

PEACE AFTER THE TSUNAMI: NEW WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

One month after the devastating tsunami disaster of December 26, two things have become crystallized as crucial for a successful recovery process in Sri Lanka. Firstly, the UPFA government and the LTTE should find a framework of cooperation in the re-building process. The post-tsunami recovery strategies should be linked to peace-building and governance reform efforts.

New Engagement?

The government-LTTE engagement in order to work out a framework of cooperation in the re-building process is a significant stabilizing factor emerged in the aftermath of the December 26 natural disaster. The dynamics of the relationship between the two sides during the first two weeks of the tsunami were quite mixed and complex. Although there were reports of a pleasant exchange of letters between the Presidential Secretariat in Colombo and the LTTE's political wing in Killinochchi exploring cooperation in the immediate aftermath of tsunami, the individual agendas of the government and the LTTE seem to have prevailed over mutual cooperation. The government, as it has now been revealed in the patriotic English press in Colombo so eloquently, had acted on the inaccurate intelligence reports that the LTTE's military strength had been decisively weakened by the tidal waves, creating a new strategic asymmetry in favour of the state. The LTTE too had its own agenda of portraying the UPFA government as having practiced deliberate discrimination against Tamil victims of the tsunami in the North. Thus, strategic unilateralism appears to have dominated the approaches of both sides in the first two weeks after the tsunami disaster.

These competing perspectives on each other and the concomitant strategic goals, projected by the government and the LTTE, initially precluded any working relationship being forged between the two sides. After much haggling, some kind of equilibrium emerged in the relationship between the two sides in the third week after December 26. Indeed, it is quite an achievement that the UPFA government and the LTTE have been working for the past two weeks on a possible framework of cooperation in obtaining and utilizing international assistance. In their public statements, there is an overt recognition of the fact that unilateralism could hardly constitute a winning strategy. Both sides are acutely aware of the fact that international assistance beyond verbal pledges would materialise only if there is concrete bilateral cooperation in the post-tsunami recovery process.

Internationalisation

This indeed tells us the extent to which Sri Lanka's post-tsunami recovery process is internationalised. The LTTE seems to have been the first to realize the political consequences of the internationalisation of the recovery process. The internationalisation of humanitarian assistance strengthened the state exactly in the same way that the internationalisation of the peace process strengthened the nation-state in 2002. From this significant insight, the LTTE appears to have decided to work in limited collaboration with the UPFA government. The government, meanwhile, also became aware of the crucial need to cooperate with the Tigers in securing continuing assistance of the international system. This confluence of

thinking is indeed a positive development. The government and the LTTE should now utilise this opportunity as a building block for future political engagement to advance the process towards a negotiated political settlement to the ethnic conflict. The task of the opposition, civil society and the international community is to help in building the capacities of both the UPFA

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government and the LTTE to utilise this window of opportunity for constructive engagement.

Fresh Openings

Meanwhile, there is another coincidence, a rare one at that, of the approaches of the President and the LTTE leadership to a key strategic dimension of the post-tsunami recovery process. Both sides are keen to de-link tsunami recovery from the peace process. The Norwegian facilitators are also reported to share this de-linking approach. This is a particular dimension of the conflict sensitivity as conceptualised by the two main protagonists to the conflict and their international interlocutor. It posits the normalisation of civilian life in the tsunami-hit areas as the shared immediate goal of both the government and the LTTE. The peace process, as this approach asserts, is too contentious to be brought into the equation right now. The best way to link this approach to a process of peace-building is to persuade the two sides to commit to a series of concrete and strong confidence-building measures through the limited framework of recovery cooperation they now seem to contemplate. Sooner or later, conflict sensitivity of the recovery process will have to be elevated to peace sensitivity. This is where the civil society and the international community can play a facilitatory role.

It is in this context that the appointment of the former US President Bill Clinton as the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for tsunami-affected countries assumes special significance for Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The international community is quite keen to establish a link between tsunami-recovery and peace building both countries where the peace process had remained stalled for months. President Clinton, with his peace deal-making background, is one of the best individuals in the world today to envision new peace efforts in both Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The UN officials have also made it quite clear that the UN was keen to 'capitalise on the openings' that the tsunami has provided for re-activating the Indonesian and Sri Lankan peace processes. In Sri Lanka, Secretary General Annan himself witnessed the intimate link between the tsunami disaster and the conflict and the imperative of peace as a pre-requisite for any meaningful and sustainable recovery process.

Meanwhile, with regard to the conflict in Aceh, the government and the rebels returned to the negotiation table in Helsinki, assisted by the former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari. In Sri Lanka, the possibility right now is for the two sides to engage the middle level

officials for talks concerning post-tsunami recovery. These may not be 'political talks' in the sense of peace negotiations. To resume political talks in Sri Lanka, a new international initiative is perhaps necessary, because the previous international initiative has largely run out of steam as well as ideas. Now with Clinton in Asia with a humanitarian mandate from the UN Secretary General, a fresh window of opportunity is in the making.

Governance Reform

Finally, an agenda for governance reform is quite central to a meaningful rebuilding process in Sri Lanka. The key to governance reforms is the strengthening of the local government institutions in a federal framework. Particularly in the South, the inefficiencies of the government machinery in responding to the complex humanitarian emergency is evident even one month after the tsunami. In many places in the Southern and Eastern districts, the GA-AGA-Grama Sevaka nexus broke down. In a number of places I have visited, the Grama Sevaka officers bare the brunt of a huge humanitarian challenge, with no guidance either from the senior officers or from political leaders. The government is not making use of the bodies of local governance, on the argument that they are inefficient and inept to handle an urgent crisis. With no regular links with the ground situation, officials in Colombo who direct a centralised recovery process are quite oblivious to the sheer magnitude of the humanitarian crisis out there.

Meanwhile, the centralised recovery response launched by the LTTE in areas under their control seems to have, so far, worked well. But there too, centralisation has its limits. There is no reason for centralization that has failed at the centre to succeed in the periphery and in the regions. Consultation of the victims of tsunami in making decisions that will directly affect the people, their lives and livelihoods is in short supply in both South and the North. Consultation in public policy making is not informing people of decisions made elsewhere, but obtaining through democratic participation, people's views that determine decisions. Recovery and re-building from above is less likely to succeed than a participatory recovery process would, because it does not make the victims partners in the path to recovery. In a way, the challenges of post-tsunami recovery and rebuilding should compel the LTTE leadership to re-think their vision of the North-East regional political entity, and to make it democratic and decentralised. Now is the moment for such fresh political thinking in both Kilinochchi and Colombo. It is an opportunity for political transformation for all. **P**

The cover picture is from the famous painting of a Tsunami by the 19th century Japanese artist, Hokusai.

The photographs in this issue were taken at Wadduwa.