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Breaking Ground

The Thailand talks are a watershed for Sri Lanka

This has been a historic week for Sri Lanka. Not only did the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan government meet for the first direct peace talks in over seven years, the three days of intense discussions in Sittahip, Thailand, passed without acrimony and resulted in agreement between both sides on a range of issues. The sense of optimism which had prevailed amongst the peoples of Sri Lanka before the talks began was, in hindsight, completely justified. The confidence in the future of the Norwegian facilitated peace process expressed after the talks by the Chief Negotiators of both sides is testament to the progress achieved. Three more rounds of talks have been scheduled already - even though the ground breaking first round was only announced a few weeks ago. Of course, this week's dialogue in the public sphere comes after several earlier discreet meetings between Sri Lankan ministers and LTTE officials, both in the Vanni and London. Nevertheless, the talks in Sittahip are an important watershed in the course of Sri Lanka's protracted conflict.

From a Tamil perspective, the talks in Thailand represent the irrevocable internationalisation of the Tamil question. Firstly, former Sri Lankan governments' portrayal of the island's ethnic conflict as merely a narrow phenomenon of terrorism devoid of genuine political basis is no longer tenable. The strong and multifaceted international involvement in the Sri Lankan peace process - along with the chorus of approval this week from several governments across the globe - underlines the elevation of the Tamil question to new standing in international affairs. Secondly, the talks underline the recognition - foremost by the present Sri Lankan government - of the Liberation Tigers as the sole and authentic representatives of the Tamil people. The Norwegian peace process is not intended to only deal with the relatively minor - when it comes to conflict resolution - issues of ceasefire and de-escalation, but also with that of the civil administration of the Tamil homeland and, in the course of time, Tamil political rights. The LTTE is acknowledged as the expected Tamil representative at discussions - effectively to be held on the world stage - on these matters.

Another key success of the talks this week is the emergence of a new rhetoric and approach by both sides: 'partnership in peace'. The establishment of a Joint Committee, to oversee ceasefire related issues, and the Joint Task Force, for humanitarian and reconstruction activities, are a step forward from the tentative collaborative aspects inherent in the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission. Whilst the tactical objective of these joint structures is to de-escalate the conflict and accelerate the restoration of normalcy, the willingness of both sides to engage in such bi-partisan efforts reflects the growing trust between them. Most importantly - and particularly in the wake of the Sri Lanka's recent deproscription of the LTTE - these associations also reflect the deepening recognition of the Liberation Tigers as a credible and important political formation. As such, the opponents of peace in the Sinhala south can be expected to continue to decry the Norwegian peace process and vociferously condemn these collaborative efforts.

But with regards to the immediate future, both protagonists in the ethnic conflict and the Norwegian facilitators are agreed that the most urgent need of the day is a tangible peace dividend for the peoples of Sri Lanka - and in particular the residents of the north and east where the war has been waged for two decades. All three parties this week called urgently for international community's generous support for a rapid and targeted program of reconstruction and rehabilitation. With up to a million people displaced from their homes and much of the infrastructure of the north - where high intensity conflict has raged for almost a decade - destroyed, the impact of any rehabilitation work would be immediate and significant. The Sri Lankan Chief Negotiator, Prof. G. L. Peiris expressed optimism the international community would respond positively. Certainly the negotiations in

Thailand ought to provide the necessary reassurances. But it must be kept in mind that reconstruction and rehabilitation in a region that has seen sustained war for almost two decades is not merely about new bricks and mortar, but also the nurturing of the local economy and undertaking of longer term projects to reconstitute a shattered community. It is beholden on the international community to work closely with Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan government to assist this restoration of normalcy.

On the other hand, amid the euphoria that followed the talks in Thailand, it should not be forgotten that powerful forces in the Sinhala south still oppose the Norwegian peace initiative. President Chandrika Kumaratunga last Friday - and again this week - launched a vitriolic broadside against Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's peace moves. In the time honoured Sinhala chauvinist tradition of stirring up apprehensions and anxiety amongst the populace, Kumaratunga warned the Premier, in a public letter, of impending danger from the LTTE. But whilst the President's executive powers continue to pose a latent threat to the United National Front government - and by extension, the peace process - amid the international excitement over the talks with the LTTE, Kumaratunga's histrionics this week struck a note of absurdity and irrelevancy. But with the peace process continuing to be a fault line for political animosity in the south, and the legislation to curb the President's powers yet to reach Parliament, it remains to be seen whether the UNF cabinet will secure the political leeway it needs to pursue the Norwegian peace process. But the mood amongst the peoples of the island this week should endow the UNF with the resolution to take the requisite steps.

Ironically, the substantial progress made in terms of formal plans to rapidly bring tangible benefits of the peace process to the residents of the war-torn north and east was ignored by most of the press, in preference for what they mistakenly considered a radical policy change by the LTTE with regards to the objective of the Tamil freedom struggle. When the LTTE Chief Negotiator, Mr. Anton Balasingham stated that the Tamil people were not seeking a separate state per se, but pursuing their inalienable right to self-determination, many observers assumed - quite incorrectly - that the LTTE was renouncing the Tamil people's right to secession. Predictably, a plethora of sensational headlines followed. But in fact, Mr. Balasingham was merely reiterating the movement's long held position on this core aspect of the Tamil question.

Even as recently as June this year, in an interview to this newspaper, Mr. Balasingham stated: "We hold the view that the Tamils have the right to both internal and external aspects of self-determination. The Tamils would examine a proposal for a fully autonomous Tamil homeland with a system of self-government in recognition of their inalienable right to internal self-determination. But if Sri Lanka denies the right to right to internal self-determination and continues to subject the Tamils to genocidal oppression, they will certainly attempt to realise it externally by struggling for secession, political independence and statehood." He repeated as much in Thailand this week.

That lazy journalism and ideological antipathy to the LTTE has hitherto prevented the flexibility of the movement's position on the issue of Tamil political independence from being adequately represented in the media is partly to blame for the resultant confusion this week. Nevertheless, the focus on the LTTE's new position has given due exposure to the movement's oft stated readiness to consider alternatives to a separate state - and thereby deprived its detractors of one of their cherished rods: the LTTE, it seems, is not ideologically intransigent, after all. This fallacy - and deliberate obfuscation on the fundamentals of the Tamil question - was part of Sri Lanka's rational to the international community for waging a brutal military campaign in the Tamil areas. In the wake of the talks in Thailand, the question for the LTTE's detractors is: Now what?



Party Discipline

Sri Lanka 'renounces war'

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The threshold of such exhilarating possibilities, should decide to jettison it all in order to return, of their own accord, to the travails of war.

Changes of this magnitude in the mindset of a people do not occur fortuitously. They are the product not of coincidence but of mature, far-sighted deliberation and pragmatic action. Preeminent among the circumstances which have made this achievement possible is the role of leadership characterised by consistency, courage and dynamism. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, through vicissitudes calculated to break the most indomitable spirit, held fast to his course of national reunification with a degree of tenacity born of depth of conviction.

His policy, persuasively articulated and realistically implemented, of one step at a time, an initiative abjuring the mire of threshold conditions - the bane of numerous attempts in the past - and opting instead for a series of practical measures, which have engendered a climate of confidence sufficiently durable to support a viable negotiating process, has fired the imagination of a beleaguered nation. This has made possible, as the inauguration of these historic proceedings bears witness today, the beginning of an epoch making exercise in healing and rapprochement, which has eluded us for so long.

Critical hour

Despite the colour and drama of this event, however, it behoves us to remember that the unfolding panorama of history represents a continuum. President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, soon after her election for the first time eight years ago, committed her government to the goal of a negotiated peace. It is the endeavour of our government at this time, with malice towards none and goodwill towards all, to consolidate and build on all positive elements butressing previous attempts at different times and yet, in all humility, to learn from the mistakes of the past, not to impute blame but simply to avoid their repetition and perpetuation.

At this critical hour of national renewal we call on all our people, irrespective of ethnic identity, cultural background or party affiliation, to join with us in ensuring fulfilment of the abundant promise of our beloved land.

As we renounce war and embrace negotiation as the key to our Island's future, far be it from us to deny or even unwittingly to make light of, the challenges and hazards that confront us. A reservoir of suspicion and antipathy, which has filled to the brim over extended periods, can scarcely be wished away overnight. Assuredly, no quick fix is feasible. Unmistakably indicated are the qualities of patience, perseverance and dedication.

At this point in time we cannot foretell, with certainty or precision, what the future holds. Nevertheless, there are several truths, as we perceive them, which stand out starkly and vividly in our minds.

We are convinced that no process of negotiation could

aspire to be fruitful in its outcome in the absence of a threshold of trust and confidence between the parties. It is the sacred duty of all our people, and in particular of all those - whatever their political complexion - on whom the mantle of leadership has fallen at this decisive moment, to consign to oblivion the wounds of the past, to rise above the lingering memory of injustice, pain and worse, to disavow the heritage of vengeance and retribution and to draw upon the reserves of wisdom, generosity and large-heartedness with which our cultural traditions have bountifully endowed us.

Challenge

Nothing is clearer, in the interest of national survival, let alone national prosperity, than that this is the time for a fresh point of departure. We, for our part, as the government of our country, are equal to this challenge. We pay tribute, at the same time, to the foresight of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and their leader, Mr. Velupillai Pirabakaran, in embarking on the transformation of their movement into a political organisation responsive to the changing nuances of contemporary priorities.

We declare, with all the vehemence at our command that the negotiations, which we are about to commence, are not in our view, by any means, a zero sum exercise. It is not a question of the winner taking all. Indeed, it is plain for all to see, at this watershed in the meandering course of a fratricidal conflict, that there are no winners and no losers.

These negotiations cannot be pursued on the basis that gain accruing to one party, involves reciprocal loss to the other. We emphatically reject that premise. We acknowledge that we both have a problem, destructive of the pulsating heart of our nation, which it is in our mutual interest to resolve together. This is very much the spirit in which we conceive of, and will carry through, our role in the ensuing discussions.

The natural corollary is that, an adversarial or confrontational approach is singularly inappropriate. Sincerity, openness and candour, which will be reflected in the sharing of perspectives, insights and information, including technical information relating to legal and constitutional issues, will supply the underpinnings of our attitude to the work that lies before us. It is our hope and expectation that this will be unhesitatingly reciprocated.

It is the government's fervent desire that the discussions should commence and go forward in an atmosphere untrammelled by inhibitions of any kind. We believe that broad horizons and resilience of mind are indispensable. And yet, in determining the parameters of the talks, there are some elements - rudimentary in quality - which cannot but be constant. These represent the irreducible foundations of what we care for and believe in.

Peoples' Support

We stand unwaveringly for the amplest degree of devolution and for the establishment and strengthening of institutions designed to

achieve this purpose. But these reforms must necessarily be effected within the framework of a State whose unity and territorial integrity is ensured in fact and in law by the envisioned structures.

As we turn to the task before us, we are encouraged by the knowledge that all sections of our people, and the international community, give us unqualified support every step of the way.

We note that it is envisaged that the Hon. Rauf Hakeem, who is present as a member of the Government delegation, will in due course participate in the talks in his capacity as the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the Head of a Muslim delegation. This arrangement would, no doubt, ensure the continuance of a constructive and meaningful dialogue.

We are mindful that any substantive structural and institutional arrangements that may be evolved should provide for the rights of all communities. In this context, we have taken note of the apprehensions expressed by the Sinhala and Muslim communities living in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. All parties should take cognisance of the need to ensure the safety, security and identity of these communities as well, and the protection and advancement of their political, social, economic and cultural rights. We should ensure that their concerns are totally addressed.

In order to arrive at durable peace, it is imperative that steps be taken for the resettlement, rehabilitation and reintegration of all displaced persons in their original areas with honour, dignity, assurance of personal safety and adequate reparations. Such measures would demonstrate our commitment to pluralism and mutual accommodation.

Hard Work

It is a pleasure to acknowledge and to express appreciation of the yeoman service rendered with regard to all aspects of the peace process by the Royal Norwegian Government.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and other members of his government have stated in the Parliament of Sri Lanka and elsewhere that the peace process is unlikely to have reached its current positive phase without the finesse, professionalism, tact and hard work, which the representatives of that government - in particular, Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen, Special Envoy Erik Solheim and Ambassador Jon Westborg - have steadfastly brought to bear on their work as facilitators. Their continuing involvement in that capacity is a source of inestimable comfort.

We thank the Royal Thai Government warmly for the readiness, with which they placed at the disposal of the negotiating teams, the excellent facilities available to us here in Sattahip, as we enjoy the legendary hospitality of Thai people.

We cordially welcome representatives of other governments, non-governmental organisations and the Sri Lankan and international media, and we thank them for their goodwill and support as we prepare to keep our trust with destiny.

If it's broken, don't fix it

Muruges Arumugam reflects on the reality of an island divided, not only by cultural differences but also by decades of war, and suggests that recognising this reality is the only way forward.

REFLECTING on a recent visit to the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka, a Buddhist monk from Colombo is reported to have expressed his astonishment at just how isolated from the rest of the island the Northeast has become. "The reality of how severed the country was only struck me today," he said. "It is terrible."

Terrible it might be, but it is a reality that Tamil activists in Sri Lanka and elsewhere have been trying to impress upon the world for decades. Especially to the Buddhist clergy themselves, many of whom have steadfastly refused to believe in anything other than a unified island for Sinhala-Buddhists.

Of course, the reality has always been that several distinct communities reside on the island of Sri Lanka. It is this underlying socio-cultural distinctiveness that was the foundation upon which Tamil political aspirations, and eventually separatism, were built. Yet throughout the period of agitation for greater autonomy and rights, Tamil activists were told that Sri Lanka was for all Sri Lankans - a meaningless doctrine employed to disguise fundamental differences.

Meanwhile, failed attempts at nation-building in the decades following independence or, more cynically, the fomenting of a chauvinistic Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism by some leaders, eroded the potential for any common sense of identity to be built.

But, more than these rhetorical and political debates, it is the reality of a 20-year conflict that has led to de-facto separation of the Northeast - a reality brought home to Sinhalese visitors in recent months. The hitherto "uncleared" areas that were under the control of the Liberation Tigers have all the trappings of a separate country - immigration checkpoints, a police force, a judicial system, a bank, a development agency, a tax system and even a different time zone from the rest of the island! Perhaps without knowing it, the Sri Lankan armed forces have achieved what Tamil politicians have wanted all along - a separate set of political and social institutions for the Northeast.

However, the situation until this year's ceasefire was by no means satisfactory. Under the conditions of a brutal and devastating war, the real potential of Tamil aspirations could not be achieved. It was what analysts call "garrison nationalism" - the sense of community built on the feeling of being under threat - at its best.

Now the peace talks between the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan government have opened up opportunities to come up with a workable solution that recognises this reality of a divided island. This reality - which only dawned on the Buddhist monk after his visit - will be the greatest of

all challenges facing negotiators. It will be tempting for some Sinhalese politicians to return to a hard-line position of no compromise. That is, of refusing to accept anything that compromises the unitary structure of the country.

However, not only will such a position ignore the basic reality of numerous socio-cultural differences, it will fail to recognise the reality of the isolation of the Northeast over the last 20 years. As a result, Tamils living in the Northeast have already become used to living in a semi-autonomous territory. To back-track now would be counter-productive and, worse still, risk renewed conflict.

The island of Sri Lanka is, in the words of the respected scholar of nationalism Walker Connor, very much a multi-homeland territory. It is not just multi-cultural as we might depict Canada or Australia because, in those countries, few if any communities can claim a distinct "homeland" within their borders. The recognition of this reality will be the first step in any fruitful negotiations.

A second step will be to treat the Northeast differently from the rest of the country. It is not just another province. The Northeast has specific requirements - not least because of the widespread reconstruction needed - and its people have distinct aspirations.

This is what Tamil leaders have been saying for decades but, more often than not, their pleas have fallen on deaf ears. Now, as the island's peoples look to their respective leaders to come up with a workable solution, these calls cannot be ignored.

The temptation for those influenced by Western liberalism - which sees ethnic differences as surmountable - will be to push for reconciliation between Tamils and Sinhalese within a single, unitary system. This reconciliation will indeed be vital but it can only occur under the premise that Sri Lanka is a multi-homeland island. Only then will peace be sustainable.

Perhaps if things had been managed differently - if Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism had not raised its ugly head or if all out civil war had been avoided - then the ideal fix would have been to strengthen the unitary system. Unfortunately, the last few decades have been plagued by acrimony, distrust and conflict between the island's main communities. The dream of a stable, prosperous, united Sri Lanka has been broken.

As a result, Sri Lanka is a broken island - broken, as the monk has noticed, more than many would realise or care to concede. Now, as direct peace talks loom large, the solution will not be to force the two parts to together but to build a system in which the two can co-exist side by side.

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