major concern for the international community.

Being a close and important neighbour, India cannot be a mute spectator to disturbing events in its proximity that impinges on its security. At the same time New Delhi has its own constraints on the nature of involvement/non-involvement in the Island's ethnic issue. Is India's policy dilemma a reflection of recent developments in Sri Lanka? Or is it a long-standing one? Can India do anything to bring peace to the Island at the outset? In other words, what are the options for India?

I RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Conflict between the security forces of Sri Lanka and the LTTE has intensified since the beginning of 2008. Portents for the same, however, were visible right from the LTTE split in March 2004. Soon after his dissention, Karuna (a commander of the LTTE in eastern Sri Lanka) and his men joined the state forces, a 'proxy war' commenced.

On its part, the LTTE also indulged in indiscriminate killings mainly through suicide attacks. In April 2006, a suicide attack was made on the Army Chief Lt Gen Sarath Fonseka in April 2006. A new phase of 'undeclared war' began thereafter. The

CFA that was shaky since 2004 got endangered. Very soon in August 2006, violence entered into 'open confrontation' with the Peace Monitoring Mission watching helpless.

During this phase, the government, with assistance from Karuna group successfully captured the eastern Sri Lanka from the LTTE control. With the same momentum, the government wanted to capture the whole of the LTTE controlled areas in the north. With this objective, military operations were launched on three fronts: Mannar in the West, Vavuniya in the East, and Jaffna in the North. The CFA, however, was found to be an obstacle to declare war officially. The government, therefore, unilaterally abrogated the CFA in January 2008, setting in motion a more violent phase in the confrontation. The LTTE's persistent ceasefire violations also made the CFA meaningless.

Since then, killings on an average is 1000 a month in addition to large-scale displacements, especially in the conflict prone areas of Jaffna, Mullaitivu, Killinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai. The majority of victims are Tamils. So far six members of parliament, including two ministers, were killed either by the LTTE or by government supported groups. Of the six MPs, three belong to Tamil National Alliance (TNA), one from United National Party (UNP) (who is a Tamil) and two of ruling SLFP. Abductions, disappearances, and detentions without trial have become order of the day.

The government was able to successfully conduct local polls in the district of Batticaloa in March 2008. It was commendable that the elections were peaceful, but was neither free nor fair. Undue advantage was enjoyed by a particular group –

Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) – that contested in alliance with ruling United People’s Freedom Alliance. The alliance won all the nine councils.

Boycott of main parties like the TNA and the UNP, however, did not give much legitimacy to the elections in terms of interest articulation. The legitimacy was also in question due to absence of nearly 50 per cent of the registered voters; and about 10 per cent invalid votes. The invalid votes were not seen as a sign of ignorance, but as a mark of protest. Nevertheless, the local polls laid a good foundation for similar future democratic exercises, especially the upcoming provincial council elections in May 2008.

Despite various drawbacks, the eastern council polls are seen in positive light because the main opposition, UNP, has decided to contest. Karuna group, is also expected to behave better to convince wider electorate in the remaining two districts of Trincomalee and Amparai, which are not its stronghold.

As a result of intense conflict, the economy is affected in two principal ways: closing off significant parts of the country for gainful economic activity; and diversion of valuable resources towards war. The tourism industry is the first victim.

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Public finances are weak. Successive large budget deficits have left the government with a public debt of over 90 per cent of the GDP and interest payments absorb over half of tax revenues. The interim solution of



printing more currency has led to a whopping inflation of around 25 per cent. Citing human rights concerns, some donors have reduced their aid to the Island.

This is a severe blow to the government, forcing it to issue international bonds to raise additional foreign revenues. Increased external borrowing has not only put pressure on the balance of payments, but also generated an external liquidity crisis for the government. With a firm belief in the ‘war for peace’ programme, the Rajapaksa government has unhesitatingly been spending on defence.

The government allocated 139.56 billion rupees (about \$1.29 billion) for 2008 as against 108.67 billion rupees (\$1 billion) in the previous year. Increased defence is necessitated by new recruitment of soldiers, large purchases of military hardware and overall strengthening of security systems. Sri Lanka has also desperately turned to Pakistan, China and Ukraine for more military hardware. Pakistan and China have already been supplying arms to Sri Lanka.

II RISING EXPECTATIONS

India has been keenly watching all these developments. The government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) wants India to be on its side in the ongoing "War for Peace Programme". Ultra nationalist parties like JVP favours India's direct military intervention against the LTTE. GOSL expects that India tightens noose on flow of essential items from unofficial quarters of India to the LTTE. This is important for the GOSL to successfully weaken the LTTE.

Colombo did not forget Indian bailout in 1987 - *Operation Poomalai*, that prevented advances of Sri Lankan armed forces against Tamil militants. Although such a tilt of India in favour of the LTTE is unthinkable at this juncture, the Tamil Nadu factor is not as predictable as it was a few years ago. From a staunch anti-LTTE posture after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, one cannot fail to observe various shades of opinions in Tamil Nadu sympathizing with their ethnic brethren in Sri Lanka. For the extreme nationalistic groups, Sri Lankan Tamils are synonymous with the LTTE. For New Delhi, however, it is important to prevail on the spread of LTTE's tentacles in India that have acted against the national interest.

India is not happy about Sri Lanka shopping arms especially in Pakistan and China. New Delhi thinks in guise of arms, both China and Pakistan may deeply involve themselves in the island's affairs and act against Indian interests. However, being a sovereign country Sri Lanka has every right to decide things suiting its national interest. India, therefore, has no option but to supply arms itself or allow Sri Lanka to shop at will, but continue to maintain present supply of non-lethal armaments. Arms supplies are strictly opposed by UPA allies from Tamil Nadu. There is opposition even within the Congress, especially those from Tamil Nadu, for military assistance for Sri Lanka. There is a dilemma here.

Tigers know well that whether they like or not India cannot be ignored. Despite proscribed in India, they have been making overtures to mend relations. The LTTE wants India to "put the past behind and move forward". It also expects India to keep off from supporting the GOSL. The Tigers are more concerned about Indian help than any

other state. The LTTE fully realizes that as long as India stands with GOSL, it cannot realize its goal of a separate state. They would have recaptured Jaffna soon after breaching impregnable Elephant Pass in April 2000, but for India.

Pressurizing New Delhi through Tamil nationalist parties like PMK, MDMK, Viduthala Chiruthaigal, and DK is, therefore, a priority for the LTTE.

The basic demand of these Tamil parties like PMK is that the Union government should not in any way assist war machinery of Sri Lanka, which was "hell-bent on a programme of subjugation, if not decimation" of its Tamil citizens. They suspect that India has been covertly supplying arms to Sri Lanka, but officially maintaining that it is providing "only non-lethal armaments". They want India to take into "serious consideration the strong feelings of the Tamils of Tamil Nadu and Puduchery while playing any role in the negotiating process."

III DIMINISHING OPTIONS

Given these constraints and dilemmas India has limited options to exercise. At the same time, one cannot write-off India's role and importance in the ethnic issue.

India's stated stand on the final solution to the ethnic question is within united Sri Lanka, but respecting the aspirations and sentiments of Tamil minorities. To keep Sri Lanka united, the LTTE has to be pushed to dilute their obdurate stand of separate Eelam.

To a solution that fulfills the aspirations of the Tamil community, the Sri Lankan government has to be made to work harder. Keeping this mind, India should see how it could augment its leverage on various actors in Sri Lanka to bring a final settlement to the ethnic issue. Notable actors include the GOSL, the LTTE, opposition UNP,

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nationalist parties like JVP and JHU, Karuna group, moderate Tamil groups like EPDP, PLOTE and EPRLF and the people of Sri Lanka.

Given the fact that India's direct involvement in the ethnic issue is seen with suspicion, New Delhi can consider forming a consortium of countries and regional/global organisations comprising the United States, EU, ASEAN, SAARC, Norway, Japan, China, and Pakistan to exercise effective leverage on various actors of the island. The consortium should act in unison on the road map for peace. The road map should include the following steps. Cessation of hostilities is the first step for any kind of peace process.

It should be followed by some sort of interim arrangement to ameliorate the conditions of the war affected people in the northeast. In the third stage talks should follow for seeking a final settlement. It is vital the consortium set guiding principles in the form of a framework agreement to guide the three-stage conflict resolution formula. The framework should clearly lay out the plan of action, the participants, facilitators/mediators, and the rules of the game. There should be a cost if the parties violate this framework. Bipartisanship between the two main Sinhalese parties – UNP and SLFP – on the ethnic issue is a must for sustaining any final settlement. All the previous settlements made by one party were opposed by the other. Can the consortium do anything in this regard?

Simultaneously India can try exercising the leverages at Track-II and Track-III levels. For instance, can the Indian Left parties be requested to prevail on the JVP's hardline thinking? Can the LTTE be approached through Tamil parties? Can Buddhist monks in India be of any use to talk to their counterparts in Sri Lanka on the final settlement? It is worth exploring. At the same time, India should keep-up its humanitarian aid to Sri Lanka especially to those suffering in the northeast. Given the shortage of basic necessities in the island, any Indian supply of food grains and fuel will be much appreciated. It is important for India to gain good will of the people of Sri Lanka.

(The map of Sri Lanka was downloaded from geology.com)

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