

SABRE RATTLING?

In Sri Lanka's uneasy peace between the government and the LTTE, spreading violence is subjecting the cease-fire agreement to increasing pressure. There is also a growing fear that hostilities might break down soon, leading to the resumption of war. Even the Co-Chairs of Sri Lanka's peace process have expressed concern about these developments. They sent a communication to the President and even met her to discuss how to avert escalation of violence.

These events are taking place against a backdrop of continuing erosion of public confidence in the peace process in general. Three years of 'no war – no peace' has not contributed much to stabilize people's trust on the ability of government and the LTTE to advance the peace process further. The long suspension of negotiations, continuing violations of the CFA along with unabated violence and the myth of a 'peace dividend' amidst the spiralling cost of living are some of the key factors that have contributed to the erosion of popular support and confidence on the peace process. The overall behaviour of the government, the LTTE, the political parties and the media gives the impression that advancing the peace process further in order to stabilize it through fresh negotiation and settlement agreements is nobody's real concern. The extreme difficulty with which the government and the LTTE negotiated even a humanitarian mechanism for post-tsunami re-building, the intense opposition it generated among Sinhalese nationalist forces and judicial injunction against some of its clauses have further added to this atmosphere of despair that is fast building up in Sri Lanka at present.

The sabre rattling has begun against a backdrop of continuing uncertainty of the direction in which the political process of the country should move. Will there be full-scale war once again? People have begun to ask this question and only the government

and the LTTE will have an answer. The government on its part has repeatedly said that it did not want war. The LTTE has also said that they did not want war, unless the war is 'thrust upon the Tamil people.'

War, in objective analysis, does not seem to be the first choice rationally preferred either by the government or the LTTE at present. At the present stage of the conflict, full-scale war is unlikely to bring about any significant military or political advantage to either side. For the government, another phase of war would be extremely destructive in both political and economic spheres. For the LTTE too, the next phase of war would be immensely destructive. For the past three years under the conditions of CFA and political engagement with the government, the LTTE has begun a re-building process in the North. It includes economic recovery, infrastructure development, setting up of an administrative machinery while the combatants are in the barracks, and new institution building necessary for structures of regional autonomy. The LTTE might not want the next phase of war to destroy all these 'achievements' made under conditions of relative peace.

Meanwhile, for the government as well as the LTTE, taking the first step towards war might not be the rational first option, even under conditions of deteriorating conditions in the Eastern province. Amidst public posturing to the contrary, the government and the LTTE seem to have established a relationship of political engagement through negotiations for the MoU on the post-tsunami administrative mechanism. The terms of the MoU clearly indicate that both sides have made significant concessions to one another in agreeing to the final text. That relationship of engagement probably continues, despite hard-line posturing in public. What is really important now is for the two sides to build further on this engagement and broaden it to discuss key issues relating to the CFA, overall security

issues and the next phase of the peace process. It is probably not possible to begin peace talks as such at present, because there is no major agenda for them to discuss. But, preparation for the next phase of peace negotiations requires greater consultation between the two Peace Secretariats with the participation of the Muslim Peace Secretariat as well. Preparation for next phase of the peace process will invariably involve addressing issues that have led to the present stage of sabre rattling. **P**

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