

The Story Still Untold

Sri Lanka

Friend to All

Enemy to none

In the aftermath of the world's greatest catastrophe, the Second World War, Sri Lanka played a significant role in turning the tide of events to negotiate peace between the two parties. Urging the states that attended the San Francisco Conference in 1951 to choose love over hatred, Sri Lanka made its mark in a long tradition of promoting world peace. To this date, it has not changed this standpoint.

From Armed Group to Terror Outfit

All former colonies in the world carry their unique burdens. Those that were able to shed the weight of their colonial inheritance have achieved development at a rapid and substantial rate. Sri Lanka's burden was the legacy of 'divide and rule.' This has not been so easy to shed, especially with the resistance of those who benefitted from it. This legacy was used by some politicians in the North to misrepresent the economic difficulties and unemployment common throughout the entire country in the 1970s as the product of deliberate action against the people of the North. This led to the emergence of armed militant groups, culminating in the assassination of the Mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraiappa who was a member of the governing party at the time.

The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) annihilated the other armed groups within a short period and became the only armed militant group in the North. It grew in strength and wealth, thanks to regional and international geopolitics and was identified as the most ruthless terrorist organization in the world by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 2008. It was known for assassinating those who



Jaffna fort

held dissenting views, regardless of their ethnicity. The LTTE pioneered suicide bombings in the world and later became the only terrorist organization to have assassinated two world leaders; a serving President of Sri Lanka and a former Prime Minister of India. The precedents that the LTTE set was later followed by many similar terrorist groups, including the Islamic State (IS).

Love over Hatred

The conflict in Sri Lanka caused thousands to become homeless, and thousands more to lose the livelihoods that they had. Throughout the humanitarian operation, the Government

of Sri Lanka provided humanitarian relief to the conflict affected areas, under the aegis of the Consultative Committee on Humanitarian Assistance, which had the participation of the Government, UN Resident Representative and several Heads of Foreign Missions in Colombo. Food, medicines, and all essential supplies were sent to conflict areas without delay. Even the Government retirement benefits (pensions) of those who had retired and were living in conflict areas were paid without delay. The Sri Lankan government was commended by Neil Bhune, UN Resident Representative in Colombo and Robert O. Blake, US Ambassador in Colombo at that time on the provision of humanitarian relief. This

is ample testimony that the humanitarian operation was not directed against civilians.

The efforts of the Government were vindicated within a short period of time. The mass exodus of civilians who were fleeing the clutches of the LTTE, rushing as fast as they could to the Government controlled areas became a common sight during the last few months of the humanitarian operation. All these fleeing civilians were given food, shelter and the much needed assurance of the safety of their lives. Among the civilians were ex-LTTE cadres, including 594 child soldiers.

The subsequent fate of those 594 child soldiers showcase Sri Lanka's determination to ensure a lasting peace. The Government took a policy decision to not prosecute child soldiers and to give them back the life that they had lost. All former child soldiers were given education, some in elite schools in Colombo, and were provided an opportunity to reintegrate into the society without any stigma. This bears strong testimony to the Government's accountability for the future of the nation and its responsibility towards its own people. The adult cadres too were rehabilitated, allowing them to learn new life skills, find employment and raise families. The Tamil ethnic community living outside conflict areas, representing more than half of the entire Tamil population, continued to lead their normal lives with the Sinhala and Muslim communities. The average death toll of over 250 per day during the conflict became zero in its aftermath.

By ending the conflict, Sri Lanka had ensured the most fundamental right of its people; the right to life.

Still Counting the Numbers

The conflict in Sri Lanka has given rise to a feature that is still being debated; the number of casualties during the last phase of the humanitarian operation. The Report of the Panel of Experts appointed by the UN former Secretary General Ban Ki Moon (popularly known as the 'Darusman Report') cites the number as 40,000. Some other reports cite numbers as high as 140,000. It is strange that these reports have failed

to identify the mass burial or cremation grounds which are needed for such a large number of corpses. Nor do these reports reveal the sources of their information. These sources need to be cross-examined to identify mass graves, if those existed in reality. The Satellite Analysis by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) conducted in the district of Mullaitivu in May 2009 estimates a total number of 1,346 graves, out of which, 960 have been identified as those belonging to the LTTE. No other source gives evidence for the existence of such graveyards.

It is also strange that the clear evidence given by recognized bodies for the number of casualties during the last phase of the humanitarian operation has gone unnoticed. The UN Country Team in Sri Lanka has cited this number to be 7,721. This resonates with the AAAS analysis. The estimation of the population in Wannai between January to May 2009 conducted with the involvement of Government Agents and international representatives, including the UN Resident Coordinator and representatives of the World Food Programme, have revealed that the highest population there was estimated as 300,000. Out of this, 293,800 had reported to welfare centres in the Government controlled areas, leaving approximately 7,000 more to be accounted for. It is worth noting that this number also includes LTTE cadres who were killed in action, escaped to Government controlled areas or evaded arrest to flee abroad.

The UNICEF supported the establishment of a Family Tracing and Reunification Unit in the former conflict areas in December 2009. This has recorded 2,564 applications as of June 2011, of which 676 were related to children and 1,888 to adults. Parents submitting 64% of applications for tracing of children have reported that their children were recruited by the LTTE. The Enumeration of Vital Events, conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics and manned on the ground entirely by officers of Tamil ethnicity, records a total number of 8,998 deaths between 1st January and 31st May 2009. This also includes deaths

due to sicknesses and natural causes, accidents, suicides and other unspecified causes.

All these reports, prepared with the participation of international bodies, their representatives, public servants as well as civilians from the Tamil ethnic community, bear clear witness to the conduct of the Government. They also bear witness to its accountability. Why are these findings so repeatedly overlooked when making reference to Sri Lanka's conflict?

Geopolitics of Survival

The 30 year long conflict has become the livelihood of some parties outside Sri Lanka, who have sought refugee status in affluent countries and now comprise significant electoral constituencies. Secure in the West, they have a comfortable standard of life. They have good employment opportunities and their offspring enjoy advanced education. Fearing the possible return to Sri Lanka, they propagate the falsehood of discrimination against the Tamil ethnic minority. Although the evidence of international bodies is readily available to those who seek the truth, they ignore these sources and continue to cite the unproven numbers. Little do they understand that these attempts to safeguard their own status in their new homes do not advance the cause of those very people for whom they appear to be speaking.

Sri Lanka holds a unique position among countries that were conflict-affected in recent history. She has maintained normalcy without plunging back into conflict. Those who will fully ignore the progress that Sri Lanka has made in development and reconciliation during the aftermath of the conflict are doing a grave injustice to Sri Lankans of all ethnicities who have suffered from terrorism and are gradually rebuilding themselves as one nation.

In continuing to believe and propagate the lies of conflict, we are only feeding the tensions of the present and stoking the conflicts of the future 🐦

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