
WOMEN AND THE PEACE PROCESS

Cat's Eye along with all other individuals and organizations who have struggled for peace in this country welcomes the recent unilateral ceasefire declared by the LTTE and the reciprocal cessation of hostilities by the government of Sri Lanka. We hope that these welcome moves by both sides are a recognition of the fact that there is no military solution to this conflict and that only a democratic political solution based on power-sharing and the guarantee of fundamental rights and freedoms will eventually lead to a peaceful resolution of the ethnic conflict.

For the past two decades civilians living in the North and East, in the border villages and in Colombo have had to face the brutal consequences of a relentless war. The direct violence and the social and economic consequences of the economic blockade has resulted in a great deal of suffering. Malnutrition levels, health standards and economic livelihoods have all suffered with the North and the East invisible in national economic and social planning and development. In the South, young men from families all over the country have given up their lives in a fruitless search for military victory. The militarisation of society due to the conflict has resulted in greater societal violence and crimes against the community as well as against women. Daily we read of cases of army deserters, paramilitaries and other young men with guns engaging in criminal and anti-social behaviour. According to the police, rape and domestic violence figures have skyrocketed in the last few years. Violence has become the acceptable means of resolving conflict and violent responses are tolerated and sometimes encouraged. This has led to an escalating culture of violence and brutality. We hope that the call to peace will result in a reversal of this upward cycle of violence and destruction.

Women living in the North and East are painfully aware that when peace processes break down, the intensity and scale of violence greatly increases. It is therefore extremely necessary that the peace process is based on firm foundations and that steps are taken to consolidate the peace process and the cessation of hostilities. We urge the government and the LTTE to enter into a permanent cessation of hostilities agreement and to set up an effective monitoring mechanism of independent, international observers who will ensure that both sides keep to their promises. We also urge the government to draw upon available international experience to secure the cessation of hostilities and to begin the groundwork for long-term political negotiation. In this regard, we welcome the government of Sri Lanka's request to the Norwegian government to begin the process of third-party facilitation. The government of Norway has in the past been a patient and tireless worker for peace not only in Sri Lanka but in many other countries. Their experience and statesmanship are welcome in this context and we hope that

assisted by a competent Sri Lankan team they will facilitate what will prove to be a delicate process of give and take.

We urge the government and the LTTE to involve women from all sides of the conflict in the peace process so that the important issues related to women's experiences of war are not neglected. In recent times, the United Nations General Assembly passed a detailed resolution in 2000 calling upon all governments and negotiators to involve women in the peace process. In Northern Ireland, Somalia, Burundi and Sierra Leone, women are playing an increasing role. Even at the Bonn meeting of the Afghan negotiators women were present as full participants. We hope the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE will involve women in their negotiating team and in the peace process generally.

Women are well aware that peace is not only about signing legal agreements and making political compromises. Peace is also about memory, recovery and the economic and social rehabilitation of society. The costs of this war are yet to be fully ascertained. Women are victims of war in different ways. They are often direct victims, being killed, raped or maimed in the process of conflict. These women remind us that war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed in Sri Lanka during the course of this conflict and that women civilians are often the victims. In the Sri Lankan war, there have also been women combatants. Their welfare and reintegration into society also poses serious concerns with little precedent in Sri Lanka or the world on how such a process of reintegration can be achieved. Women and children are also 80% of the refugees and the internally displaced, often finding refuge in under-resourced camps with few provisions. In these camps, they find the strength and resources to survive despite the high rates of domestic violence and sexual harassment. They often become the empowered partner in the marriage relationship, doing everything they can to sustain the lives of their husbands and children. Women close to the armed conflict are often widows, their menfolk having been killed in the war. As members of female headed households they will have an uphill task in fighting to survive and in bringing up their children. The social and bureaucratic obstacles that they will face will often discourage and defeat them. Women along with all others who have been exposed to this conflict will carry psychological scars of trauma and depression requiring medical and psychological intervention and support from the community. Any negotiations for peace must also be about economic and social rehabilitation and women must play a major role in the process of defining and formulating a strategy for the future. The presence of women's voices in the negotiations is one way to guarantee that these important components of the peace process are not forgotten. We urge the government and the LTTE to give women their rightful place. ■

Courtesy *Cat's Eye*