

ON UNLEASHING THE DOGS OF WAR

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Gentlemen learned in the law urge recourse to all-out war but have they stopped to count the cost ere game and set and match are lost?

1. As we teeter on the brink of all-out war our attention should be focussed on military realities and prospects. We should not be distracted by futile efforts to devise a political package which is expected to encourage the Tamil people to "marginalize" the LTTE and force it to compromise. We have been down that road before-in 1987-and know well its lack of success.

2. What we need to do urgently is to concentrate our minds on what military escalation entails. This is especially necessary for two reasons. First, we have hardly any experience of modern warfare or knowledge of its potential costs. Secondly, what we are engaged in is the deadliest form of modern warfare-a nationalist guerilla war of secession fought on the guerillas' home ground-in which both of the world's super powers (the USA and the Soviet Union) bit the dust within recent memory. It is a form of warfare which dismembered the UK in 1922 and Ethiopia in 1993. There are no cases of such a war ever being won by the conventional forces of the state defending the **status quo**.

3. There are very important and urgent lessons for us in similar conflicts in other parts of the world. Let us consider one which is within the knowledge of many Sri Lankans. In Northern Ireland (which is about 2/3rds of the land area of the north-east province of Sri Lanka) the IRA fought both the British army and the Protestant paramilitaries ranged against it for 25 years to secure the secession of Northern Ireland from the UK and its joinder to the Irish Republic. There is a fragile cease-fire now in force while all parties remain armed. In the latter stages of that war, say in the middle of 1994, the British army fielded 100 troops to 1 guerilla. The British government spent on the conflict \$ 3.25 billion per year (equivalent at current exchange rates to Rs. 260 billion per year). That sum would have been far greater if Britain had to purchase abroad and import the material required for the war. Despite Britain producing at home all the tanks, aircraft, ships, transport equipment, weapons, ammunition, communications equipment, fuel, medicines, food and clothing required for the war effort the British government had to spend \$ 3.25 billion per year on a conflict with 300 hard core IRA guerillas who had no naval or missile capability-and yet could not subdue them in 25 years of fighting.

4. The north-east province of Sri Lanka is half as big again as Northern Ireland. Its terrain incomparably more rugged and advantageous to the guerillas than Northern Ireland. Whereas

the IRA numbers around 300 fighters the LTTE has 8,000. Whereas the British army fielded 100 troops to 1 IRA guerilla we field 10 to 1 against the LTTE, a tenth of the ratio that failed in Northern Ireland. On 30,000 troops in Northern Ireland the British government spend \$ 3.25 against the LTTE we spend Rs.29 billion in 1994. All the military hardware required by the British army in Northern Ireland is home produced whereas in Sri Lanka almost all of it has to be purchased abroad in scarce foreign exchange and imported. The IRA holds no territory nor has it naval or missile facilities-the LTTE has the lot.

5. Is it any wonder that the Sri Lankan forces have suffered a series of military defeats? Is it not likely that they will suffer many more until a credible ratio of troops to guerillas of at least 100 to 1 is built up? Already the Indian government fields more than a 100 to 1 ratio in Kashmir.

6. The impending escalation has prompted the raising, by new taxes, of the derisory sum of Rs. 4.5 billion for additional military hardware. As the engagement gets under way many multiples of this sum will be urgently required. The conflict in Sri Lanka is of a far greater magnitude than that faced by the British army in Northern Ireland and will undoubtedly cost us far more in the very near future if a credible effort is to be made.

7. The magnitude of the sums required completely dwarfs the largest single effort made by the Sri Lankan government since independence-the Mahaweli project. That project elicited generous grants from the UK, Canada, Sweden and Germany. Contrariwise, all the funds required for the war effort will have to be generated domestically. The tax profile of Sri Lanka is such that sums of the enormous magnitude required can be raised only from the mass of the people through indirect taxation (and the cessation of the costly subsidies and services now provided to millions of the poor) with direct taxation of incomes and profits capable of only a very secondary role. In a very poor country such as Sri Lanka it is not only that the poor have to fight its wars but it is the poor, by virtue of their huge numbers, who will have to pay for them. Before we unleash the dogs of war we owe it to our people to make this abundantly clear to them. But it is no more than our adversary has long paid for his war effort.

8. It is idle to speculate now on what the outcome of the conflict will be. However, without any speculation and with absolute certainty we can look forward to a future of impoverishment and degradation and the disappearance of civil government itself among the Sinhala people. ■