

## OPINION

# War's over, but what about peace?

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IT has been three months since Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse declared the country "liberated" from Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) after a 26-year war.

He said he wanted to settle most of the displaced Tamil civilians within 180 days.

But today, with more than half that time elapsed, nearly 300,000 are still being held in "internment camps", to which the media and humanitarian organisations have virtually no access.

One person who was able to visit some of them in May was United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon.

He said: "I have travelled around the world and visited similar places, but these are by far the most appalling scenes I have seen."

In the middle of this month, the camps were flooded by downpours that, according to The New York Times, "sent rivers of muck cascading between tightly packed rows of flimsy shelters, overflowed latrines and sent hundreds of families scurrying for higher ground".

Moreover, there is no public list of those being held in the camps, and many families do not know whether their loved ones are alive or dead.

The brutal and violent methods used by the LTTE during the conflict are beyond dispute. But the government claimed to draw a distinction between LTTE fighters and the law-abiding Tamil population, whose genuine political grievances it would address once the "terrorists" had been defeated. So far, nothing like that has happened.

Although it has screened out those it believes were LTTE cadres and sent them to separate camps, the government has repeatedly extended its own deadline for releasing the civilians who are still in the main camps.

People who question this inside Sri Lanka are accused of being traitors in the pay of "the LTTE diaspora", while outsiders are accused of using humanitarian concerns as an excuse for neo-imperialist intervention.

Sri Lankan journalists who criticise the government have been arrested, beaten and in some cases murdered in broad daylight, while many more have fled the country. Foreign journalists have been kicked out, and Human Rights Watch and Amnesty

International are not allowed into the country.

In the last weeks of the fighting, an estimated 20,000 civilians lost their lives. Government forces were accused of shelling Tamil civilians and killing people who tried to surrender.

The LTTE was charged with using civilians as human shields, forcibly recruiting them as fighters and shooting those who tried to flee. There were rumours of mass graves but no independent observer has been able to investigate.

The government claims to have won the "war on terror" within its own frontiers, and denies the right of countries that have been less successful to question its methods.

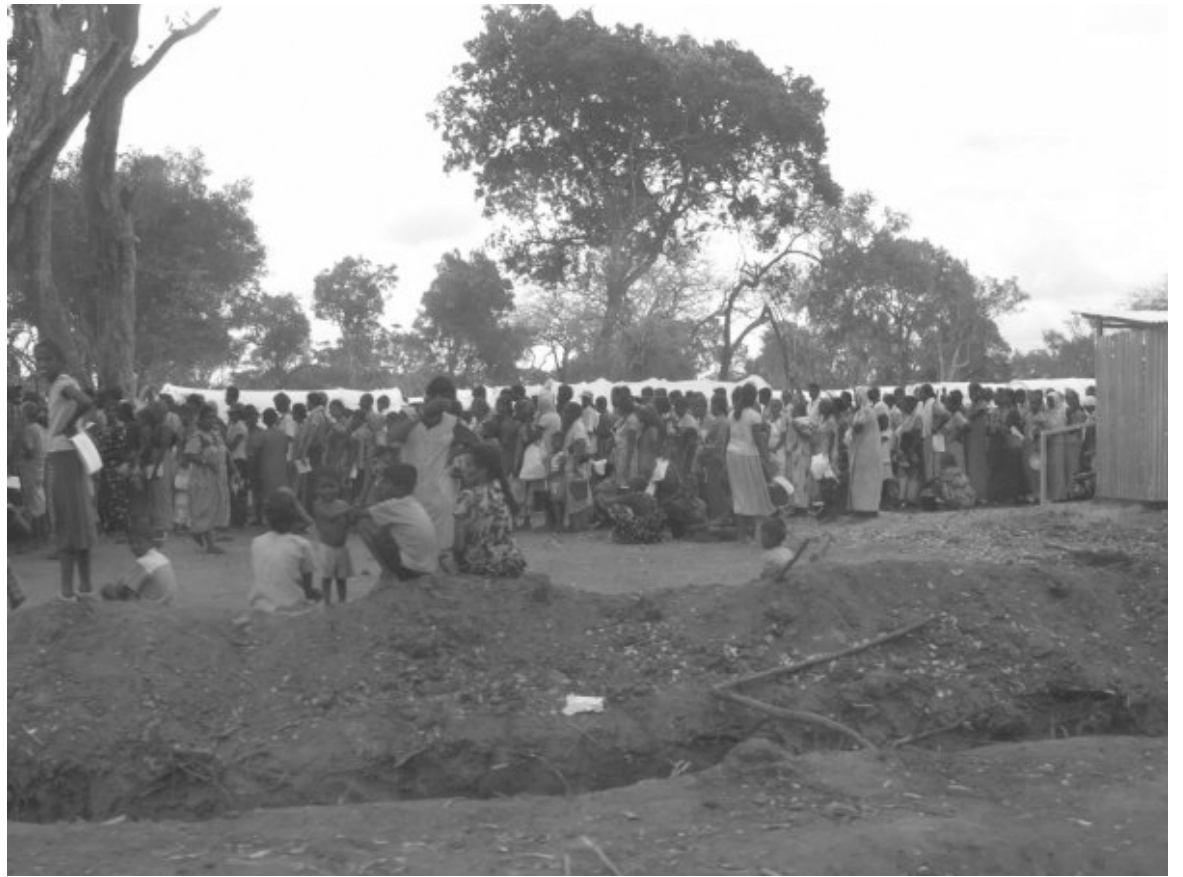
As one of the five "Colombo Powers" that organised the historic Bandung Conference in 1955, and a leading member of the Non-Aligned Movement, Sri Lanka was, for many decades, a responsible democracy, even a model member of the international community. Surely, the people of Sri Lanka do not want to compromise that enviable status.

Friends of Sri Lanka, especially in the developing world, do not understand why President Rajapakse chose Myanmar as the first country to visit after winning the war.

They were concerned to read, on the government's own website, that one reason for this choice was that "the (Myanmar) generals are increasingly finding it difficult to contain insurgent groups in the country's northern frontier and are willing to learn some fresh lessons from President Mahinda Rajapakse on how to defeat the enemy".

That is not what the international community wishes to learn from Sri Lanka. Rather, it is expecting the country to be faithful to its democratic tradition and act on Mr Rajapakse's promises that the rights of minorities would be respected, that the displaced would be helped to return home, and that prisoners would be treated humanely.

We do not believe that most people in Sri Lanka agree with the view that developing-country governments can best deal with internal opposition by crushing it ruthlessly and treating any advice to respect human rights and humanitarian law as hypocritical. Sadly, the government's willingness to ignore these principles has



Peace for many Tamil civilians is life behind barbed wire queuing daily for meagre food handouts

met with very little international resistance.

Even the United States, which has urged the rapid release of all civilians and deplored the Sri Lankan government's slow timetable on political reform, is simultaneously encouraging US investors to "make Sri Lanka your next business stop".

This puts a heavy responsibility on Asia's key powers - India, Japan and China - which have been staunch supporters of the Rajapakse government and have channelled large sums of money to it (mainly, recently, for humanitarian purposes).

It is time for these governments to say clearly that further economic and political support will depend on the following conditions being fulfilled:

1. The UN, International Red Cross and voluntary agencies

must be given full and unhindered access to care for and protect the civilians in the camps, and then help them return to wherever in their own country they choose to live.

2. A list of all those still alive and in custody should be published.

3. Those who continue to be detained as alleged LTTE combatants must be treated in accordance with the provisions of international law, and given urgent access to legal representation.

4. Accountability processes must be established to ensure that international aid is not diverted to purposes other than those for which it was given.

5. The Sri Lankan government should invite regional and international specialists in conflict reconciliation to help rebuild

lives and communities.

6. Sri Lanka should request or accept a full UN investigation into war crimes committed by all parties during the war.

The government has won the war, and the world shares the feeling of relief visible among Sri Lanka's people. It remains for it to win the peace, and the rest of the world must help by insisting on the above conditions. Peace won by the brutal humiliation of a people is rarely secure.

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## Squandering peace ...

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building and to furthering the interests of all Sri Lankans - Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. So also is the need to discard the almost mono-ethnic character of the security forces. Colombo has to stop dragging its feet on implementing the constitution's 13th amendment, which requires the ceding of some powers to the provincial or local level.

Sadly, there is little international pressure on Colombo, despite the leverage offered by the Sri Lankan economy's need for external credit.

The U.S. can veto any decision of the International Monetary Fund, but it chose to abstain from the recent IMF vote to give Colombo a \$2.8 billion loan. In the face of China's stonewalling at the U.N., Ban has been unable to appoint a special envoy on Sri

Lanka. A U.N. special envoy can shine an international spotlight to help build pressure on a recalcitrant government. But on Sri Lanka, the best the U.N. has been able to do is to send a political official to Colombo this month for talks.

It is thus important for the democratic players, including the United States, the European Union, Japan and Norway - co-chairs of the so-called Friends of Sri Lanka - and India, to coordinate their policies on Sri Lanka. If Rajapaksa continues to shun true reconciliation, these countries should ratchet up pressure on Colombo by lending support to calls for an international investigation into the thousands of civilian deaths in the final weeks of the war.

The International Criminal Court has opened an initial inquiry into Sri Lankan rights-

abuse cases that could turn into a full-blown investigation. Sri Lanka, however, is not an ICC signatory and thus would have to consent - or be referred by the U.N. Security Council - for the ICC to have jurisdiction over it. As world history attests, peace sought through the suppression and humiliation of an ethnic community proves to be elusive.

If Rajapaksa wants to earn a place in history as another Dutugemunu, he has to emulate that ancient king's post-victory action and make honorable peace with the Tamils before there is a recrudescence of violence. It will be a double tragedy for Sri Lanka if making peace proves more difficult than making war.

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