



Sri Lanka

The War against Peace?

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The war in Sri Lanka between the armed forces and the LTTE, labeled “Eelam IV” to earmark an escalation of violence starting mid-2006, is ongoing. The LTTE has largely been driven out of the East, but in the pursuit of a military solution to the conflict, problems continue to abound. According to official (and euphemistic) reports by the GOSL, more than 1,200 soldiers have been killed and more than 7,500 injured in the first nine months of 2008 alone. Almost 10,500 civilians have lost their lives, which makes this year the goriest in the conflict’s history. Compare this to 2005, the second bloodiest year when 5,000 people were killed.

The targeting of innocent civilians and the vituperative rhetoric adopted by both, the state and the LTTE, have further polarized both the Sinhala and Tamil communities and withered away any possibility of a solution for prolonged peace. Indeed by embracing similar warring tactics, disregarding human rights and disrespecting the rule of law, the GOSL and the LTTE have simply become mirror images of one another. Trapped in the pursuit of a military solution, everything else has become of secondary importance or of no consideration whatsoever.

I ACTORS, ACTIONS & INACTIONS

Sri Lankan Military (SLM)

The SLM has made some major territorial and strategic gains over the past year and a half. In July 2007 with the fall of Toppigala, the GOSL declared the “liberation of the east”. Military operations in the east took one full year to complete. The acquisition of the east, possible in

large part due to the timely breakup of and internal clashes within the LTTE command structure, has led the SLM to believe that total victory over the LTTE is achievable and in sight. Although they failed to completely consolidate and create a devolution package for easterners, they are riding high on the military successes there, and have decided to use it as a role model for the north as well.

In the north, the Army has focused its energies on regaining complete control of the A9 highway, the main road connecting the Jaffna peninsula to the rest of Sri Lanka. It has launched a four-pronged approach in the districts of Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi, parts of Mannar and Jaffna. Pooneryn and Mallavi, important LTTE strongholds, were captured in November. S. P. Tamilselvan, the LTTE’s top political advisor, was killed in an earlier battle. The SLA has also managed to encircle Kilinochchi, the administrative capital of the LTTE, and is within “kissing distance” of it. But the fight over the last bit of territory has been time consuming and intense to say the least. Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF) and the Navy (SLN) have used aerial bombing tactics and sea patrols respectively to try and clinch other strategic victories. The SLAF has managed to destroy several LTTE hideouts and the SLN has posed major hindrances to the LTTE’s supply lines from the sea.

The LTTE

The Tamil Tigers have suffered severe setbacks in recent months. Their strength has dwindled, mostly because of in-house disagreements within the senior leadership. With Colonel Karuna’s earlier disengagement with the LTTE, the Tigers have lost the Eastern provinces as a recruiting ground for cadres. What is more, the SLM has exploited these divisions amongst the LTTE leaders to weaken them

further, militarily. The LTTE has resorted to calling up reserve forces and are employing the use of the “makkal padai”, a civilian militia group loyal to the Tiger’s cause, to fight alongside their trained cadres.

The LTTE is largely confined to half of Kilinochchi and three-quarters of Mullaitivu districts. While still forced to use conventional warfare tactics, they have turned to engaging the SLA in guerilla warfare. They have also retained their air power capacity, albeit limited by the lesser sophistication of their flying machines. In October 2007, they managed to attack and destroy much of a Sri Lankan air base in Anuradhapura.

Perhaps most importantly, the LTTE still retains control over the strategically important “Elephant Pass” in the North, and are battling fiercely with SLA soldiers to prevent its loss. For as the famous Sri Lankan adage goes, “Those who rule Elephant Pass, rule the North”.

II

TWO ACTORS, MULTIPLE VIOLATIONS

Human Insecurity

Ordinary Sri Lankans have had to bear the brunt of the civil war. The death toll is in the several tens of thousands. Claymore mines littering vast spaces in the countryside have been responsible for the deaths and maiming of mostly school going children. Minority communities such as the plantation Tamils from the interior and the Sri Lankan Muslim community (comprising approximately 8% of the population) have been victims

of attacks by the LTTE. Forced abductions of children to join the ranks of frontline cadres continue to remain a popular recruitment tactic

for the LTTE.

On the other hand, the SLM has been accused of needless and indiscriminate ‘collateral damage’. The onset of the monsoon season has resulted in a severe crisis due to floods. Several coastal areas and villages have been submerged, thousands of houses destroyed, agricultural areas flooded, telephones rendered non functional and sanitation facilities lacking. Artillery shelling continues in the midst of this natural disaster. According to recent reports by the IASC, about 8,000 families continue to remain displaced in the Jaffna region alone, and a total of more than 320,000 people were affected by the floods. In Mannar and Mullaitivu, more than 7,000 families have been rendered homeless and have had to move to refugee camps, or convert schools and other public spaces into living quarters.

Colombo city has not been spared either. Suicide bombings, although significantly reduced over the past few months, continue to be a looming threat. Perhaps the most terrifying aspects of the war are the disappearances and extrajudicial killings of people. More than 1000 such killings have been documented; several hundreds more have gone unrecorded. Amidst the presence of a huge security apparatus in Colombo, there are reports of unmarked white vans roaming the streets during the day and night, forcefully picking up individuals who are never heard from again. This practice has become so commonplace that the term “white-vanning” has become a verb.

Falling Economy

The importance of an economy that can sustain the war effort is not lost to either the GOSL or the LTTE. Both have resorted to efforts to keep the war machine going. The LTTE believes that by continuing war in the North and opening up a new front in the East again, they can bleed the country’s coffers, dragging Sri Lanka into a financial debt that will be hard to recover from. They have employed terrorism tactics in Colombo and other major towns and cities to do exactly this. They also realize that they need not strike as hard as they would have otherwise in order to cripple the economy.

The GOSL has so far been comfortable on bail outs in the form of aid by the international community. But with the ongoing global financial

crisis, few countries will be able to continue giving hand outs to the island nation. An increase in military expenditures has meant that hundreds of thousands of people have lost their means of livelihood.

Thanks to internal displacement issues, unofficial economic impediments, restrictions on the movement of goods and services and constraints on the fishing industry, food prices have gotten higher. The GOSL has also recently proposed a new Nation Building Tax in its 2009 budget aimed at manufacturing, service and import industries. This additional burden has received severe backlash from the business community who feel that additional taxes in an already slow economy might kill off certain small or medium sized businesses.

Khaki Casualties

The ongoing war has resulted in heavy casualties not only among civilians or militants, but among Sri Lankan soldiers as well. Although the government has not publicly released mortality figures in the past two months, an entire generation of youth has been left battle-scarred.

In a recently released research paper studying the psychological impact of the war on soldiers, army psychiatrists revealed that troop moral was low, and that there was a worrying swell in the numbers of troops suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Survivors of battles from the North and East recounted horror stories of watching colleagues die, of being filled with a sense of hopelessness, sorrow, survival-guilt, depression, and being unable to recuperate from those memories. Returning soldiers have also found it extremely difficult to reintegrate into civil society. Thus, the war has taken a heavy toll on soldiers and their families.

Political Instability

There is no denying that President Mahinda Rajapaksa's rise to power has much to do with the deterioration of the situation on the island nation. The Sri Lankan premier largely came to power on a war ticket, having depended on and negotiated agreements with hardline nationalist Sinhala parties like the JHU and the JVP to acquire the presidential seat. This caused him to discard any progressive peace principles that had been laid out by the previous regimes.

Labeling his new agenda as a "war-for-peace" program, President Mahinda Rajapaksa pushed deeper into warmongering solutions to the conflict. A term also marred with several scandals, his presidency has even alienated several key supporters. The United National Party (UNP), Sri Lanka's opposition party in the government, has blamed his governance with corruption, and labeled his regime as the "Brothers' Incorporated" – a term that came about when President Mahinda Rajapaksa appointed his own brothers to head several key ministries, including Defense, Ports and Aviation and as Members of Parliament.

There needs to be a recognition of the fact that the end of the Tigers does not spell an end to the conflict. As long as fundamental Tamil (and other minority) grievances stay alive, the war will continue.

In an attempt to address the backlash against his purely combative solution, President Mahinda Rajapaksa created the All Parties Representative Committee (APRC) in 2006. The APRC was meant to come up with a way to bring southern political parties together in an effort to find political solutions to the major issues at the heart of the Sri Lankan peace effort – the amount of power to be devolved to the provincial level, and how the merger or demerger of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka should happen. So far however, the APRC has been unable to unify the different political parties around its proposals, i.e. to accept the 13th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution made in 1987.

The use of rhetoric such as "war for peace" has only served to exacerbate the problem. By ignoring the root causes of the conflict, and by placing a very high emphasis on a very contracted definition of security, the GOSL has also begun to lose out on the hearts and minds campaign amongst the civilian population

Intra-Tamil Violence

The rise of an armed militant group such as the

LTTE has meant that there is no space left for any other dissident voice from the Tamil community. The Tigers believe that they are the sole repositories and guardians of the entire Tamil community, and have been obstinate in their demands for secession from the rest of the country and the formation of a separate Eelam for the Tamils.

The LTTE's intolerance towards opposition from any other Tamil group has caused serious problems. Other Tamil political parties like the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) have had several of their members killed or missing.

What is more, the breakup of the LTTE in the East has destroyed the ideological basis of the Tigers, and weakened them militarily. Still, they have not shifted from their position of a separate state for Tamils, and dissenting voices are silenced, even if they are Tamil voices

III A ROLE FOR INDIA?

While the GOSL has approached India to assist it in the job of fighting the LTTE, India continues to maintain a disengaged stance. Not only is it preoccupied with its own terrorism problems given recent events in Mumbai and Delhi, but it is also wary of returning to the island and reviving Sri Lankan antipathy due to a previously botched peacekeeping mission.

At the same time, India has not kept quiet either. Premier Rajapaksa has made high profile diplomatic visits to meet India counterparts at the behest of India. And Indian Foreign Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, is scheduled to visit Colombo in December.

Beyond the quiet diplomatic pokes and nudges, there is not much else that India can do presently, given that President Rajapaksa has his mind set on the complete decimation of the LTTE. Keeping in consideration the plight of civilians however, and to prevent a spillover effect of the war into neighboring Tamil Nadu, India can press Sri Lanka to respect the rules of war.

It is also advisable for India to exercise more leverage on both warring parties by forming a

consortium of nation states that are respected and have a significant role to play in Sri Lankan politics and economics. How such a consortium should be formed is one of the biggest challenges facing India, which it needs to rise up to.

IV FUTURE TRENDS

Despite insistence by the GOSL that the LTTE can be completely wiped out, it is next to impossible to do so. Not only is the LTTE capable of simply melting away into the jungles and lying low for a while to recuperate and re-infiltrate, there is already a precedent for this. In his recent Heroes' Day Speech on 27th November, Vellupilai Prabhakaran's duly noted that "today's challenges are neither novel nor huge." Even if Prabhakaran himself were to fall, the LTTE's second-in-command are more than capable of taking over and running the show.

There needs to be a recognition of the fact that the end of the Tigers does not spell an end to the conflict. As long as fundamental Tamil (and other minority) grievances stay alive, the war will continue. Meanwhile, civilian casualties will continue to soar. Reimplementation of the ceasefire has become extremely difficult under the current context, and a low intensity conflict is expected to continue for months, if not years.

Denial by the GOSL of participation in human rights violations will continue at all levels. A victory in Kilinochchi will signify a significant boost for President Rajapaksa, who will inevitably use his military successes as political mileage in the next elections.

A political solution is still a distant dream, and the security situation will continue to be plagued with problems. In other words, the current conflict will only serve as a pyrrhic victory for the majority.



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