
PEACE: FROM ILLUSION TO REALITY

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The Sinhala people have had a long sojourn in the land of make-believe. Their leaders have promised them things which defy belief. Junius Richard Jayewardene hoped to disarm the LTTE in 72 hours with Indian assistance. He began the ritual mantram of promising all-out military victory. His successor, Ranasinghe Premadasa, promised from the *pattirippuwa* of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy that the single all-island state would be preserved come what may. His two successors, Wijetunga and Kumaratunga, made annual promises of military victory.

A variation on this theme was the repeated assertion that the LTTE could be so seriously debilitated by military pressure that it would be forced to sue for peace on the government's terms. This mantram was persisted despite the manifest increases in the LTTE's military capability resulting in a series of staggering defeats suffered by the Sri Lankan armed forces during the last five years.

For the last 14 years from 1987 all governments without exception have assured the Sinhala people that a constitutional solution enacted into law could end the conflict by weaning away the Tamil peoples' support for the LTTE. The 13th Amendment to the constitution which established Provincial Councils was intended to have precisely that effect and was a complete failure. The Tamil people could not be persuaded to believe that a constitutional change enacted by a Sinhala majority parliament would never be repealed by the same body. They demonstrated a complete unwillingness to entrust their security and future to the constitutional enactments of a Sinhala majority parliament.

During the course of the war all Sinhala governments persuaded themselves and the Sinhala people that the LTTE and the Tamil people did not have the financial and manpower resources to sustain a prolonged war against the larger financial and manpower resources of the Sinhala state. The fact that the Tamil *diaspora*—now over 800,000 strong and resident in the world's richest countries has a per capita annual income at least 25 times greater than that of the population of Sri Lanka is never mentioned. The illusion is maintained that the LTTE has not the means for the long haul.

A recent variation on the last theme is the hope that the categorising of the LTTE as a terrorist organisation and the consequent banning of financial support to it will starve it of funds and so bring it to its knees. The Tamil *diaspora's* financial support for the LTTE could thus be ended. It was in 1997 that the US Government imposed its so-called "ban" on the LTTE. There is reason to believe that support from that country has increased rather than diminished after the

ban. It is a well-known fact that attempts by governments to stifle the wishes of their citizens often produce the opposite of the desired result. The 6th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution outlawed, on pain of severe penalties, any secessionist activity. It was intended to kill the LTTE at birth; we are all too well aware how successful that attempt has been.

All the leaders of the Sinhala people, political, religious and social, have asserted the proposition that secession is an act of moral turpitude and for that reason its suppression, by military force if persuasion fails, is morally justifiable. While the secessionist aspiration is roundly condemned there is never in Sinhala society any inquiry into the causes that led to its emergence and adoption by an entire people. The series of pogroms against the Tamil people living among the Sinhala people from 1956 to 1983 produced no legal process against the wrongdoers. Custodial massacres, obviously with the connivance, if not the encouragement, of the government custodians (Welikade in 1983; Kalutara in 1996; Bindunuwewa in 1999) resulted in no legal redress against the culpable. These and many other reasons combined to produce the determination to seek their own security in a state of their own where the minimum rights of a citizen will be safeguarded and enforced. Condemning secession without seriously and rationally examining the reasons for it is a deliberate attempt at drawing the wool over the eyes of the Sinhala people, investing them with a misbegotten sense of righteousness and burdening the victim with guilt.

The determination of the Tamil people to secede and set up an independent state of their own in the area of their domicile is presented to the Sinhala people as a criminal conspiracy against the state without any reference to the fact that all over the world, and in our nearest neighbours, secessionist tendencies have manifested themselves and have come to fruition in some cases. At the moment of independence in 1947 Pakistan seceded from the Indian Raj; in the sixties The Federated Malay States split up, peacefully, into three separate, independent states; in the seventies Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan and became a separate, independent, sovereign state. Two years ago East Timor seceded from Indonesia and set itself up as an independent state. These states are our nearest neighbours to east and north. Further afield many secessions have taken place during the last century – The Republic of Ireland from the United Kingdom in 1922 and Norway from Sweden even earlier. After the end of World War II many secessions have taken place in Europe. The several republics of the former Soviet Union from that state; Slovakia from Czechoslovakia; the five constituent members of the Yugoslav Federation from that state; the Turkish Republic of Cyprus from

the state of Cyprus. It is only a matter of time before the secession of Kosovo from Serbia becomes a reality. The secessionist tendency is a common part and parcel of the rise of ethnic nationalism in many parts of the world. It is presented to the Sinhala people as an unique phenomenon due solely to the bloody-mindedness of Mr. Velupillai Pirabakaran and the LTTE. The Sinhala people are never reminded that at the general election of 1977 the Tamil people of the northern and eastern provinces voted overwhelmingly for an independent, sovereign Tamil state in the area of their domicile. The Sinhala people have been misled into an irrational and false conception of the nature and conventionality of the Tamil decision to secede. Thus misled they have been railroaded into war as the only means of dealing with Tamil nationalism and its secessionist aspiration.

Each of the paragraphs above has dealt with an element of the Sinhala mind-set as it inhabits the land of make-believe. Not one of them has any relationship to existential reality. Indeed, every one of them is the diametrical opposite of current reality. To approach a negotiation with the LTTE for peace and an end of the war with such assumptions and such a mind set is to guarantee failure from the very outset itself. Fundamental changes in Sinhala thinking, eschewing these egregious myths, is an absolute *sine qua non* if the peace negotiations are to have any chance of success.

The Lessons of the First Three Sets of Talks with the LTTE

It is a well known truism that those who do not learn the lessons of history are condemned to repeating their mistakes and disasters. This is especially the case with the lessons of recent history. The 18-year war now has a history of its own and within it is the history of the three sets of talks with the LTTE, first in 1985 at Thimpu, secondly from 1989 to 1991 in Colombo and finally from 1994 to 1995 in Jaffna. Each of these talks failed and the failures hold important lessons which we shall now examine.

The Thimpu talks failed because the two parties were on different planes and did not engage on common ground. The Tamil parties, which included the LTTE, took their stand on their national rights as a separate nation. The Sinhala side denied the existence of a separate Tamil nation and so dismissed the claim to national rights. These positions are set in stone to this day. At present all Tamil political parties, not just the LTTE alone, stand rock-solid on this ground. The reason for the Sinhala refusal to acknowledge the Tamil position is the inevitable end of the single all-island state if it is acknowledged. On that rock the Thimpu talks foundered. The adamant refusal of the Sinhala side was based on the absolute conviction of the possibility of successful military suppression if the talks failed.

By the time the second set of talks came around the LTTE was fully engaged in open war with the Indian Army's Peacekeeping Force. Both sides found it expedient to make common cause against

the Indians and the issue of Tamil national rights was put on the back burner. When the Indians withdrew the strong impetus on the Sinhala side for a quick military victory against an adversary severely bloodied by the Indians surfaced in the ranks of gung-ho militarists whom President Premadasa could not restrain. Once again the unquestioned certainty of military victory – a *coup de grace* on a weakened LTTE—led to the resumption of war in June 1991.

The third and final set of talks by the last government from 1994 to 1995 contains the greatest number of lessons for the future. The very form the talks took showed the government's lack of experience in peace-making and its unwillingness or inability to learn from recent international experiences in this field. The initial gambit was correspondence between the President and Mr. Prabakaran. The letters exchanged were not made public at the time and were kept secret. They were revealed only by the publication of Dr. Anton Balasingham's book, *The Politics of Duplicity* in the year 2000 (Fairmax Publishing Ltd., London). The talks themselves were desultory affairs carried out on the Sri Lankan government side by low-level officials and a few confidantes of the President. They flew to Jaffna for talks of a few hours on each occasion with lengthening intervals between them. On the Sri Lankan government side there was an element of condescension in that the government was willing even to talk to people who should really be blown out of the water. The LTTE understood quite early that the government was susceptible to military pressure and even relatively minor relaxations of the embargo on food and drugs would be thwarted by military foot-dragging. The effort to secure international observers of the ceasefire and other relaxations proved abortive. When the futility of the talks became clear to the LTTE it gave notice to the government of the end of the period of ceasefire which the government failed to take seriously. When fighting resumed on 19 April 1995 there were angry allegations by the government of foul play and bad faith which had little effect on international observers in Colombo who knew the facts. The talks never proceeded to an engagement with the *casus belli*, namely the national rights of the Tamil nation.

International peacemaking efforts demonstrated clearly the need for fully accredited representatives, supported by experts and administrative staff, housed together in the same building, engaging in patient, specific, factual negotiations with constant reference back to the principals of each side. Complex issues would be dealt with by specialised working parties containing experts in the respective fields in order to arrive at clear, viable undertakings by each side. The mediating party would strive to encourage each side to understand the realities of the conflict to which both sides could be blinded by the heat of the conflict and the ill-will and hatred generated by it. Accordingly the talks themselves were invariably long drawn-out affairs, sometimes involving "proximity talks" where the parties were not on talking terms or refused to discuss face-to-face ultra-sensitive issues. Such structural

arrangements in which both sides participate are an indication of the seriousness with which each side approaches what is indeed a matter of life and death for so many of their subjects and supporters. All of this was totally absent in the third set of talks in Jaffna. Indeed, these talks were a classic demonstration of how peacetalks should not be undertaken.

With the hindsight following the passage of time, the lessons of the three sets of talks are crystal clear. They may be summarised as follows:-

- i. From the very outset a direct, unambiguous engagement with the *casus belli* i.e. the national status and the national rights of the Tamil people has to be faced up to, however ominous its potential consequences.
- ii. Secondly, the reliance on a military fall-back option needs to be abandoned as experience has amply proved its futility. Its corollary, that the LTTE can be so weakened militarily as to be forced to sue for peace on the government's terms, has to be abandoned as clearly illusory.
- iii. Thirdly, the strategy of seeking a constitutional settlement for a problem which has nothing to do with constitutional form but has to do with the national configuration on the island, has also to be abandoned as a proven delusion. The constitutional form of each national entity is a matter for each entity and will follow the treaty or agreement on which peace will be founded.
- iv. Fourthly, the negotiations between the two sides must necessarily be structured on the lines of other well known peace-making efforts with the clear understanding that it will be a very prolonged and time consuming process not amenable to the imposition of "time frames" for the attainment of its several objectives.
- v. Fifthly, it must be clearly understood that the international mediator or facilitator cannot alter the realities that have resulted from a long war and that peace will have to take account of those realities.
- vi. Sixthly, there has to be an absolute and unqualified understanding that everything is up for negotiation and there are no non-negotiable reservations. Whatever is needed for the two peoples to live in peace and amity on the island which is their home will form the foundation of the settlement. Unquestionably this will entail a new and hitherto undreamt of statal configuration upon the island which will end the spectacular failure of the single all-island state to maintain peace within it for the island's population.
- vii. Finally, detailed and serious consideration must be given to well known international examples, such as the Benelux Union, which demonstrate the possibility for a close social union as opposed to political unity which could afford both peoples the great benefits of cooperation and amity in place of hostility and war.

The Significance of the Present Background of the Peacetalks

For the first time the peacetalks will take place in the background of shattering and unprecedented military failures by the Sri Lankan armed forces. From July 1996 when the massive defeat at Mullaitivu took place the five-year period up to date has seen nothing but one military failure after another. The debacles at Killinochchi (1998), the winding up of the unsuccessful *Jayasikurui* campaign (Dec. 1998) the tremendous reverses of November 1999 in the Wannai, the fall of the huge Elephant Pass complex in April 2000 and the virtual rout in the Pallai salient in April 2001 have demonstrated conclusively a profound military failure. The thirty thousand troops marooned in the Jaffna peninsula have no land supply route and have to be sustained at enormous expense by sea-borne supplies on a tenuous sea route subject to frequent interruption by the LTTE's naval forces.

The economic context has seen a similar deterioration, especially during the last year after the LTTE disrupted the tourist industry by its attack on the island's sole international airport. The general downturn in world trade following the September 11 events in the USA has compounded the island's economic difficulties. Worst of all is the emerging horror story of the economic mismanagement of the recently expelled government of the PA. The bare ability to service the burgeoning public debt and keep the basic elements of civil government going are now in jeopardy. Setting apart financial resources for war is now nothing more than a purely academic speculation. The economic situation utterly forecloses any possibility of continuing with the war.

The political context itself has undergone a major change following the general election of December 5, 2001. The nationalist parties espousing the projection of military hegemony throughout the island were wiped out. The *vox populi* is clearly for pragmatism and the recognition of ineluctable realities in preference to the hollow triumphalism of the PA government which itself was the carry over of the same syndrome from all previous governments. The psychological willingness for fundamental change is there and both military and economic necessities are compelling. Never have the auguries for peacemaking been more propitious.

Over the last year there has also been a sea-change on the Tamil side. The overwhelming majority of Tamil members of the present parliament have recognised the LTTE as the true representative of the Tamil people and asked that peacemaking be undertaken in talks with the LTTE. This is an important advance from previous ambivalence in this respect and is greatly conducive to a successful negotiation.

The Will for Peace

It is a vital truth in human affairs, and one that needs repeating, that "where there is a will, there is a way". The

18-year duration of the war and its current continuance are a clear demonstration that peace was not the overriding priority but was only an adjunct to other more valued objectives. On the Sinhala side this was crystal clear – peace was acceptable only within the single all-island state. The concept of peace as the primary objective for which even the single all-island state was a price worth paying was, and still is, wholly absent on the Sinhala side. Indeed, the very mention of such a concept in the public domain is virtually outlawed both by political timidity and the forlorn hope against hope that it could be avoided. The time has come now to grasp this nettle and “come clean” with the public. Peace will be possible only if this priority is reversed and peace becomes the prime objective. Peace within a two-state island is peace nonetheless – the treasure beyond compare for which both nations on the island yearn today. In today’s context an insistence on peace only within a single all-island state means opting for continued war. An advance away from the land of make believe to the realm of realpolitik requires a clear and unambiguous understanding of this simple equation. There is no doubt that this requires a seismic upheaval in Sinhala thinking and Sinhala policy and that is what coping with change implies.

The Future

For all the peoples of the island both the past, especially the recent post-independence past, and the present have been bedevilled by violence. From the fateful day in 1956 when the eminent leaders of the Tamil nation were clubbed and beaten on the pavement before Parliament without intervention by the police present and without legal process against the assailants, the public

life of the country has been besmirched by the recourse to physical violence of persons and political parties in power. The disease has become endemic and has grown to catastrophic proportions at present. Neither the past nor the present conjure a vision of peace in the public domain. If we want peace it will be a journey into new territory. Peace if ever attained lies in the future. To reach such a future, fundamental changes in self-conception and in attitudes towards others in the public domain are needed. The attempt at Sinhala majoritarian hegemony has failed the Sinhala people and wreaked havoc on others whose safety and well-being should have been our concern and responsibility. A state worth that name must ensure to every one of its citizens personal security and prompt legal redress by due process under a functioning rule of law. The “state” that now exists failed that elementary test long ago and needs to be recreated on lines taken for granted in many countries of the contemporary world.

The title of this paper implies a journey from one world to another – from the world of make-believe and illusion and hollow triumphalism to the world of reality. It is a journey that has been postponed far too long but can be postponed no longer. On peace hangs the very survival of the state as a recognisable entity. Massive foreign intervention with both aid and direct investment might just save the day if the quality of the peace that is achieved is internationally credible. Sri Lanka is now as close to final collapse as Argentina but paradoxically it has a way out absent in Argentina, namely, the war which can be ended to international acclaim. Salvation from the tragedy of war and from the ruin of economic collapse both hang on just one thing now – PEACE. ■

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