

## **SRI LANKA AFTER PRABHAKARAN**

(The way forward)

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The ethnic Tamil rebels, one of the most feared guerrilla movements in the world acknowledged that their war for a separate homeland had “reached its bitter end”.<sup>1</sup> LTTE has been decisively defeated by the Sri Lankan armed forces marking the end of world’s longest civil wars. Its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, after prolonging the agony of the Tamils by using them as human shield was shot dead by the Sri Lankan army on May 18, 2009<sup>2</sup> prompting people to celebrate and distribute sweets in the streets of Colombo.

With the end of Elam war IV which started in August 2006 as a result of failure of a Norwegian brokered Cease Fire Agreement (CFA), the Sri Lankan armed forces were able to achieve what the US led allied forces have not been able to achieve in Afghanistan for the past nine years. This remarkable victory of the Sri Lankan army was made possible after the government of Sri Lanka cleverly planned its strategy for an all out war while still keeping the door for negotiations open till the formal abolition of Cease Fire Agreement in January 2008. The Sri Lankan armed forces improved their counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism capabilities and sought hi-tech weapons from countries like Pakistan and China.<sup>3</sup> Military spending in the 2009 budget was raised from \$1.5 billion to \$1.6 billion<sup>4</sup> which is five percent of GDP and 20 percent of the government’s budget.<sup>5</sup> On the propaganda front, government created the Media Centre for National Security (MCNS), in June 2006<sup>6</sup> with the aim of countering the pro-LTTE web sites. Sri Lanka also developed relations with countries in the South East region which were used by the LTTE as centres for arms transshipment and other subversive activities. Exchange of intelligence information with these countries resulted in the weakening of the LTTE. Furthermore, the resolve and commitment shown by the government also acted as a morale booster for the armed forces and people at large.

Certain factors were responsible for this downfall of LTTE which up till now was undoubtedly one of the most powerful and hard to defeat terror group:

Decision to assassinate Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991<sup>7</sup>, followed by Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993, and making an attempt on the life of President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1999 proved disastrous for LTTE.<sup>8</sup> Even if it had started this struggle with the best of its intentions for the rights of Tamil people, such acts proved detrimental since as a result, the Sri Lankan government was successful in convincing the rest of the world to declare LTTE as a terrorist organisation. Moreover, following the events of 9/11, LTTE lost support of sympathetic Western countries, as well as India, which could have played a pivotal role in resolving the conflict.

Its decision to enforce a boycott in Tamil majority areas during the 2005 presidential election was yet another mistake made by LTTE. By enforcing this boycott, LTTE tried to create a situation in which the Sri Lankan government could be seen as an aggressor by the international community. As a result of this boycott, Ranil Wickremesinghe, a shrewd negotiator who entered the Cease Fire Agreement with the Tigers in 2002 and was known as the cease

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fire architect<sup>9</sup> lost and Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was being supported by Sinhalese nationalist and who pledged to end the war during his election campaign came to power.

Whenever a peace deal was made, LTTE used it to reinforce and strengthen its military capabilities. It showed little interest in Sri Lankan government's offer of political autonomy within a federal structure during 2002-2005 peace process. Its continuous refusal to find a peaceful permanent solution to the problem and relying on military means only also went against it. Unlike the Maoists in Nepal, LTTE was not willing to be a part of a political process of the country. It failed miserably to grab the opportunities presented to it to meaningfully engage Sri Lankan government. With the help of foreign mediators, it could have secured for the Tamil people what was rightfully theirs. Millions of Tamil people could have been spared had LTTE been more realistic and more committed to the cause of protecting Tamils instead of waging a war it could never win.

In an effort to be acknowledged as the sole representative of the Tamil people, LTTE ruthlessly eliminated all other Tamil militant groups. Leaders of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation front (EPRLF), Tamil Eelam Liberation organisation (TELO), and People's liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and several other democratic Tamil leaders were all assassinated by the LTTE. For LTTE, anyone who did not support it was a traitor. This led to authoritarianism and polarisation of Tamil struggle.

Atrocities committed by Tigers on Tamils also contributed to their downfall. Extortion of huge sums of money and forceful recruitment of child soldiers resulted in disillusionment. The extent of inhuman treatment that was meted out to Tamils in the last phase of war can be gauged by the fact that not only Tamil civilians were used as human shields by the Tigers but those trying to escape the battle field were shot in the back. Furthermore, a split in the ranks of LTTE in March 2004, when a section of its cadres in the Eastern province led by Karuna revolted against the domination of the organisation by Tamils from the Northern Province, was another factor which weakened the group to a great extent.

## **The way forward**

LTTE failed to see the changing dynamics of the world politics. It did not realise that the world around it has long ago stopped seeing it as a liberator and it was now regarded as a terrorist group banned by over 30<sup>10</sup> countries around the world. The military campaign which the LTTE started in August 2006<sup>11</sup> has reached its culmination. With the elimination of Prabhakaran along with his thousands of fighting cadres killed; its military structure and assets and capabilities destroyed; and with its political organisation decimated, LTTE does not exist anymore. Having overcome this one big challenge successfully, the Sri Lankan government has now to deal with a situation which would ultimately decide how far the decision to launch military offensive has paid off. Having lost around 6, 261 of its soldier and another 2,556 disabled<sup>12</sup> since the operation begun, the Sri Lankan government has to make sure that sacrifices made by its soldiers and people do not go in vain. The government of Sri Lanka cannot let this chance of durable peace slip from its hands.

President Rajapaksa has achieved what no other government could achieve during last three decades. Having secured the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka, the government of Sri Lanka is now facing its toughest challenge. While celebrating its victory over

LTTE, the government has the task of providing basic minimum infrastructure to tend to the basic needs of 2.8 lakh Internally Displaced Persons ( IDPs) currently housed by the government in 29 temporary camps.<sup>13</sup> There were some reports in the media that the conditions in these camps are not good as people are still suffering from varying degrees of degradation, destitution and deprivation. However, a delegation led by US Congressman Heath Shuler visited these camps and expressed its satisfaction saying that the conditions are good and impressive and of a much higher standard than described by media.<sup>14</sup> Similar views were also expressed by Japanese special envoy Yasushi Akashi<sup>15</sup> in his recent visit to Sri Lanka which is encouraging.

Despite elimination of LTTE, the possibility of guerrilla strikes cannot be ruled out as is evident by the claim made by LTTE spokesman Selvarasa Pathmanathan posted on the pro-rebel website referring to "fearless and unending commitment to this cause".<sup>16</sup> The Sri Lankan government, army and intelligence agencies will have to keep a close eye to avoid any such activities by disgruntled groups.

It is also being argued that the political solution should not be based on ethnic lines as it would undermine the notion of nationalism and Sri Lanka would never be able to get out of this ethnic barrier which would seriously undermine the development and progress of the country. However, it must be remembered that discrimination and almost 30 years of armed conflict has left a deep scar in the minds of Tamil people and it takes years and even decades to undo such anger. In the interest of peace and reconciliation, some difficult decisions will have to be taken and compromises will have to be made by both sides. Both sides will have to follow a middle path and accommodate each other. Continuous efforts and inclusive policies will bear fruit in due course of time and ultimately, Sri Lankans will rise as a nation by breaking all barriers of racial identities. In this regard, President Rajapaksa's statement that "No longer are the Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays and others minorities"<sup>17</sup> is a step in right direction. No Sri Lankan should feel isolated and discriminated on the basis of his religion, caste or ethnicity. Some of the policies adopted by the government during past couple of years are not being implemented properly. For example, both Sinhala and Tamil have been recognised as national languages but most of the work and documentation in the government offices is done in Sinhala due to lack of resources.<sup>18</sup> The government of Sri Lanka will have to ensure that Tamils get a fair share of representation in government offices. It is appreciable that the Tamil was made a compulsory subject in the Sinhala speaking areas since the middle of 2007<sup>19</sup> and proficiency exams have been introduced at various levels of the public service which gives incentives to those with bi-lingual capacity. All such schemes should not only remain on paper but implemented in a way that should benefit all.

The Sri Lankan government will also have to look after the Tamil diaspora which is scattered around the world. Some members of this diaspora community are highly motivated and are devastated by the outcome of the war. They can raise the issue of civilian deaths in the No Fire Zone to embarrass the Sri Lankan government and thereby, gaining more support for the cause of "Elam". Having contacts with the important people of host countries, Tamil diaspora is capable of providing a new leadership and new energy to lead the struggle for Tamil homeland through constitutional and political means. The government of Sri Lanka will have to take the international community into confidence and convince them to be vigilant in their respective countries.

The Sri Lankan government instructed its security forces not to use heavy calibre guns, combat aircraft and aerial weapons that might cause civilian casualties and reiterated its policy of "Zero Civilian Casualty policy".<sup>20</sup> However, at the same time, ignoring the threats from the Obama government to block \$ 1.9 billion in International Monetary Fund aid money<sup>21</sup>, the Sri Lankan government rejected international pressure to halt its operation saying that the security forces were now close to victory and would not leave a life line for the LTTE or its leaders who were wanted for war crimes and crimes against humanity. This position taken by Sri Lankan government has not convinced the Western countries as they are already demanding an inquiry into civilian deaths. Sri Lankan government is being blamed for massacring 20,000<sup>22</sup> Tamil civilian during the last phase of the fight. The government of Sri Lanka has rejected all such allegations and on the contrary insists that its forces are responsible for liberating tens of thousands of civilians trapped in the war zone.

Even if the concerns of the Western countries are justified, it must be remembered that going by the same rules some "Western countries" are also answerable for the war crimes they have committed in Afghanistan, Iraq and even Pakistan. For example, atrocities committed by the State of Israel on the hapless Palestinians are known to everyone. Why is the international community not playing its role to bring to justice people who were responsible for these operations? Absolving oneself from the guilt and finding faults with others does not serve the purpose of peace and justice.

President Rajapaksa has repeatedly said that his government is committed to the introduction of a political package to address the grievances of the Tamil community and resettle the displaced people in the north. In this regard, the Rajapaksa government will also have to make sure that the hardliners among his allies are not allowed to hinder any move taken by the government for reconciliation. The government will also have to ensure economic reconstruction of the areas hit by insurgency. Along the lines of the highly successful "Negenahira Navodaya (Eastern Resurgence), plans to develop North through "Uthuru Wasanthaya"<sup>23</sup> is already underway with the supply of electricity to all villages and reconstruction of highways in the entire rural sector with priority on the construction of schools, hospitals, post offices, divisional secretary offices and bank branches in the bid to bring normalcy is a positive development.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the government has also announced that it would facilitate the return of nearly one lakh of its Tamil citizens now living in India as refugees once the resettlement of the IDPs is completed.<sup>25</sup> In addition to this, integration of Ex-Combatants into civilian life and rehabilitation of child soldiers is yet another area which needs immediate attention.

It is also feared that the Sri Lankan government might now try to send Sinhala settlers into the Tamil region of north and east in order to bring demographic changes so that nationalist ambitions may be neutralised. However, any such move would lead to further alienation.

In its effort to bring normalcy in the Northern region and to ensure the democratic rights of the people, the government of Sri Lanka has announced that it would hold the local government elections for the Jaffna Municipal Council and the Vavuniya Urban Council soon. Establishment of local government bodies in the terror hit areas would give an impetus for development and democracy after almost three decades. Tamils, voicing their concern for nation building and advocating peace and reconciliation should be encouraged to come forward.

The government will have to make sure that political parties or individuals, trying to take advantage of the situation by creating communal tensions for their own gains, are discouraged.

With the elimination of LTTE, new avenues are open for Sri Lanka and country is set to witness unprecedented economic development. International community has made pledges with massive funding. It is being anticipated that with the end of civil war, the economic growth will see a boost of another 3% per year.<sup>26</sup> It is also interesting to note that previously, all governments used the excuse of terrorism for the slow economic growth of the country whereas, President Rajapaksa is being admired for not only giving a new momentum to the projects that were put on hold by his predecessors but has also kept all welfare measures intact and increased public sector wages despite quadrupling of the defence budget.<sup>27</sup>

The end of LTTE is a victory for the whole nation since Tamils have equally suffered at the hands of Tigers. Errors committed in the past should not come in the way of a bright future for Sri Lanka. An early solution would help in preventing ethnic strife to resurface again.

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