

NEWS

'Engaging' Tamil Diaspora to elude the cause



Efforts are being made to engage the Diaspora in redeveloping buildings like Kilinochchi hospital, destroyed by the Sri Lankan military during the war, but to do so through ways that benefit the Sri Lankan government and do not address the underlying political issues about the rights of Tamils

TamilNet

ENGAGING sections of vested interests in the diaspora to elude righteous causes of struggling people, in order to achieve imperialist goals in war and peace, is a long time strategy of powers. International foundations, firms and other such outfits are created from time to time for this purpose.

How such outfits envisage to blunt the cause of Eelam Tamils by locking vulnerable sections of the Tamil diaspora into a Sri Lankan diaspora identity, and how the outfits wish to achieve it behind the back of Tamil people and their media, is clearly revealed in a 'confidential' Assessment Report and Program Strategy of the Public International Law & Policy Group (PILPG), prepared in March 2009.

Engaging the diaspora should take place confidentially and by neutralizing 'spoilers,' says PILPG, citing a failed initiative in Malaysia in 2008, exposed by TamilNet.

'Surrender the armed struggle and opt for politics' was the rhetoric of the powers that never wanted to recognize the national question in the island. But the powers that immensely contributed to crush the armed struggle in a 'grand scale,' didn't want to see a political struggle of Tamils either.

The international outfits of the powers, while facilitating and justifying the military onslaught through so-called peace initiatives, were simultaneously engaged in insinuating into the diaspora to blunt Tamil national politics also forever.

Sections of 'think tanks' in the diaspora, long associated with the international outfits tell us that the powers and their international outfits have realised their mistakes and have changed after the war, and Tamils have to intelligently engage the change.

Rather than democratically coming out with true voice of aspirations and straightforward political organization, Tamils have to play hopping games and springboard games, the 'think tanks' further advocate.

The big question before the diaspora for any meaningful engagement now is that to what extent the international outfits have fundamentally changed in recognizing Eelam Tamils as a nation, not as a minority, and in addressing the Eelam Tamil diaspora as Eelam Tamil diaspora and not as Sri Lankan diaspora.

Whether by firm and irrefutable political organization of their own the Tamil diaspora has to set a global example in attracting the international community for engagement, or whether as international slaves the diaspora has to receive guidance, coaching and money in the name of empowerment for engagement, forfeiting leadership to deviating outfits, is left to the diaspora to decide.

Compromising righteous fundamentals would only lead to second and third Mullivaaykkaals, now political and economic, is the lesson that past engagement with these outfits tells us.

PILPG which is a global pro bono law firm, engaged in peace negotiations, post-conflict constitutions and war crimes prosecution, lists out its involvement with the diasporas of Darfur, Kosovo, Ethiopia, Armenia, Iraq, Burma and Liberia, besides Sri Lanka, in its confidential document, 'Engaging Diaspora Communities in Peace Processes.'

From its own experiences and from the experience of US and Danish institutions, the PILPG's outlook for engaging the diaspora in a peace process was the following:

- 1) Neutralize spoilers and build trust and cooperation among the diaspora; 2) infuse realistic ideas and recommendations into the peace process; 3) build capacity of the diaspora to effectively participate in the peace process; 4) build internal and external political support for the peace process; and 5) promote post-conflict political and economic development.

"Short-term goals for a Sri Lanka diaspora engagement program could include productive debate and discussion, the development of a platform of issues of

mutual interest, or the development of statements pertaining to issues ancillary to the peace process, such as economic investment and development initiatives or capacity and knowledge transfer from members of the diaspora to their home state," is also of the view of PILPG.

"Fostering cooperation among the diaspora community may neutralize the diaspora's role as a spoiler in the conflict by providing an avenue to engage in the peace process," the PILPG report says.

The fundamental flaw of PILPG outlook is that it considers Tamils and Sinhalese as Sri Lankan diaspora.

PILPG has also missed the ongoing academic debate that to what extent the forced Tamil migrants and the not-so-forced Sinhalese migrants could be equated by the use of the term diaspora.

Even though PILPG tries to project that Sinhala and Tamil diaspora are not homogenous within them, it fails to understand that as far as the national question is concerned they are strongly homogenous in their respective positions and setting a platform for a two-nation negotiation only could justify the reality.

PILPG in its report cites the example of "International Conference on the Sri Lankan Diaspora - The Way Forward," organized by the Federation of Sri Lankan Associations in Malaysia (FOMSO) in Kuala Lumpur in August 2008 and implies that criticism from Tamil media and lack of confidence and confidentiality were reasons for the failure of the initiative that aspired Tamils and Sinhalese meeting under a common banner of 'Sri Lankan' diaspora.

The following are excerpts from the PILPG report:

"The FOMSO conference illustrated the political difficulties of organizing a conference of the Sri Lankan diaspora. TamilNation and TamilNet, two popular Tamil diaspora websites, published critical commentaries of the conference, arguing that the conference had failed to adequately include all interested parties in the Sri Lankan diaspora. TamilNation and TamilNet expressed concerns

that the Sri Lankan diaspora was not prepared to recognize the Tamils and instead sought to assimilate the Tamils rather than recognize their interests in resolving the conflict. In addition, TamilNet suggested that through the conference the organizers sought to intimidate portions of the diaspora. The experiences of the FOMSO conference indicate the activeness of Tamil media organizations and the potential criticism any diaspora engagement program may publicly receive from the media.

"One may need to have past experiences either working with the Sri Lankan community or living in Sri Lanka. These past experiences may dictate whether potentials facilitators' are perceived as being bias and should be scrutinized carefully prior to the commencement of an engagement program.

"For instance, the Tamil diaspora discredited the Federation of Sri Lankan Associations in Malaysia (FOMSO) diaspora program, alleging that FOMSO supported the Sinhalese diaspora and was incapable of holding an impartial diaspora program.

"Due to the length of the Sri Lanka conflict and the strong sentiments of all diaspora communities, the diaspora program may be effective only when participants believe that their ideas will be kept in confidence. [...] The Tamil diaspora in particular is capable of quickly and effectively disseminating information about diaspora programming. Dissemination of the substance of the meetings in the program jeopardizes the legitimacy of the process and the sincerity of the participants.

"An inability to maintain confidentiality in a diaspora engagement program also increases the likelihood that the program will be discredited and that the participants will disengage before the program is complete. A confidential program therefore empowers the diaspora to use the results of the program to encourage the advancement of the peace process through political pressure on the home state."

PILPG says that the Federation of Sri Lankan Associations in Malaysia

(FOMSO) is an umbrella organization of twenty-five Sri Lankan organizations in Malaysia, including both Sinhalese and Tamil organizations, formed in 2003.

In fact the very lesson PILPG has to learn comes from the formation of FOMSO.

There was no Sri Lanka for the Tamils or the few Sinhalese who have gone to British Malaya and Singapore. The identity of all their parent organizations, which predominantly belong to Tamils and exist for the last 125 years, is either Jaffnese or Ceylonese.

The veteran Malaysian-Chinese Professor of History, Dr. Khoo Khay Khim, who addressed one of the plenary sessions of the FOMSO conference made a particular note of this point and was wondering how 'Sri Lanka' came into the picture at that juncture!

The question is who in 2003 wanted the 'Sri Lankan' tag and why. For whom the avenue was set gratifying a genocidal state and the identity it wishes to impose?

If the 2008 FOMSO conference of 'Sri Lankan diaspora' tag has failed, it was a blessing in disguise for Eelam Tamils, enacted by the very participants for the edification of future solution-finders and peace initiators.

The PILPG has taken the positive stand in formulating the concept of 'Earned Sovereignty' in the case of many other convenient global issues.

But, neither the PILPG nor the other outfits convening Tamil diaspora groups for engagement or working with them in political initiatives to see that they don't turn into 'spoilers,' have got the point that their approaches need fundamental changes appropriate for a national question. The Eelam Tamil question is simpler. It is not about earning sovereignty but only about retrieving sovereignty that was lost to colonialism and later illegally deprived of it by the Sinhala Buddhist state of Sri Lanka.

However, what the Tamil circles notice with concern is that the outfits, instead of adopting the positive global position of the PILPG, have only taken the negative advice of it to engage willing sections of the diaspora behind the back of people.