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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

PEACE: ACT WITH RESPONSIBILITY

Last chance for peace', this expression has been used more than once in the recent past, and therefore its re-invocation today may seem to be an exercise in cliché brandishing. With that risk in mind, we may still say that the last, last chance for peace in Sri Lanka has arrived. And if for some reason this chance too is missed, it would also be a failure of a generation.

When the PA government assumed office in mid August, one of the spontaneous public reactions to this long-awaited political change was the generation of massive expectations for peace. A war weary people in the South, the North and the East began to feel that they had at last found a leadership which was genuinely resolved to negotiate a peace settlement to the ethnic conflict.

Public statements made by government leaders, proclaiming their commitment to peace, were soon supplemented by an important policy decision too. Describing its move as a 'confidence building measure', the PA government, within two weeks in office, removed the ban on 28 items of essential goods that the previous government had put out of reach of the people in the Jaffna peninsula. There were also pledges by the government to restore the supply of electricity to the peninsula and to expedite reconstruction and rehabilitation work in the North-East areas.

The LTTE's reciprocal gesture of releasing 10 Sinhalese policemen in custody could not have been viewed otherwise than as a further step in the direction of peace. Meanwhile, Mr. Prabhakaran, the LTTE's elusive leader, came on the BBC radio expressing a desire for peace. On this rare

occasion, when he allowed his voice to be broadcast over a non-LTTE radio channel, Prabhakaran avoided any reference to the 'traditional' Eelam demand; instead, he talked of a political settlement that would satisfy the 'just demands of the Tamil people.' He put some emphasis on further confidence building measures that would lighten the burdens now being endured by the people of the North. After that, the LTTE quickened the pace by naming its team of negotiators, and inviting government representatives to Jaffna.

All these developments have generated such a 'peace optimism' that some news agency reports even went to the extent of proclaiming that Jaffna was getting ready to welcome Chandrika Kumaratunga, the new Prime Minister.

If the first one to three weeks of the PA administration were thus a period of remarkable events, the fourth week brought gloom and despondency. It all began with the still unexplained sinking by the LTTE of a naval gun boat belonging to the Sri Lankan Navy, off the coast of Mannar. This was the first major post-election engagement between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces. In the encounter, some sailors were also taken prisoner by the LTTE. A few days later, the Sri Lankan army in Jaffna went into offensive action, inflicting considerable damage on LTTE troops. In a subsequent retaliatory attack in the East, the LTTE killed several soldiers of the army.

In sum, when the new PA administration completed its first month in office, peace expectations had been considerably weakened by a few events which were both unanticipated and unwarranted. Even

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then, it is to the credit of the government that they reaffirmed their determination not to let such incidents thwart the moves towards peace.

However unfortunate these events may have been, they also point to the immensity and complexity of the task called 'peace-making' in a situation of a militarised internal conflict. Students of military conflicts are only too aware of the fact that armed engagements are at times forms and means of communication. If the LTTE's sinking of the naval boat was one such, then it is really a misfortune that both parties, the government and the LTTE, contributed to a situation where armed communication became necessary.

When we look back the entire series of events concerning a negotiated settlement since the PA came into power, we can detect one major shortcoming in the 'dialogue' between the government and the LTTE: permitting euphoria to overtake the hard realities of war and peace. Both used public rhetoric to communicate with each other and with the public. There is still no evidence to support a surmise that the two parties had used any form of

communication other than public statements, which merely indicated each other's intentions for peace in general and broad terms.

In conflict resolution processes, the initial stage may necessitate re-statement of generalities and certain steps to test each other's peace intentions as they are publicly declared by the parties. Nevertheless, the most viable and acceptable method of testing peace intentions is through informal contacts, ideally *via* a third party. However, the Sri Lankan peace process began without the involvement of a third party at all. Both the government and the LTTE dismissed, from the very beginning, the idea of any third party mediation. This, as can be seen in retrospect, gave the false impression that a certain trust had developed, in response to circumstances conducive for peace, between the PA and the LTTE.

Perhaps, the Sri Lankan case may not require a third party, as in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. However, Sri Lanka's experience in this very brief period of one month clearly points to the peril of not having adequate communication between the two sides at the most crucial, formative period of the peace process. And indeed, we are still in this formative phase and any belligerent act by either side can jeopardise the entire future process for peace.

The LTTE's belligerence has not done them any good. It has only resurrected the dark shadow of suspicion and mistrust of Prabhakaran's intentions. Only a very, very hard realist would be able to sit back and take a stoical view of the recent armed clashes. Such a realist would see them as unavoidable irritants in a preliminary stage of resolving an intractable conflict. But, all are not seasoned realists. People's minds and perceptions are particularly susceptible to day to day events and such events may cause more despair than hope.

The particular way in which the LTTE has been responding to the government's peace initiative appears to have some specific characteristics. First of all, the LTTE has been repeatedly, to use a familiar expression, 'sending the ball back to the PA's court.' The LTTE named their negotiating team promptly, proposed Jaffna as the venue for talks, invited Chandrika Kumaratunga to Jaffna, and asked for a cease-fire, as a

pre-condition necessary to create a suitable atmosphere for negotiations. It appeared that Prabhakaran wanted to set the tone as well as the pace, if not the agenda, of negotiations.

In contrast, the government appeared to be pre-occupied with its own difficulties in actually starting the peace process. Caught up in a sort of a constitutional dual power situation—with the Defence Ministry still being held by a UNP President—, and sensitive to a possible backlash from the army, the PA leaders could not take any concrete step towards talks, during the first month in office. Even the naming of the government's negotiating team was delayed. Meanwhile, the statements made by the Deputy Minister of Defence while visiting the army camps in the North may have transmitted wrong signals. Responding to queries from soldiers who were skeptical of peace with the LTTE, Anuruddha Ratwatte, the PA's Deputy Minister of Defence, repeated the claim that if talks fail, the government would pursue the military option vigorously.

Even from the viewpoint of a hard realist, these were unfortunate events. One may even go to the extent of saying that peace talks are being talked about by parties that are totally inexperienced in peace-making. Indeed, in Sri Lanka, there is hardly anybody with a 'peace experience' as such. Against this backdrop, what people can most optimistically hope for is that these initial setbacks will not imperil the peace process.

It is nevertheless most crucial to bear in mind that there is no easy path to peace. All that happened in the last two weeks of September should put the entire business of peace in a proper perspective: there is always the possibility of unforeseen events interfering with peace efforts, sometimes even threatening to break up negotiations. To avoid pitfalls on the way to peace, the most prudent approach would be not to let events overtake the process.

In a way, the primary responsibility of creating and sustaining a viable peace process lies with the PA government. It is the Chandrika Kumaratunga administration that should not, in a future day, be looking around to find excuses for 'failed peace talks.'

P