

## BOOK REVIEW

**Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation**, Edited by Robert I. Rotberg, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press and the World Peace Foundation 1999, x+218pp. ISBN 0 8157 7578 4 hb GBP20.95.

This volume on conflict and peace-building in Sri Lanka stems from a conference held in late 1997 at Harvard University, jointly sponsored by the World Peace Foundation, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The book's chapters are new contributions building on that meeting, and reflect on more recent developments, as well as on the roots and manifestations of the protracted civil war that has been under way since the early 1980s.

In his introduction, Robert Rotberg gives a succinct and nuanced account of the complexities of the Sri Lanka conflict and its background, and sets out the structure of the book: the roots of the conflict, particularly 'competing nationalisms'; the costs of the conflict; and means of building peace. The following chapters group around these themes. Chris Smith gives a useful account of the military campaigns in Sri Lanka's 'enduring war'. David Little looks at whether the conflict is at root 'religious', 'ethnic', both or neither. Something of the same theme is pursued by Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, whose main purpose, however, is to show how the war has become self-perpetuating, transcending whatever its initial roots were. The following two chapters, by Saman Kelegama and Donald Snodgrass, look at the economic costs of the conflict, including the opportunities foregone because of it. The remaining chapters look at various ways by which peace could be "brought in", in Rotberg's introductory formulation. Chandra de Silva looks at both the effects of the war on education and the potential role of education in ameliorating political violence. Teresita Schaffer, a former US ambassador to Sri Lanka, examines critically the initiative presented by President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1994-95, after she came to power on a peace ticket; Schaffer examines what went wrong (and right) with an initiative that was followed by further escalation of the conflict. William Weisberg and Donna Hicks look at the potential for third party interventions into the conflict (such as the intermediary role currently being pursued by Norway). Jayadeva Uyangoda looks at the impediments to peace in Sri Lanka's political culture. Rohan Edrisinha looks at the potential for constitutional reform, such as that proposed in the mid-1990s, in securing peace. Neelan Tiruchelvam, who was director of the ICES, a former MP and constitutional thinker, concludes the volume by scrutinising the role of devolution and federal models enshrining minority protection that is needed to secure lasting peace. He shows how, in contrast to other post-colonial societies in South Asia and elsewhere, devolution and minority protection were not written into the Sri Lankan constitution at independence. He then shows how past attempts at devolution and recognition of the multiethnic character of the country (a proposal drafted in the late 1980s explicitly recognized four main groups — Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Burghers or mixed race people) were scuppered by a reluctance to undermine the central, unitary state, and by the competing and seemingly irreconcilable Tamil and Sinhalese nationalisms exemplified by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the south. President Chandrika's 1995 proposal for a 'union

of regions' similarly foundered, though he sees this draft proposal as a 'paradigm shift' in the right direction.

Rajasingham-Senanayake's contribution perhaps occupies a pivotal position in the book, both conceptually and in the order of chapters, located between the discussion of the conflict and its causes (chapters one to three) and the discussion of the effects of the conflict and the potential for its resolution (chapters five to twelve). Rajasingham-Senanayake's chapter touches on all of these aspects. She opens with the observation that

Sri Lanka's armed conflict has generated a momentum and logic which exceeds its root cause—often glossed over as ethnic conflict—even as it has invented new collective identities. Yet, few of the numerous analyses of the conflict have asked how war transforms identities, borders and territories, or generates the ethnicization and polarization of hybrid collective identities (p57).

A pessimistic corollary of this observation is that the conflict could sustain itself long after devolution or other power-sharing mechanisms are introduced, conceding autonomy to the Tamil-speaking peoples of the north and east as a means of ending the war (ibid). In following sections of her chapter, which could very usefully be expanded, Rajasingham-Senanayake gives a succinct account of the complexities of conflict, its roots, and its pursuit by various paramilitary groups in addition to the main protagonists—the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE; she shows how the conflict has become self-perpetuating in various 'hidden war economies'; she examines how the 'relief industry' has become implicated in the whole set-up; she shows how identities, particularly of women, have been transformed; and she demonstrates tellingly the hurdles a solution involving devolution would have to overcome, not least the fact that formerly ethnically mixed localities are now forcibly, and probably irrevocably, 'unmixed'. Like Neelan Tiruchelvam, her view is that any settlement must address explicitly the issue of minorities, particularly at the local level, in an attempt to undo rather than consolidate the enclave mentality that the conflict and its accompanying ethnic cleansing have brought about. As Rajasingham-Senanayake points out, there are obvious resonances here with other places, not least former Yugoslavia.

Robert Rotberg has done an excellent job in putting this book together. It is well indexed, although a consolidated bibliography would have been useful. The volume gives us stimulating reflections on the Sri Lankan conflict in particular, and on conflict and its resolution in general. Painfully and symptomatically, the final chapter of the book breaks off with a note from the editor that Neelan Tiruchelvam was murdered by a suicide bomber before he could complete his contribution. Fittingly, the book is dedicated to his memory, yet another victim of Sri Lanka's bloody, intractable civil war. ■

**Nicholas Van Hear—Centre for Development Research, Copenhagen. This review first appeared in the Journal of Refugee Studies, OUP.**