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Falling Sand

Norway is running out of time as Sri Lanka continues to attack

The deadlock in the Norwegian facilitated process caused by Sri Lanka's insistence that the Liberation Tigers attend any peace talks as marked criminals and not the recognised representatives of the Tamil people, continued this week. Oslo's tireless peace envoy is cooling his heels in his home country. Since the Sri Lankan government "categorically" refused to countenance lifting the ban on the LTTE, the Norwegian initiative has visibly ground to a halt. The LTTE's statement urging Colombo to reconsider the matter initially drew no response. It came last week in Sri Lanka's most ambitious naval and aerial operation, intended to blockade the LTTE-held Vanni region. Also last week, Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunge adopted a familiar cry: she vowed to crush - for the good of the country, naturally - the "Vanni hideout of Prabhakaran and his blood-thirsty band of terrorists."

The military option is quite clearly firmly back on Colombo's agenda. The Norwegians are not needed at this juncture, there's a new battle plan to trial. With over a billion dollars worth of financial assistance secured in the past month from the international community, and with the Indian government reportedly intervening to head off a no-confidence challenge from the main opposition United National Party (UNP), Kumaratunge is very much back in the saddle again - albeit a little gingerly. The strategic objective - as once again bluntly stated by the President - remains. But with the Sri Lanka Army still licking its grievous wounds, it's the turn of the Navy and Air Force to prosecute the war.

The LTTE continues to maintain a studied silence with its offer for Colombo to reconsider still on the table. The movement's oft stated distrust of President Kumaratunge continues to be justified by her government's actions this week: waging war while calling for peace. Kumaratunge's statements to the international community are not as relevant to reality as Norway and the international community might - rather conceitedly - think. Both Tamils and Sinhalese know her vows to the southern masses to destroy the Tigers are genuine, while her promises to the international community to seek peace are part of the obligatory charade for securing funding. So in the dizzying reversal and counter reversal of positions that is Kumaratunge's hallmark, she last week called for peace, launched a military operation, called for peace again, refused to remove the ban - the biggest hurdle to talks, called for peace once more and then vowed to destroy the LTTE. Kumaratunge's hard line is not contrary to the tide of political forces in the south. Her assertion that the Tamils are merely a minority -

made each time she refers to us in the context of a political solution - is inline with the Sinhala-Buddhist clergy's ethno-religious fundamentalism. Last week, as the high priests railed against Oslo's peace envoy and ambassador, Kumaratunge maintained a respectful, tacit silence. Even her handpicked Prime Minister, Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, urged Solheim to throw in the towel.

Norway's position is unenviable. Surmounting the issue of the LTTE's proscription, which is the crux of the present impasse in the peace process, is one problem. But time to tackle this is running out because of another: Sri Lanka's eagerness to wage war. Kumaratunge's military adventures are inevitably going to result in a bloody engagement sooner or later. The last time a state of uneasy equilibrium on the battlefield was disrupted thus, the LTTE was sufficiently incensed to withdraw its unilateral ceasefire. The rout of the Sri Lankan offensive that followed, combined with the LTTE's continuing restraint, provided another stable period for Mr. Solheim to pitch for peace.

The point is one of persistent irritation amongst the Tamils. Norway's initiative remains standing only because Mr. Solheim has been able to persuade the LTTE not to go on the offensive during his peace initiative. He has singularly failed to do the same with President Kumaratunge. In the past nine months, Sri Lanka has repeatedly gathered its strength and lashed out at the Tigers. Failing, it has rested and tried again. Tamil frustrations centre on the international community's refusal to acknowledge the LTTE's concrete actions to further the peace process while rewarding Sri Lanka's statements - despite the clear contrast with Colombo's actions - with massive funding, thereby enabling the prosecution of the war.

Which begs the question what can be done. If Sri Lanka is to be restrained from pursuing the military option, then the international community must link its financial assistance to firm steps towards peace. The issue of sovereignty is a laughable notion here considering whose lifeline keeps this developing country's weakened shell stumbling on. And Mr. Solheim's options are fast running out. The LTTE would probably continue to grit its newly grown teeth until Sri Lanka's attacks begin to challenge the organisation's strategic security. At this point the movement would inevitably strike back, triggering a vicious cycle of escalating violence under which the Norwegian initiative would collapse. If the international community now lacks the courage to assert its authority with Colombo, what does it - and Norway - propose to do once this happens?

Cause and Effect

Wars are apparently easier to fund than its victims

Much to the dismay of humanitarian organisations and those they look after the world over, the cash-strapped United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, this week announced cutbacks as a result of lower contributions from certain European powers. Perhaps these countries may not be able to sustain their commitments, considering that the International Monetary Fund (IMF), another supranational organisation funded by member states, has recently allocated approximately \$10 billion to prevent Turkey from spiralling into a financial crisis and more funds may be lent to assist Argentina in the near future. These are huge figures even for the IMF but it was what was deemed to be necessary to pull a key member of NATO out of a potential economic mess. However, one would have hoped that in the light of recent headline policies in several European powers with respect to refugees, funds to an organisation such as the UNHCR, whose objective is to alleviate such crises at the source of their occurrences, would not have been cut.

Interestingly, Sri Lanka seems to be able to claim more than its fair share of the international community's coffers at these apparently difficult times. In the past month the IMF and a consortium of countries have offered over \$500 million in funds, while the Asian Development Bank (ADB) trumped up a further \$600 million. Where has this money gone? Over the past year the Sri Lankan Armed Forces have seen massive expansion in its weaponry as the government has gone on a spending spree for all three service arms. The

IMF funds were not explicitly destined for this of course, but funds are fungible. Furthermore, the amounts that are being provided challenge conventional economic wisdom. Admittedly it is only a tenth of the recent package put together for Turkey but considering that Turkey's loan raised surprise at its size - so much so that it temporarily protected the country from the battering of capital markets speculators - and that Sri Lanka has a GDP approximately a tenth of Turkey's, Colombo's package should also raise eyebrows.

All in all, the new world order does not seem to provide a kinder climate for refugees. Those that seek to assist them are suffering cutbacks whilst those that intend to wage the wars that increase their not inconsiderable numbers are having little trouble getting access to funding. President Kumaratunge's salute last week to the IMF for rescuing her government should also be seen in the light of her new found readiness to escalate the war. And so the question becomes what message is the international community sending the protagonists in the Sri Lankan conflict? While the Norwegian peace envoy, Erik Solheim strives to bring about negotiations, the world powers are readily bankrolling the combatant that, as the past few months have amply demonstrated, is most eager to wage war. The international community's approach to the situation in Sri Lanka seems to be a perplexing one: rather than the usual carrot and stick, a new principal of carrot and candy seems to be in application - a policy that will undoubtedly increase the future need for more money for both weapons and refugees.



So near, yet so far

International realpolitik devoid of morality

What is of importance to the international community is not the justice and morality of the Tamil cause or the pitiable plight the Tamils are in but only the self-interests of the powers concerned, argues **DBS Jeyaraj** in the *Sunday Leader* of May 27.

AFTER more than a decade of bitter strife, there was some optimism amongst Tamils when the on-going peace facilitated by Norway and supported by the international community began. The reason was obvious: Tamils disillusioned and disappointed by Sinhala 'treachery' in various types of negotiations were not ready to trust the other side anymore. But third party mediation of the international variety was a different proposition.

The sad history of Sinhala-Tamil relations in this island has been a trail of broken promises. Under these circumstances there was little room for Tamil opinion to trust Sinhala bona fides in direct negotiations. Given the consistent refusal of Sinhala regimes to implement even the areas agreed upon, few Tamils expect that any Sinhala government would sincerely honour its obligations towards Tamils. So the dominant feeling among Tamils is that no peace negotiation with a Sinhala government would work unless and until it was mediated and guaranteed by a third party which had to be necessarily international.

An examination of the political discourse in Tamil about international involvement would reveal that the most common reference is 'Moondraam Tharappu Mathiyastham' or 'Third Party Mediation'. It is only in very recent times that some Tamil newspapers make it a point to define Norway's role as being facilitator and not mediator. There has also existed in the Tamil psyche a somewhat naive expectation that the international community could if it desired compel the 'Sinhala' government in Colombo to grant and implement Tamil rights. At the very least, the war could be brought to an end. This was due to the explicit knowledge that this war against the Tamils was being bankrolled by the aid giving Western nations and Japan.

If the flow of foreign aid was curbed, then the fuel enflaming the fires of war would be reduced to a trickle was the simple logic. The rights of Tamils too could be enshrined and ensured through international efforts it was believed.

This does not necessarily mean that Tamil opinion was firmly of the belief that international pressure was the only way out. The more nationalistic ones and those who interpret the lessons of history in a particular way felt that nothing at all was possible in Sri Lankan society where chauvinistic attitudes were institutionalised. Nevertheless there was a meeting point between both strands of Tamil opinion. There were a lot of takers for international involvement from the Sinhala 'side' too. For many believed that the perceived recalcitrance

of the LTTE could also be controlled only through international pressure.

The LTTE's authoritative structure, the overreliance on the military factor and its lack of interest in pursuing politico-diplomatic procedures had created an overall impression that the LTTE was not prepared to enter negotiations and opt for a peaceful settlement. This negative image of the LTTE was further enhanced after the disastrous fall-out of Govt - LTTE talks in 1994-1995. The international community felt that the LTTE would never opt for peace negotiations and that against this backdrop a war against the LTTE was justifiable. What was lost sight of was that the so-called war for peace has unleashed death, destruction, displacement, detention and despair of an unprecedented colossal scale against the Tamil people.

The LTTE was not prepared for talks was the general perception. The LTTE's rationale for this position was extremely simple. No Sinhala regime would be prepared to accommodate Tamil aspirations in a reasonable and genuine manner within a united Sri Lanka. Talks therefore were useless. Realising that this stance was not very welcome internationally and that Kumaratunga was reaping the benefits of the LTTE's 'default', the Tigers revised their strategy last year and decided to explore the politico-diplomatic option by engaging in talks with Kumaratunga again.

Diplomatically the LTTE discovered that their fortunes were very low. The international community that backed Kumaratunga in South Asia's Longest War were aghast at the total ineptitude of her regime to contain let alone combat the LTTE. Nevertheless they rallied around her again to prevent a military catastrophe. When 500,000 Tamils trekked out from Jaffna during Operation Riviresa, it was not perceived by the international community as a humanitarian crisis but when 38,000 troops were supposedly at the mercy of 7,000 guerrillas it was seen as a humanitarian crisis. The fall of Jaffna was averted mainly due to international pressure.

Velupillai Prabhakaran therefore decided to change his approach. He launched what has been described in these columns as a 'peace offensive'. His fundamental conviction that the Kumaratunga regime would never accommodate Tamil aspirations was unshakable. By going through the motions of seeking a settlement within the parameters of Sri Lanka's unity and territorial integrity genuinely he felt that he could expose the duplicity of Kumaratunga to the international community. It would also convince the Tamil people

that the LTTE had no choice other than to continue the armed struggle.

Despite this tactical shift Prabhakaran may have never opted for peace talks if not for the international factor. Even though he distrusted the Colombo government Prabhakaran felt that the international community would be fair. One reason for this was that Prabhakaran knew that the international community realised the limits of Colombo's military option and would therefore encourage a political settlement to prevent secession.

The LTTE therefore welcomed Norwegian efforts and co-operated wholeheartedly in the peace exercise. When Prabhakaran met Solheim he agreed to suspend attacks in the south on a request made by Solheim. The LTTE later offered a unilateral ceasefire and extended it on a monthly basis thereafter in spite of the government rejecting it and also engaging in provocative tactics. The LTTE was amenable to many initial suggestions favourable to the government in the Oslo drafted Memorandum of Understanding. Despite this co-operation, the Tigers in particular and the Tamil people in general have been saddened and disappointed by the turn of events that culminated in the launching of Operation Fire Beam by the armed forces last April.

The conduct of the government in this exercise was to be expected because it was regarded as untrustworthy from the beginning. It is however the role of the international community that was deplorably disappointing. The harsh reality today is that trust and confidence in the International role has eroded significantly. The silver lining however is the bona fides of Erik Solheim the special peace envoy.

The recent past has shown that a regrettable hiatus exists between intention and action of the international community in relation to its objective of bringing about a negotiated peace in Sri Lanka. From a Tamil perspective this phenomenon was all the more disappointing because it betrayed signs of obvious partiality towards the Kumaratunga regime.

If a negotiated peace is to be obtained then it can only be with the consent and concurrence of the LTTE. Therefore the LTTE has to be treated on par with the government in any meaningful negotiation. What happened however in the past months was the obvious reluctance of the Kumaratunga regime to respond positively to LTTE overtures for peace. A shameful spectacle of filibustering unfolded.

The LTTE and several Tamil parties kept on requesting International opinion to pressurise Colombo into responding positively but to no avail. Matters were made worse when Britain imposed a ban on the LTTE. The usual practice is to encourage movements like the LTTE to enter negotia-

tions but here the Tigers were being discouraged to do so and being penalised. Norway restricted to a facilitatory role alone was seemingly incapable of influencing events. The worst however was still to come.

In spite of a peace process being on and the LTTE's declared commitment to it neither Oslo nor the international community was able to prevent the Sri Lankan armed forces from embarking on a massive military offensive. The most terrible destruction was unleashed on the zone of conflict which is Tamil inhabited. Despite this, the LTTE through superior tactics, morale, courage and capability withstood the torments of firepower and in turn delivered a decisive defeat to the armed forces.

Lo! and Behold! What a change there was. Suddenly the international community woke up to the fact that the situation was deteriorating. The capitals of the world became concerned at the violence. Restraint was urged. The merits of a negotiated peace were propounded. Norwegian peace efforts received a second wind.

International opinion that remained conspicuously silent when the Tamils were lamenting about deteriorating conditions and the preparation for a major offensive by the government changed its course after government forces suffered a defeat. There were no qualms about the government publicising its acquisition of arsenal and armaments prior to the confrontation.

But when the tide turned against the government once again the International community became concerned about peace. Again it must be noted that there was silence for the first two days when a government victory was expected. It was only after the government defeat became unavoidable that the International conscience for peace was stirred.

So can the Tamils be blamed if they subscribe to the view that the international community had optimistic second thoughts about the capability of the armed forces in destroying the LTTE and willfully turned a blind eye to the offensive? If the battle had been favourable to the government and the tigers perceived as being defeated would the international community raised its voice for peace again? All the suffering and entreaties of the Tamil people for peace did not move the International community but the moment the tigers won it and the government's weakness became known it was peace, peace and nothing but peace again. The starkly brutal lesson to be drawn from all this for the Tamil people is that had the LTTE lost there would be no international push for peace.

The situation is further compounded by the fact that India, Britain and the USA, the 'big three' said to be pushing the peace effort have all banned the LTTE. All three have aided the military effort of the Sri

Lankan government. None of these governments are neutral on the issue. Furthermore American and British military expertise was supposedly involved in the planning and execution of recent military operations.

What is of importance to the big powers are not the justice and morality of the Tamil cause or the pitiable plight the Tamils are in but only the self-interests of the powers concerned. It is realpolitik devoid of morality that counts though sanctimonious hypocrisy would be articulated. Against this backdrop it is possible to assume that the powerful International Countries are ready to collaborate in the repression of Tamil aspirations while paying lip service to the peace process. An LTTE and by extension a Tamil defeat is to be welcomed. The only deterrent in this scheme of things is that the tigers and by extension the Tamils will simply refuse to be militarily defeated and politically annihilated.

Therefore, the first lesson for the Tamils is that the International community is not fair by them. It is partial towards the government regardless of whether the LTTE pursues the peace option or not. It seems obvious that given a choice where Tamil resistance can be militarily crushed or Tamil aspirations accommodated equitably the International community would be inclined to endorse the former option if that were possible. The second lesson is that despite the sincerity of Norway its role is limited and cannot impose peace. To do so Oslo needs the pressure of powerful nations to be exerted on Colombo.

The scenario therefore is dismal and gloomy for Tamils as far as the peace process is concerned. Their hopes of relying on International efforts to resolve the crisis within the parameters of a united Sri Lanka are dashed. The international community was ineffective and inactive when war was unleashed; it seems helpless to even get the talks started; How can it then secure justice and equality for the Tamils at the negotiating table? More importantly how can it compel Colombo to implement anything arrived at in negotiations? So international mediation looked upon as the panacea for Tamil maladies is now perceived as a non-remedy!

If the international community, particularly the USA, Britain, India, Japan and the European Nations want to correct this impression then they must prove through deeds that they are indeed fair and impartial. Meaningful and concrete action is required to convince Tamils that the dice is not loaded and the cards not stacked against them in the sphere of internationally backed peace processes. Tamil perceptions about the playing field not being level in the case of international peace initiatives have to be constructively transformed in the near future.