



Sri Lanka Challenges Ahead

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As of February first week, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been cornered to small pockets of Mullaithivu district. In 2006, when the 'open confrontation' broke out in the island, the Tigers were in control of over 15,000 square kilometres comprising districts of Kilinochchi, Mullaithivu, Mannar and parts of Vavuniya, Jaffna, Trincomalee and Batticaloa, virtually running a proto-state.

Using the ceasefire agreement (CFA) effectively, they augmented their manpower and military arsenal manifold, while selectively assassinating identified "traitors" and "enemies". LTTE intelligence and hit squads penetrated government-controlled areas for selective assassinations. Some of the high profile victims include Lakshman Kadirgammam, Foreign Minister, Lt. Gen. Parami Kulatunga, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army, Maj Gen Janka Perera (Retd), Maj. Muthalif, Chief of Army Intelligence, Lt. Col. T. Rizvi Meedin, senior Military Intelligence official, and several undercover operatives.

Although the writ of Colombo did not run in those "uncleared areas" controlled by the LTTE, the Sri Lankan government, with the help of non-LTTE Tamil armed groups and 'Deep Penetration Units', knocked out some key LTTE leaders. The government also was successful in weakening the LTTE by weaning away Karuna, one of the longest serving commanders of the LTTE. Karuna deserted with a chunk of cadres in March 2004 to connive with the government forces; the LTTE consequently lost the entire East in July 2007. The role of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) was restricted just to 'naming and shaming' of the antagonists rather than to make them abide by the Agreement.

Unfortunately, in due course, both the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE developed serious disagreements on interpretation of the CFA. Disagreements ranged from movement of LTTE cadres with/without arms in the government controlled areas to dismantling of high security zones, implementation of Prevention of Terrorism Act, disarmament of Tamil paramilitary groups etc. As the sanctity of the Agreement waned, violations went up. The number of violations by the LTTE were alleged to have been ten times higher than the government's.

Frustrated with the LTTE's obduracy and muscle flexing, many important countries like Canada and the EU imposed ban and started tightening noose on Tigers' funds and arms flow. The Sri Lankan government successfully made use of these turnarounds to take on the LTTE militarily. It officially abrogated the CFA in January 2008 and declared open war on the Tigers.

The strategy worked. As of end-January 2009, the LTTE controlled less than 300 sq kms of territory after losing its administrative capital Kilinochchi and the strategic Elephant Pass. It is only a matter of time before the Sri Lankan forces take control of the remaining areas from the Tigers. In the days ahead, however, there are likely to be several challenges for the government and the common people.

I NEUTRALIZING VIOLENCE

Bringing an end to the ongoing ethnic violence is the biggest military challenge before the government of Sri Lanka. Capturing remaining parts of Mullaithivu may not take much time, but neutralising every LTTE cadre will be an arduous

task. Unable to cope with the onslaught of the security forces, the Tigers have already shifted to guerrilla war mode. As a result, in the jungle-infested Mullaithivu areas, the government forces may find it difficult to make its presence felt on a sustainable basis. Using 'hit and run' tactics, the Tigers may be able to effectively inflict casualties on the troops.

It is, therefore, crucial for the Sri Lankan Army to stifle external supply lines to these areas totally. The LTTE has also penetrated the southern areas of the island to carry out terrorist attacks on vital economic and political targets using its 'sleeper cells'. Strengthening security of potential targets, especially against suicide attacks, is, therefore, a priority for the establishment. In addition, at the macro level, capturing or eliminating the LTTE chief Prabhakaran and other Tiger leadership is vital to ward-off the leadership component to the insurgency movement. Despite capture of seven airstrips, potential of an air strike by the Tigers remain. Air alert should remain high till the final stretch of territory is captured from the LTTE.

Most of the liberated areas are heavily infested with mines. Demining them is yet another uphill task. The United States and Japan have offered a grant of SLR 3.2 billion to the Sri Lankan

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government for demining in the Mannar District. Belgium has also offered to help in technical, training and equipping Sri Lankan security forces in demining process. Other countries also should come forward to help in demining remaining areas of the Northeast. There is yet another issue of dealing with the young soldiers of the Army who are likely to be demobilised. After the war, the government may not require them. So will be the case with surrendered LTTE cadres. Given the

economic situation of the country providing suitable alternative employment to these demobilised soldiers and Tigers is not going to be an easy task. Once again, international aid agencies are the only hope. Sri Lanka Donor Conference countries including the United States, the European Union, Japan and Norway can play a leading role in this regard by also roping-in India.

II POLITICAL SETTLEMENT: NEAR AND FAR

To Military victory against the LTTE is not as important as winning the hearts and minds of minority Tamils. Real test of political leadership lies here. As long as grievances that gave rise to militant groups like the LTTE remain, violent resistance will continue. Popular support to the LTTE among Tamils is not overwhelming. However, the Sri Lankan state's continued indifference and apathy towards Tamils have pushed them towards the Tigers. It is right time that the present regime under Rajapakse acknowledges this aspect of the ethnic conflict. No ethnic strife can be settled without addressing its root causes.

However, progress in drafting a political package for Tamil minorities has been lethargic. The All Party Representative Committee (APRC), appointed in 2006 to "fashion creative options that satisfy minimum expectations as well as provide a comprehensive approach to the resolution of the national question" has not moved anywhere near to the stated objective. Instead of exploring creative options, the APRC, in its interim report submitted in January 2008, advised the President to implement the 13th amendment to the Constitution, which outlined devolution to provinces after Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of 1987. Even after 20 years, ideas are back to square one.

However, the government is far from implementing even these old ideas. It is appreciable that President Rajapakse conducted elections firstly to local councils in Batticaloa district in March 2008 and then to now de-merged Eastern province in May 2008. The post-election governance in the East, however, is not promising. The Eastern Provincial government has insufficient resources and powers to manage its affairs. Factions in the ruling Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) is yet another hindrance in the governance process. Unfortunately, the Rajapakse regime is planning to emulate this

model in the north as well, which is not appreciable.

On the other hand, Colombo should make use of this golden opportunity to demonstrate its earnestness over power-sharing with minorities rather than just to show to the international community that "democracy has been restored in the former fascist areas". It is therefore the responsibility of the international community to exercise maximum leverage on the Sri Lankan government to deliver a meaningful devolution package to the minorities. India can take a lead role in this. Any meaningful devolution should go beyond the present 13th Amendment. It is true that for the Sinhala hardliners even 13th amendment is unacceptable. But, in reality, devolution under 13th Amendment is not only 'too little - too late', but also unsustainable in the long run.

Yet another drawback of the APRC is its unrepresentativeness. Important parties like opposition United National Party (UNP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA) are not part of the Committee deliberations. Thus, the principal objective of generating a consensual political document on the ethnic issue is lost. Unless this shortcoming is overcome, all efforts of the APRC would go in vain.

The international community should also make sure that the present military victory over the LTTE should not result in triumphalism on the part of the Sinhala-dominated regime over Tamil minorities. A suitable reconciliation method could be adopted to construct bridges among all the communities of the island. This is where a good interim arrangement aimed at ameliorating sufferings of the affected populace and, at the same time, that could build confidence between the majority and the minority is vital.

The affected communities need not to wait for a final solution which is at a distant future. Relief, rehabilitation, resettlement and reconstruction require urgent attention. It is important that both interim and final arrangements are consensual to all the parties. This is yet another challenge which requires more energy and maturity. One only hopes that 'plebiscitary politics' does not come back to haunt the ethnic question.

III GETTING EVERYBODY ONBOARD

Presently the fundamentals of Sri Lankan economy are shaken by the three decade-old ethnic conflict. The island is suffering from expensive short-term foreign debt, declining foreign

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exchange reserves and a high deficit. Present foreign exchange reserves of about \$1.5 bn are enough only to finance for two months of imports. Although, the oil prices are currently down, fluctuations may gobble the current reserves sooner. The ongoing global economic crisis has added to the woes by hitting key export sectors like tea and garments. Garment industry, especially, is under peril due to threat of suspension of lucrative trade concession by the EU if the Sri Lankan government continues to ignore human rights concerns. Called as "the GSP+ scheme", the concessions helped Sri Lanka net a record \$2.9 billion from EU markets in 2007, or 37.5 per cent of the total export income.

In addition, travel advisories from important countries like the United States, Australia, Germany, Canada, Russia, Britain and New Zealand have constrained tourists flow. It is to note that tourism is one of Sri Lanka's main sources of foreign exchange, along with garments, remittances and tea. Eastern parts of the island, one of the best tourist attractions, have not yet been made safe for the visitors.

Foreign remittances, yet another major foreign exchange earner, in the recent past have been good to meet the balance of payments crisis. However, there are concerns that these inflows would decline as there have been a sudden change in the economic fortunes of oil-producing countries with the decline in oil prices. In the

global context of an economic and financial meltdown, there is a significant fall in the foreign direct and portfolio investments.

Appreciably, inflation has come down, but still a cause of concern to a common man whose real income has not kept pace with the inflation. Rural areas, President Rajapakse's main power base have largely been shielded from economic woes through populist budgets and development projects. How long this could be sustained is a big question. The government is counting on aid flows meant for post-war reconstruction to bail itself out of the crisis. However, too much reliance on post-dated cheques is economically unwise. At the same time, one cannot discount the fact that a durable peace can bring a turnaround to the ailing economy. Agriculture and fisheries are promising sectors in a peaceful northeast. In addition, Sri Lanka is emerging as one of the key backyards of services sector, especially business and knowledge outsourcing.

IV CONCLUSIONS

The humanitarian situation is precarious in the northeast. Estimatedly, over 12,000 have been killed since 2005 when 'proxy war' commenced between the two antagonists that gradually slipped into 'undeclared war' and later into 'declared war'. The casualty figures are expected to increase manifold as confrontations get to a stage of close-quarter fighting in the coming days. Over 25,000 have fled to India as refugees, and about 500,000 are displaced internally, including 135,000 in the past few months.

The numbers are expected to increase further as forces advance. Thousands of civilians are still trapped in the hostilities between the two antagonists. For those civilians who are caught in the crossfire to move to safety, the government has created "safe zones". However, as long as hostilities continue, it may be dangerous for the safe and voluntary movement of people out of combat zone. In this regard, the EU suggestion of temporary suspension of hostilities till the movement of people is complete is worth considering. This may also avoid use of "safe zones" by both parties to attack each other.

Unexplained disappearances have become normal in Sri Lanka. Since the unilateral abrogation

of CFA by the GOSL in January 2008, nearly 150 persons have disappeared from capital Colombo alone. The figures may be high in the Tamil-dominated northeast. Sri Lanka ranks second only to Iraq on the number of killings, displacement and disappearances.

Threats to civil society organisations and media functionaries are grave under an island-wide that is in place since August 2005. Since 2006, about 50 journalists were killed. Maintaining basic human rights standards are imperative in a democracy. This is all the more important in a post-conflict society basically to prevent situation sliding back to a conflicting one. For this, the current regime has to shed its present authoritarian behaviour and switch to democratic mode. Shattered democratic institutions require rebuilding. Else, Sri Lanka will continue to figure among the failed states.

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