

The Sri Lankan Ethnic issue – the post war situation
A forgotten humanitarian crisis

Introduction

The victory of the Sri Lankan army over the rebel LTTE in May 2009 captured international attention. The media focussed on the end of a three decades of ethnic conflict and terrorism; opened a new horizon for peace in Sri Lanka. More than 18 months after the end of the war, the sight of the new horizon has become a mirage, an unsolved problem for the minority Tamils and Sri Lanka has once again become the theatre of a major humanitarian Crisis which is far from being solved.

The life conditions of the internally displaced Tamil Minority are a matter of concern. More than 300000 Tamils are living in very precarious and vulnerable conditions. They need immediate humanitarian assistance and the international community along with the Sri Lankan government must contribute to safe guard the wellbeing of these victims of war.

This paper aims at analysing critically the present situation from the humanitarian and political point of view and will propose a certain number of steps that can be undertaken to find a new way-out of the present deadlock. This document is the free expression of the author, a constructive move to get out of the present stalemate.

May 19, 2009 A military victory

On the 19/05/2009, the majority Sinhala south was jubilant whether media vied to present to the public the “Dead Tiger Leader”, Prabhakaran who reigned as the undisputed Leader for the past 25 years and was considered till then as invincible. The complete elimination of the Tiger leadership was the summit of victory for the government and the army. The south was in a spirit of trance and bliss once this good news spread to every corner of the south.

The President, Mr.Mahinda Rajapakse was acclaimed as “God sent» national hero, a messenger of hope; the soldiers were praised for their magnificent duty to tame the tiger. The ruling party was at the climax of its glory. The president was exalted and compared to the ancient Sinhala warriors who drew away the foreign enemies from Sri Lanka.

...And in the north

While the south was in jubilation, the minority tamils in the north were mourning their dead, looking for their kith and kins. Amassed in the Mennik Camp in the North they were in despair and hopelessness. Separated form their near and dear ones, many of them were drowned in sadness. Overnight the Tamil minority which was already living in highly vulnerable conditions was once again subject to untold psychological and physical pressures.

More than 300 000 Tamils form the Vanni region were forced to leave their homes and became inmates in camps after having walked for days and after having been subject to harsh treatment by the armed forces during their exodus. In the camps which were heavily guarded by the army, their liberty to move around was limited and these inmates considered themselves living in open prison, with very little contact with the outside world. Most of them were subject to a lot of psychological pressure and trauma leading to psychological and physical insecurity. The treatment, by the army, varied form compassion and understanding to very harsh treatment, often leading to humiliation.

Each Tamil was suspected to be a potential Tiger sympathizer, each youngster lived in insecurity of being branded as a tiger soldier. Murugan said, "I am young and I worked in Vanni, today I am in the queue forgetting ration. I cannot move around freely." The camps were surrounded by barbed wires and tightly guarded by the security forces.

This situation was to continue till August-September 2010 for many and even today around 50000 are estimated to be still in the camps waiting to come out.

The price for this victory

The human and economic cost of this military victory was tremendous; more than 70000 civil are feared to be dead, 300000 displaced and living in sub-human conditions and living only on external aid ; around 80000 houses are estimated to be destroyed and must be rebuilt, roads have been destroyed by the aerial bombings, agricultural lands are mined and cultivation will not be possible in the near future.

The national economy was totally affected by this bloody war. The most affected were the poorest class who are not able to have access to a decent living due to escalating prices, underdevelopment and many are deprived of their basic needs ; a huge expenditure for maintaining the army

Tamil minority in the north are still living in dire conditions of poverty subject to changing weather conditions. They live in make-shift shelter and are dependant on humanitarian aid for their day to day physical survival. It is almost impossible for them to undertake any economical activity and they are subject to untold physical and psychological sufferings. The worst affected and the most vulnerable are the children and widow headed families.

Economical and agricultural recovery will be a major challenge and cannot take place in the near future.

Who gained in this victory ?

The immediate political gains for the ruling party and the president Mr.Rajapakse were tremendous. Being acclaimed unanimously in the south, the President opted to call for early provincial elections and ultimately anticipated presidential elections. The ruling party claimed a landslide victory in the provincial elections and a comfortable majority for Rajapakse.

This victory has also influenced the attitude of the Sri Lankan public opinion towards UNP, the opposition party which is completely withered and kept aside. The president Rajapakse has run for a second term, and has won the elections and in November 2010 took oath for a second term of office. With such a landslide victory and also with a second term that is assured, the UNPF is planning to bring about constitutional changes which will certainly affect the minority Tamils.

The Army has gained a prevalence and favour with the government.

In this situation, two major questions remain unanswered:

- How can democracy be maintained in the present political context and configuration which is very favourable for unilateral decisions by the parliament with out any opposition.
- How can the ethnic issue be solved in the present political stand of the government and where the Tamil parties are not yet ready to take up leadership and the cause of the Tamils.

The future of the Tamil minority

The political setup in the post war context does not predict a good future for the Tamil minority. A withered opposition and an uncontested majority, an omnipotent president, and the Tamil parties without any vision, the Tamil minority is going to be left by itself with no one to take up their cause. At the international level, the Tamil minority issue is no more a concern for the international community.

On the contrary the government has adopted a “One country, One Nation policy” leading to a determined policy of militarising the north. The Tamil communities, in spite of the end of the war and the elimination of the tigers is subject to untold hardships and difficulties by the army. The government is moving fast in setting up Buddhist symbols in the north (stupas, statues of Buddha). A certain number of measures taken by the government do confirm the fact that the Tamils will still have to struggle and now without any political leadership to defend their causes.

There is a tendency on the part of the government to introduce Sinhala culture : Obligation for the students to sing the national anthem in Sinhala, the name of the streets are translated into Sinhala, bringing the families from the south to be settled in the north. This is perceived as cultural negation by the Tamils .

The government is accelerating the creation of High Security zones in areas where the Tamils had traditionally lived. The creation of these High Security Zones prevents the installation of the Tamils in their homes, thus hindering their rehabilitation.

The promulgation of the PTA even after the end of the war, creation of military bases in the north are also perceived as not taking into account the fear of the Tamils.

As on today there are no clear rehabilitation plan for the Tamils and there is yet no clear policy to facilitate their integration in their traditional homeland in the north.

From the economical point of view, there are no plan for their economical recovery and integration. The arable lands are either confiscated by the army or the government as high security zones or they are still mined and cannot be used. As for the fishing which is one of the main sources of income in the north, it is subject to lots of restrictions thus preventing the fishermen from going to the sea.

The lessons learned and reconciliation committee (LLRC) was a laudable move by the government to open the dialogue and the healing process by addressing the question of justice. But the way it has been initiated makes the Tamils conclude that the process has been waylaid and this is once again perceived as blow to the Tamils. They do not believe that the government is serious in taking into account their sufferings and difficulties and their aspirations to get justice.

As on today the government has not taken steps to initiate any plans for the political mainstreaming of the Tamil parties and the political deconcentration of power to the north (which could not be carried out earlier due to the LTTE presence and control).

Today the Tamils feel they are stateless in their own traditional homeland and feel that they are under a military occupation. The lack of rehabilitation plan for the internally displaced Tamil minority and the army control in the north which gives untold hardships to the Tamils are

perceived and interpreted as lack of interest by the government. The present stands of the government do not allow the minority Tamils to hope for a ray of hope in their future.

Future steps for a sustainable Peace and Harmony in Sri Lanka

The present situation is not a victory for Peace. The military victory is now perceived as a stepping stone for alienating the Tamil minorities from the mainstream of the society. There is an urgent need to transform this military victory into a political victory and this is the major challenge that awaits President Rajapakse and his government. Peace and harmony cannot be built on indifference towards the aspirations and sufferings of the Tamils.

The Sri Lankan government must now build a rapport of confidence with the Tamil minority and this has to be accompanied by concrete gestures towards them. The first and foremost action to be undertaken is the formulation of a national integration plan, an Integral recovery and rehabilitation plan for the north and East and this has to take place in close conjunction with the Tamil people.

The government must also stop the Sinhala colonisation of the north which only brings distrust and lack of confidence in the good will of the government. Although one cannot be against the “one country one nation” trend and the Tamils are not against such an idea as long as their aspirations to live in dignity as citizens of this nations are met, yet the way it is carried out today seems to give indication that the whole process is heading towards a cultural and ethnic negation of the Tamil minority. It is the first and foremost duty of any democratic government to protect the citizen, especially the weakest subjects who have been put to three decades of hardships and sufferings.

The reconciliation process can take place more relevantly with international mediation. Similar experiences have taken place in other countries and lasting peace and harmony has been achieved. It is in the interest of the Sri Lankan government to facilitate the national reconciliation process and contribute to the quick rehabilitation process of the tamil minorities. The international community also has a responsibility towards the Tamil minority and must help the government to find the right solution to rehabilitate the tamils in their homelands.

Political mainstreaming of the Tamil parties, deconcentration of power, Rehabilitation of the Tamils displaced and their early economical and professional recovery and above all demilitarisation of the north are the miles stones for transforming the military victory into a political solution and on the long run into a political victory.

The way forward – proposition for a political solution

There is an humanitarian imperative in Sri Lanka and the tamils cannot be once again forgotten. They need international attention and this is urgent. These suggestions could give a ray of hope for these innocent victims.

- There is an urgent need to help Sri Lanka to initiate the reconciliation process and a political solution. This can be done by organizing a “Post war - Peace conference” at the international level in which countries having had similar experiences {Sierra Leone, Northern Ireland and South Africa} can be invited to share their experiences. This conference will certainly have major stakeholders such as India, Japan, EU, US and this UN. Such a conference can be organised by the religious leaders and the government. Inter-religious groups are well placed to take up such initiatives.

- The religious leaders have an important role to play at this moment. They must organize meetings with the government to propose a certain number of actions which will ease the sufferings of the Internally displaced tamil minorities :
 - o The first and foremost action to be undertaken is to re-establish a relation of confidence between the Civil Society Organisations (CSO), in particular the INGO, and the government. The government cannot respond appropriately to the needs of the victims of this disaster and the contributions of the CSO must be considered as an asset . The government must place the same trust on the INGO as it did during the tsunami disaster. The Humanitarian actors must be given the freedom to carry out their activities without any hindrance. It is here the government can give its support to the NGO to fulfil their mission.
 - o It is urgent to establish a Post war Rehabilitation platform in which the Civil Society Organisations will have a major role to play in the rehabilitation process and also in the elaboration of the rehabilitation plan.
- The government must take all necessary steps to safeguard the specificity of the northern region, facilitate the freedom of movement of the civilians and cater to their immediate needs at the soonest..
- The Church has an important role to play, given the fact that there are Christians in both the communities and the church has experience in carrying out relief activities.
- The government must soon introduce a quick recovery plan for the Vanni and Killinochi areas and implement them with the help of the INGO. International donors must also be in a position to fund these programs through the INGO and local NGO.

AJ.

December 2010