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From Conflict to Peace: The Case of Sri Lanka

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Ambassador Edward Marks: The Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed the first formal bilateral ceasefire between the two sides in seven years, signaling the end of two years of ceasefire talks and the beginning of complex negotiations for national reconciliation.

A number of factors contributed to this achievement:

- Patient and skillful diplomatic activity by Norway
- A new Sri Lankan government that was elected in December 2001
- A change in the international political environment arising from the September 11 attacks
- Increasing war-weariness of the concerned communities
- Apparent recognition that a military solution is not achievable

It is likely that the GOSL and the LTTE are pursuing different strategies: the government is hoping that social and economic recovery will lead to political reconciliation, while the LTTE may be implementing their leader's (Velupillai Prabhakaran) long-standing position that ceasefires are way stations to formal Tamil independence.

In any case, success or at least meaningful progress depends primarily on the two primary participants, each of which have a number of concrete tasks which must be pursued in advance of and during the actual negotiations to be held in Thailand, among them:

- de-mining
- internally displaced persons
- refugees
- resumption of trade and commerce
- movement of people
- establishment and administration of civil governance in the North and East

But, a clear but possibly fleeting opportunity exists for the international community to help by exerting significant leverage through timely assistance and political support:

- Norway continues as active a role as desired by concerned parties (facilitator, moderator, mediator);
- India, UK, US, Canada, Australia, Singapore and the United Nations offer public political support for the peace process;
- UN willingness/capability to play a role in implementing any peace agreement (monitors, Blue Berets);
- Relevant countries work through their resident Tamil communities;

- India especially must actively provide support through all the channels available to a neighboring country which in many respects is the center of Tamil society and as the regional hegemon. Of particular note is the need for international public support for the current GSL and its participation in the peace process; contribute prompt and adequate assistance to the de-mining program and post-conflict reconstruction; generous economic assistance for national economic growth.

Many of these recommendations appear to be happening:

- Norwegian questionnaire asking both sides for desired role for Scandinavians
- Public attitude of Indian Government and high level consultations recently concluded in New Delhi
- Extradition of Prabhakaran
- Oil tanks in Trincomalee
- Free Trade Agreement (FTA)
- 300,000 tons of wheat; US\$100 line of credit
- Recent donors meeting expected credit for next year to be at least the same level (\$350 million), but pending peace talks
- US\$150 for reconstruction from ADB and Japan
- ECHO Euros 1.5 million, EU new credits
- Public statements by concerned governments, including careful reservation about terrorist classification of LTTE

International support could become tricky as and if peace negotiations bog down or head in an undesirable direction:

LTTE:

- Freedom of movement and speech
- Human rights of Sinhalese and Muslims in LTTE “administered” areas
- Establishment of a de facto LTTE “dictatorship”

GSL:

- Pressure and/or coup threats from clergy or military

JVP:

- Rising Sinhalese public opposition
- Political sabotage

Ambassador Ernest Corea:

I. Introduction: Two Rages

As a politically active university student in the 'sixties, Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sri Lanka's current Prime Minister, led a group of fellow-undergraduates who burned the then Minister of Education in effigy. Now, Wickremesinghe's critics insinuate that he is again playing with fire, because he has chosen to engage Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or LTTE, commonly known as the Tigers, in a peace process.

The LTTE is proscribed as a terroristⁱ organization in Australia, Canada, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, the UK, and the US. A warrant for Prabhakaran's arrest has been issued in India, where he is wanted for alleged complicity in the murder of Rajiv Gandhi. The LTTE has established a formidable reputation for itself as masters of suicide bombing. Its victims include a President of Sri Lanka, the Prime Minister of India, several presidential candidates in Sri Lanka, a member of the Cabinet, and several hundred (if not thousands) of non-combatant civilians. It "has a track record of having killed more political leaders from the Tamil community than from among its proclaimed enemies – the Sinhala."ⁱⁱ It has attacked places of worship, other public places, and commercial targets. Prabhakaran has entered the peace arena before, but has always withdrawn from it. Thus, negotiations of varying intensity were launched but floundered in 1985, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1995, and 2000.ⁱⁱⁱ Violent upheavals followed. Based on this record, a highly vocal body of opinion in Sri Lanka considers Prabhakaran, his colleagues, and associates unsuitable candidates for any form of peace partnership.

Members of Sri Lanka's Tamil community in general and Prabhakaran and the Tigers in particular will argue differently. Tamil Sri Lankans, they will say, have been grievously diminished either by overt discrimination or in more subtle but equally harmful ways. They have been victims of violence, by depraved mobs and by official agents of various governments. The International Commission of Jurists quotes a Sri Lankan scholar as saying: "History and historiography have created an emotive climate of ethnic animosity which often results in violence, preventing compromise and a negotiated settlement of ethnic differences."^{iv}

Prabhakaran himself has said that he took to violence as a last resort, when all other approaches failed.^v This explanation is embedded in the claim that previous good faith efforts at power sharing have collapsed under the weight of prejudice, dissimulation, and calculated sabotage.

II. Subduing Rage: A Ceasefire Agreement

So what do we have here? What we have is well encapsulated in a phrase used by Chris Patten, the European Union's Commissioner for External Relations, to describe what he encountered in a highly divisive and dangerously explosive situation elsewhere. "There were two authentic rages," Patten observed.^{vi} In Sri Lanka, indeed there are. The question is: Must rage consume its adherents, or can it at least be controlled, later subdued and, eventually, eliminated?

From 1958, when the passage of what is popularly known as the "Sinhala Only Act" triggered Tamil dissent and anti-Tamil riots, through 1975 when Tiger terrorism was inaugurated with the assassination of the mayor of Tamil-speaking Jaffna, to the present, over 70,000 Sri Lankans have been killed. The harsh and sad reality is that the new generation, which should now be

enjoying its childhood and youth, is being depleted. Almost every aspect of life has been affected by the two rages. Life will be even more harshly affected if the rages do not abate.

In an effort to reduce the rage, Wickremesinghe and Prabhakaran signed a ceasefire agreement^{vii} on February 22, 2002, assisted and encouraged by intermediaries from the Government of Norway. Earlier, it was President Chandrika Kumaratunge of Sri Lanka invited the Norwegians as facilitators, to arrange political negotiations between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. For a while, it looked as if Norway would bring the antagonists to the conference table, but that did not happen. The Norwegians resumed their shuttle diplomacy last year, after the general election in December brought a new government^{viii} into office. This time around, their efforts have already produced a result, even if that result is only a small, first step on a long and convolute journey.

Much has already been said about the infirmities of the ceasefire agreement, mainly but not exclusively by sections of the parliamentary Opposition. Some of the criticism, unfortunately, is based on what the ceasefire is not. The agreement does not aim to produce a final, political solution to Sri Lanka's "national problem." It does not set down a rigid timetable for political negotiations. It does not identify and analyze contentious issues standing in the way of political agreement. It is, as its title clearly if modestly puts it, "an agreement on a ceasefire." That's all.

Explaining the character of the document in Parliament, Wickremesinghe said: "I have had time to analyze and reflect on the mistakes we have all made. Therefore, this time, our approach is going to be a step-by step process, where each step stands on its own, but is sequentially connected to the next."^{ix} These connected steps include the following:

- Halt the fighting between LTTE and Government forces;
- Halt all terrorist acts;
- Create conditions of normal life in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern provinces which have served as theaters of war;
- Create conditions conducive to the emergence of mutual trust;
- When these conditions have been met, undertake "further steps towards negotiations on a lasting solution."

The operation of the ceasefire is monitored by the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), created under the terms of agreement itself. Retired Gen. Trond Furuhoide of Norway, who is assisted by Scandinavians and Sri Lankans, leads the mission. This activity is separate from the Norwegian's role as facilitators. The SLMM does not exercise enforcement authority. It receives complaints of infractions, assesses the evidence and, based on the facts, validates or rejects the complaints. The SLMM has sought to influence both parties, persuading them to conduct their activities strictly within the boundaries of the ceasefire agreement. After some initial mis-steps, the SLMM has carried out its tasks with such fairness that both sides have criticized it.

The ceasefire agreement is a document that engenders hope, but with at least two in-built conditions of risk. First, as already pointed out, it does not fix a timetable for moving the parties to a negotiating table. Second, it provides a respite during which either or both sides can prepare to resume hostilities with even greater ferocity and devastation than before. That has been the past pattern, and skeptics in Colombo are even now making book on when the pattern will be

repeated. And yet, US Ambassador Ashley Wills has described the current process as the "best chance" Sri Lanka has had for rebuilding peace.^x Other observers have been equally positive.

To Sri Lankans, irrespective of ethnicity, who have endured domestic terrorism and war, these optimistic predictions offer comfort. But astrology, as we all know, is not an exact science. What is it, then, that makes many in Sri Lanka hope, and many from outside anticipate, that this time around the prospects of peace will outlive the problems? Is there actually a difference from past experience?

III. The Difference?

A Sri Lankan academic^{xi} points out that "peace making is an extremely complex and difficult proposition in a protracted armed conflict." He adds, however, that "protracted conflicts may also open up rare opportunities for conflict termination and settlement. What we have in Sri Lanka at present is probably one of those rare opportunities." Support for this assessment rests on several realities including, primarily, four: military stalemate, the state of the economy, domestic expectations of and support for peace, and external compulsions.

Military Stalemate: From around 1999, the LTTE, while not abandoning terrorism, turned heavily to conventional warfare. The initial results of this makeover were a series of strategic victories, causing uncertainty and panic in the rest of the country. In response, the Sri Lankan Government changed field commanders, and conducted a massive program of emergency arms purchases. Items on the Government's shopping list included aircraft, boats, multi-barrel rocket launchers, and missiles. The result of all this activity was a predictable upsurge of hostilities, with fluctuations of military fortune and, eventually, a situation of stalemate. Both sides suffered heavy manpower losses. Hence, perhaps, the LTTE's increased conscription of child soldiers^{xii}, which has been broadly condemned, and the recurring recruitment drives of the Sri Lankan Army, not all of them successful. Both sides had to increase their military investments, a trend that for different reasons neither side can now easily sustain. For both sides, continuation of the war is a high cost, high-risk, low-returns exercise. Prabhakaran's candid assessment, for instance, shared with Norwegian facilitator Erik Solheim is that "neither side could win the war."^{xiii}

Economic and Social Costs: Battlefield losses have been paralleled by social and economic destruction over time. Overall, a World Bank assessment^{xiv} of the impact of war reported as follows:

"The conflict has caused a humanitarian problem of great proportions, taken the lives of several of its political leaders, and forced a generation of children to grow up in an environment of insecurity and conflict. Sri Lanka's social fabric is under stress due to the poverty and deteriorating health and education outcomes in war-torn areas, psychological trauma associated with the conflict, displacement, as well as rising levels of crime and violence."

Some 800,000 Sri Lankans were internally displaced at the end of 2001, and another 144,000 Sri Lankans were refugees in India.^{xv} Most of the Sri Lankans affected were Tamils, but thousands

of Muslims and Sinhalese were driven out of their homes in “ethnic cleansing” campaigns carried out by the LTTE in the country’s eastern province.

By the year 2000, the economy had been severely jolted. In the following year, 2001, Sri Lanka experienced negative growth for the first time in its post-colonial history. Overall, negative growth was some 1.3 per cent. Agricultural production declined by 2.3 percent and industrial production by close to 4 percent. Inflation rose to 14.2 percent.^{xvi} These and other trends, while disturbing even on paper, continued to place heavy, day-to-day burdens on the lives of the people.

As with the military situation, there is little if any prospect of full economic regeneration in which the potential of all communities are realized until normalcy is restored.

Public Support: At the end of 2001, facing a "snap election" called by President Kumaratunge, the United National Front (UNF) led by Wickremesinghe emphasized both economic modernization and peace in its campaign. It secured 114 seats in the 225-member Parliament. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of Tamil Sri Lankan parties, took 15, in the northern and eastern provinces. The outgoing government of the Peoples Alliance secured 77 seats. Since the general election, the UNF has captured majorities in almost all of 250 local government elections. In these elections across the country, campaigning on a peace platform, it has won 2,251 seats out of a total of 3,522,^{xvii} a two-thirds majority "on the ground" across the country. The UNF has interpreted these results as a mandate for peace.

For the LTTE, which has not faced an election, public acceptance of the peace process may be inferred from outpourings of public sentiment. Public statements and demonstrations have been enthusiastically pro-peace. Crowds have poured out into the streets in the northern and eastern provinces, welcoming the cessation of hostilities, and a return to normal life. LTTE political leaders and cadres who have begun working in the open have been well received. Wickremesinghe, too, was commended for bringing about a ceasefire. He received a tumultuous welcome when he visited the northern province. An unnamed Tamil Sri Lankan bystander greeted him as "the great philosopher, the scholar, the spiritual leader, the treasure house of wisdom and the prince of peace."^{xviii}

The outspoken Bishop of Jaffna commended the peace process, in messages at Good Friday and Easter. He said:

"Lord Jesus Christ, through the bitter experiences and death reached the glorified state of resurrection. He has taught us that it is through our sufferings and sorrow that we can attain freedom and salvation. We can say that the Easter of this year has made it come true for us....We should be grateful to all those who have worked dedicatedly for the signing of the memorandum of understanding for normalcy in the life of the Tamil people and the dawn of peace."^{xix}

(On the opposite side of the doctrinal fence, the Mahanayakes or chief priests of the major Buddhist sects in Sri Lanka have offered the peace process their support, and exhorted others to follow suit.^{xx})

External Influence: The fourth plank on which the “rare opportunity” for settlement rests is the push from abroad. The LTTE feels this push in two ways: continuing rejection of its separatist goal and, more recently, the global anti-terrorist thrust in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11, 2001. UN Security Council resolution 1373, adopted in response to the September 11 atrocities, obliges all member states to act against terrorist organizations, and choke off their financial support. This has caused funding sources to shrink, and support from abroad to be subdued as never before. The fear of international reprisal as part of a broader crackdown against terrorism has risen, particularly in the context of unconfirmed speculation that the LTTE has had links both with Al-Qaeda and Nepal’s Maoist organization. This fear no doubt accounts for the near-hysteria among TNA politicians, serving as parliamentary proxies for the LTTE, over the possibility that Sri Lanka and the US might enter into a conventional “Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement,” that allows the armed services of each party to the agreement to avail itself of servicing, repairs, spare parts and equipment of the other in exchange for payment of through the exchange of identical good or good of equivalent value.”^{xxi}

The Government feels the external push, as well, in continuing pressure, diplomatically conveyed, that it should stay the course. Numerous countries have emphasized this message. They are all key providers of development assistance whose support is essential both for short-term reconstruction, and long-term regeneration. The most recent urging was from Tony Blair who said somewhat expansively (during a visit by Wickremesinghe) that “the whole of Britain” would support Sri Lanka if it continued its quest for peace.^{xxii}

IV. Early Successes

The formal ceasefire has now lasted more than 100 days. It has thereby outlasted the previous ceasefire of 1995, which snapped on Day 100. The formal ceasefire was preceded by two months of informal ceasefire unilaterally declared by the LTTE and reciprocated by the Government. This is thus the longest stretch of peace experienced in recent times by a country, which for decades has lived with the horrors of domestic war and terrorism. Averaging out the lives lost in the recent past, and would have been lost had hostilities not ceased, some 1500 lives have been saved. This is a triumph to be savored.

So are the gradually emerging signs of a changing atmosphere. Bans in the north and east on a whole range of goods that were considered potentially lethal have been lifted. Normal occupations are being renewed. North-South travel and commerce are developing. Two ships used by the International Committee of the Red Cross to transport people, medicine, and other supplies have been berthed following the re-opening of road transport. Postal trucks have left the northern province with mail for the rest of the country after 12 years. The availability of medicines and consumer goods in the north and east has increased. Elsewhere in the country -- knock on wood -- the convulsions wrought by suicide bombs and other terrorist onslaughts are not part of daily life. The LTTE is building a new, political structure. Prabhakaran, who usually lives a shadowy life in a jungle hideout, came out and met national and international journalists at a press conference. That he fared poorly is less important than the fact that he flirted with accountability. Civil society institutions are seeking more entry points through which they can positively influence events and trends. Direct contacts have taken place between Government

and LTTE representatives, with Norwegian assistance, and disagreements that could have turned into major problems have been resolved.

These are all notable achievements. They should provoke rejoicing in the street – by both sides. I wish that were so. Instead, doubts and concerns lurk behind the façade of emerging normalcy.

V. Problem Areas

Some of the sheen has worn off the initial euphoria. Problems, sometimes exaggerated, are being emphasized at the expense of demonstrable advances. Opponents of the peace process are beginning to show their hand. The rhetoric among various "players" is growing more strident. Tamils allege that they are being harassed by the armed services. The number of incidents reported to the SLMM is increasing, and they have grown more dramatic and potentially harmful to the peace process. Meanwhile, fears exist on both sides of the ethnic divide of being lured into a trap from which escape routes must be identified in advance.

LTTE propagandist Anton Balasingham, who lives in London, said in a press interview that the LTTE's confidence in the peace process had been undermined, and that the LTTE was "disappointed over the lack of concern and inclination on the part of the Sri Lankan government in the process of de-escalation and stabilization of peace."^{xxiii}

The primary reason for this sense of foreboding is that time has elapsed since the ceasefire agreement was signed, without signs of momentum in the direction of political negotiations. In February, it was assumed that political talks would begin in May. Then it was June, then possibly July.

With each passing day, imaginative speculation grows, and signs of disaffection emerge, fuelling anxieties that yet another opportunity may be lost. The fact, however, is that a pause between the signing of the ceasefire agreement and the opening of negotiations is inevitable. The ceasefire agreement contains 16 time-bound objectives. It is logical to assume that negotiations should be initiated only after the last of these deadlines has been met, on August 2, when the Sri Lankan armed services are obliged to vacate school premises that they now occupy. Any move towards negotiations before the final deadline has to be considered a bonus. Negotiations thereafter could be considered normal progress.

Applying Wickremesinghe's sequential approach, a tripartite assessment could be undertaken immediately after August 2, to determine whether the obligations written into the agreement have been fully met. This effort should not be rushed and, where necessary, additional deadlines could be set. The exercise needs to be transparent, and carried out in a spirit of recommitment to peace. Of course, all this will mean another delay in getting to the conference table. That does not matter, if both sides act in good faith, and ensure that the ceasefire holds. A "positive delay" -- one that takes place by mutual agreement to advance the cause of peace -- can be helpful in providing opportunities for resolving issues that stand in the way of confidence building. These issues include:

- Conflicting interpretations of some of the ceasefire's stipulations;

- The perception that the LTTE is trying to push Sri Lankan forces completely out of the north and east, thereby making separatism a done deal;
- Conflict between the LTTE and the Muslim community in Sri Lanka's eastern province;
- Mind sets with a concrete-like quality that inhibit mutual understanding;
- The LTTE's campaign for domestic depredation that has been carried out in a strangely unprofessional manner; and
- The ever-present shadow of a resurgence of chauvinism.

Two other issues need watching. First, the existence of three legal challenges to the constitutional legitimacy of the ceasefire agreement. These are now before Sri Lanka's Court of Appeal, which has fixed July 3 for deciding whether they are admissible. If even one of the challenges succeeds in the courts, the entire peace process may become moot. Second -- and many consider this the ultimate spoiler -- the constitutional authority of the President who could attempt to bring a legal wrecking ball to the negotiating structure. Constitutionally, she is an executive president, and not a ceremonial figurehead.

VI. Moving On

Yogi Berra once said: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Wickremesinghe and Prabhakaran are at more than a fork; they are at a tangle of pathways. They have both taken risks, in order to reach higher objectives. How will they move on?

In Sri Lanka, as the old cliché goes, anything can happen and usually does. The difficulties I have outlined are not insurmountable. But who can tell? Sectarian bigotry may pick up the additional strength required to impede reason and good faith. Mutual misunderstandings could lead to fatal miscalculations. Pragmatic leadership may be thwarted by the personal ambition of lesser figures. Any or all of this could plunge the country into the abyss reserved for failed states.

Suppose, on the other hand, that this time around there indeed is a difference, that reason and goodwill can prevail, that the residue of contentious issues will be resolved, and that the current suspension of hostilities will lead to the next logical phase of political negotiation. If such benevolent circumstances prevail, the easy part would have been concluded and the hard part will begin. For both sides that means thinking "outside the box," of having the courage and honesty to reach compromises that may not fulfill all the aspirations of either but will meet the indisputable needs and rights of both.

ⁱ Title 22 of the United States Code defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups of clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience."

ⁱⁱ G. Parthasarathy: "Prabhakaran Unleashed," *Frontline* magazine, India, Vol. 19, Issue 9, April 27-May 10, 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ Chronology of Peace Bids in Sri Lanka, Reuters, February 22, 2002

^{iv} Radhika Coomaraswamy, quoted in Virginia A. Leary: "Ethnic Conflict and Violence in Sri Lanka, International Commission of Jurists, Switzerland, 1981.

^v *The Week* magazine, India, March 3, 1986

^{vi} *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2002

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- ^{vii} "Agreement on a Ceasefire between the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam"
- ^{viii} For the second time under the present constitution, the President who, constitutionally, is both head of state and head of government, and the Prime Minister, are from different parties. In keeping with the people's mandate, they have decided on "cohabitation," however uneasy, with the Prime Minister functioning as head of government.
- ^{ix} "Agreement Takes Us Halfway Down the Road -- PM," Daily News, Sri Lanka, March 5, 2002
- ^x Interviewed on Rupavahini television, Sri Lanka, April 25, 2002
- ^{xi} Jayadeva Uyangoda, The Lanka Academic online, March 20, 2002
- ^{xii} Toward a Totalitarian Peace: The Human Rights Drama, Special Report No. 13, University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), Sri Lanka, June 2002; Amnesty International quoted in "Tamil Tigers Still Recruiting Children," BBC Online, March 12, 2002; and "US Criticises Tamil Tigers," BBC Online, March 11, 2002
- ^{xiii} "Prabhakaran Thinks Neither Side Can Win 'War' -- Solheim," The Island, Sri Lanka online
- ^{xiv} Sri Lanka: Recapturing Missed Opportunities, The World Bank, USA, 1999
- ^{xv} World Refugee Survey 2002, US Committee for Refugees, June 2002
- ^{xvi} Asian Development Outlook 2002, Asian Development Bank, Philippines; Sri Lanka Finance Minister's Budget Speech 2002
- ^{xvii} Electoral statistics from the Sri Lanka High Commission, Canada
- ^{xviii} Personal correspondence from Sri Lanka
- ^{xix} Easter Message from the Bishop of Jaffna, Rt. Rev. Savundranayagam, Daily News online, March 30, 2002
- ^{xx} "Chief Monks Pledge Support, Daily Mirror online, Sri Lanka, June 4, 2002
- ^{xxi} Press Release, US Embassy, Sri Lanka, May 31, 2002
- ^{xxii} "Blair Tells Ranil: Peace belongs to the Brave, Go Ahead," Daily Mirror online, May 31, 2002
- ^{xxiii} "Sri Lanka's Conditions for Talks Create an 'Impasse' - Balasingham," Tamilnet online, June 5, 2002.

Dr. Karunyan Arulanantham: Thank you for inviting me to participate in this forum. My perspectives are that of a Tamil. This is a perspective that is often not heard. It reflects not only my experiences as a Tamil, but also those from my working as a physician with Tamil refugees in South India and my recent visit to Jaffna.

At the beginning of this year I was invited by the university to teach and work as a Pediatrician in the Jaffna teaching hospital. I was born and raised in Jaffna. As I landed at the airport in Jaffna and proceeded to the hospital the words from the book of Lamentations came to my mind.

"How deserted lies the city, once thronging with people! Once great among nations she now becomes a widow. Once a queen among provinces now put to forced labor. Among all who loved her she has no one to bring her comfort. Her friends have all betrayed her: they have become enemies. How bitter is her fate. Her adversaries have become her masters."

The airport is currently taken over by the military and I traveled through the vast military camp carved out of the land and homes of people in Paley and the surrounding communities. As I proceeded to the town, I was greeted by bombed out buildings, pockmarked from shells, properties with overgrown foliage and all other signs of neglect and destruction. The center of town with the park, town hall, courts and St. Peter's church had been reduced to rubble and utterly destroyed, as had the adjacent homes and offices. Citizens of Jaffna. They also have to live with the constant indignities of multiple checkpoints dotting the roads in Jaffna. These checkpoints in a totally Tamil speaking area are manned by Sinhala speaking armed soldiers. There are even some signs on the roads in Sinhala only. Jaffna is an occupied land.

I was unaware of the extent of the destruction and despite some difficulties I managed to get some photographs of the area and I want to share these with you.

Photos of Jaffna

Over two decades of bombing, shelling, and displacement of the populace by all those wanting to control their hearts and minds, has had its toll on the people and their institutions. They are tired. They have to deal with disrupted family life, social life and an economy that is significantly destroyed. The effect of this is visible in the growth of children. There is significant under nutrition and stunting and their physical and psychological health is also impacted by the war.

I Erasmus

The Jaffna I saw certainly affirms the saying of Erasmus of Rotterdam, a pacifist and a Catholic reformer. In the year 1511, he wrote, “Dulce bellum inexpertis.” “War is sweet to those who know nothing about it.” The Tamils I met and know all yearn for peace. The war must stop.

The conflict in Sri Lanka is multi-faceted and complex. Currently its chief manifestation is the war between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam. The government represents the interest of the majority Sinhala people and uses a totally Sinhala army to fight the LTTE who represent the aspirations of the numerically smaller Tamil community. LTTE fields a totally Tamil army.

But the encouraging news is that the two parties have taken the first step towards peace. In the current global scene of escalating conflicts, particularly those of an identity based ethno-religious ones; the news from Sri Lanka is certainly refreshing and hopeful and must succeed.

2- Obstacles to peace

But the peace process remains fragile. Changing deeply held beliefs, assumptions and mindsets for which people are willing to fight and die are not changed easily. There are thus significant obstacles to peace. Some are due to the persistence of the same reasons as for the war while others are the result of the mindsets conditions created by the war. Thus an understanding of the genesis of this conflict and its consequences is necessary to appreciate the problems associated with achieving and maintaining peace.

3- a-Sinhala state

The war is reflective of a dysfunctional state whose policies and actions have caused the Tamils to take arms against the state. The thrust of these policies has been to create a Sinhala state for and by the Sinhala majority in which the Tamils have no means of equal participation.

3-b Sinhala mindset

The Sinhala state was the response to the Sinhala Buddhist mindset which was conditioned by history and myths in which the Tamils were portrayed as enemies of the unique Sinhala Buddhist identity. These beliefs, which are counterproductive to the creation of a modern pluralistic state, are deeply entrenched in the language and culture.

In a Marga Institute publication “Sinhala-ness and Sinhala Nationalism” published last year, Michael Roberts observes that in the Sinhala language the word for the Sinhala ethnic group is synonymous with the Sinhala nation and this word is also used to denote the Sri Lankan nation. There is thus no word in the Sinhala language to describe a pluralistic nation.

3-c Demonisation of the Tamils

A necessary accompaniment of this expression of Sinhalaness was the demonisation of the other. Tamils considered a threat were marginalized and when they resisted their acts of resistance were interpreted as proof of their demonic traits. The demonisation of Tamils has now been transferred to a systematic demonisation of the LTTE, which has undoubtedly carried out many acts that must be condemned without question. But violence by the LTTE is not the whole story. Many Tamils see them as essential in their struggle despite their disagreement with some of the methods it has used to fight and die for the cause it believes in. While both parties have committed human rights violations, to many Tamils the terror of the government is a far greater reality than that of the LTTE.

3 d Political system

It is in this background that the politicians exploited the Tamil bogey and fear in negative political campaigns to get votes from the majority Sinhala public. The recent success of the government in the last two elections openly campaigning for peace is a positive change but the significantly the cost of peace was not discussed.

3-f Tamil response

The initial non-violent resistance of the Tamils was ineffective and it escalated to an armed resistance to the state with the tacit approval of many Tamils. The Government met this with indiscriminate violence and a cycle of violence began which has now culminated in the war with the use of highly destructive weapons, heavy and random aerial bombing and also suicide bombers. The Tamil resistance, which started as a guerilla movement, has now been transformed to a conventional armed force with an army and a navy with an organized command structure. They control and govern a significant portion of the land that the Tamils call their homeland.

4- Mindsets created by the war

The changes in the minds of those in the Island as a result of this prolonged war has to be understood as we march towards peace. There are undoubtedly some who have realized the need for fundamental changes in the country. But many among the Sinhala community want peace but do not understand that there is a price to be paid for it. They have difficulty sharing power with

the Tamils. Such factors may be the reason for the Buddhist clergy in Sri Lanka to aggressively want the war to continue a phenomenon that is not quite understood in this country where Buddhism is seen in pacifist terms.

4-a Tamil mindset

The more significant effect of the conflict is the change in the Tamil mind. The Tamils responded to the perceived threat to their identity by stumbling on to what can be described as Tamil Nationalism. In the 1977 elections they voted for a separate state. The Tamil demand for a solution based on the Thimpu principals essentially expresses the feeling of the Tamils that too are a distinct people with the right to determine their own future. They want to be considered as equals with the same rights and sufficient power to protect and express their identity as the Sinhala people. This is the basis for the demand of the Tamils for the right of self-determination, a demand that is met with considerable anxiety in the south. They want the Sri Lankan state be structured to accommodate this.

These demands were not present at the time of independence of the country. The stimulus for the change is the Tamil perception that the various state acts against them were not merely one of discrimination but that collectively it added up to a program to destroy the basic foundations of their identity, their language, culture, economic life, education and homeland. The state aided and often-violent program to settle Sinhala people on traditional Tamil homeland and displace the Tamils bolstered this perception. Their experience of humiliation, injustice and suffering has strengthened their resolve to protect their identity. They do not trust a state with a political structure in which they would never have power. It should not be difficult to understand that a populace abused as has been portrayed in the photographs shown would naturally be reluctant to trust those who destroyed them.

4-b- Tamil self-empowerment

Tamils also have new sense that they can resist those with greater power provided they are willing to sacrifice. Many Tamil though not all, have not been cowed down by years of difficulties and suffering and this has given them a self-confidence that was not present in the early years of the struggle.

4-c- Erosion of basis for a common country

Another consequence is the isolation of the communities and the violence between them is the erosion of the basis for a common country based on anything other than force and subjugation

5- Nature of the conflict

Many Sinhalese still frame the conflict between them and the Tamils as a majority, minority conflict. But to quote Michael Roberts again, he states in the same publication, “ few independent observers would reject the statement that in heart and mind, there are two nations within Sri Lanka. To the Tamils, the Sinhala Tamil conflict is, at this stage a conflict of two distinct people and nationalisms, both legitimate in the eyes of their eyes of their proponents. For

each group to devalue the others claim is counterproductive to the search for peace. Nationalism is a concept that asserts the importance of a people who share some common features such as culture and language. It can be destructive or useful. It can be oppressive to those outside it and liberating to those within it. It functions to liberate those oppressed and in the case of the Tamils it may be serving a positive function. It is not helpful for the international community to devalue Nationalism, which undoubtedly has been evil in certain circumstances without studying its role in a particular context. The complexity of Sri Lanka is that the Sinhalese too feel that their Nationalism is functionally protective of them from the Tamils who are not only in Sri Lanka but in South India too.

6-Reasons for peace

How is peace to be achieved given these circumstances? This is the real issue at this time.

6-a Failure of war

The recent change in direction by the Government to resolving the conflict by negotiations was due to its inability to defeat the LTTE. It was a pragmatic decision not a visionary or moral one primarily necessitated by empty state coffers. While the motives of the LTTE are less transparent it too may have come to the realization of the limits to resistance to an existing internationally recognized government however brutal it may be. It too may have made a pragmatic decision.

Current status:

A ceasefire agreement has been signed and there is no active fighting. The Norwegians who facilitated discussions between the two parties are on the ground monitoring the truce. Despite accusations of violations the truce has held and this is an achievement to be happy about.

The Tamils have largely agreed that the LTTE will be their voice at the negotiations and the LTTE seems committed to the process. But a united front on the Sinhala side does not exist and there are signs of the usual political games being played once again. This will make it more difficult for the Tamils to trust the process given the history of repeated backtracking by the Sinhalese in the past.

The President, the commander in chief is a political competitor of the Prime Minister and there is evidence of animus between the two and they may not be on the same page. Many expect difficulties from the President whose own peace agenda was a failure. The army under her command has not complied with the terms of the agreement and it is said that some commanders have stated that since the President did not sign the agreement they are not bound by it. Thus there are difficulties to overcome.

Conditions for peace:

The wide gap in perception and expectation of the populace they represent cannot be bridged soon and will take time. Thus prior to deciding on permanent structural changes that will determine the power relationships between the two communities, there should be a focus on creating conditions that will enable those negotiating to make the difficult compromises that will be essential for peaceful reconciliation. Compromise essentially means that both parties have to

give up some of what they have been fighting for. In a good compromise neither party is satisfied. Compromise will have risks for both sides. Conditions that make war more painful than the compromises being contemplated must be created. What are these conditions for peace? Some that come to my mind are the following.

1) Create an atmosphere of good will and decreased hostility

Programs to humanize the “other” are needed. Most importantly the Sinhala textbooks, which portray Tamils, as enemies of the Sinhalese must be changed. This is not conducive to a plural humanistic country.

- A) Remove all barriers to free movement of goods and people between the two communities. Repeal the prevention terrorism act

2) Improve the life conditions of those affected by the war and to give those affected a stake in peace.

- A) Urgent rehabilitation of the North East with a focus on rebuilding damaged homes.
- B) Program to improve the health and nutrition of the populace
- C) Allow free economic activity particularly unfettered fishing in the Northern Waters.
- D) Program to resettle and integrate the refugees and the internally displaced people.

3) Meaningful reform in the country. Create new institutions for a plural state.

A) Create institutions needed for a pluralistic country. President Kumaratunge recently alluded to the need for new institutions. The President in a speech in India, where she candidly admitted the failure of the Sri Lankan state in the treatment of Tamils, suggested the creation of independent, non-political national institutions with the constitutional authority to study and formulate every aspect of a national policy for a pluralistic society. Here she seems to recognize the limitation of the political system in creating national policy for a pluralistic state.

- B) Active program to make it possible for Tamils to function in the country.
- C) Strong and effective means of ensuring human rights protection to all citizens by all parties.

4) Balance of power. (Parity)

The assumption underlying this condition is that it was the lack of power that allowed for beating and then blaming the Tamils in the conflict in Sri Lanka. This is a basic human condition and correction requires some balance in power between the two communities. It is obvious that the projection of military power by LTTE was instrumental in getting the government to the peace table. However military power is not the only type of power to be considered particularly in the context of Sri Lanka, which is so dependant on the international communities for funding and assistance. Other sources of power that can contribute towards parity include the following.

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- A) International guarantee of any agreements between the unequal partners.
 - B) The recognition of the legitimacy of the Tamil struggle.
 - C) Removal of the terrorist label from the LTTE.

The Prime Minister Mr. Ranil Wickremasinghe in his speech in the parliament acknowledged that there is a key role for the international community in the peace process in the beginning of the year. I will quote his words.” A solution to the North East problem will through international opinion”

But he also hopes to use the international opinion to achieve his vision of a solution within a united country. I quote him again “In this backdrop if the international opinion is with us we could protect the territorial integrity and unity of our nation”. The reality may be that there are two nations in that island. In any case from the Tamil point of view, based on their experiences, is less sympathetic to the territorial integrity of a state that has oppressed them in comparison to their natural desire to protect their lives, property and identity. The fundamental role of the international community is to promote enduring human values and not get bogged down to prescribing final solutions in a country with its unique set of problems. These solutions have to evolve and must be negotiated and not prescribed.

If the Sri Lankan state can make the necessary changes to allow for Tamils to be treated with equality and dignity a united structure is possible. This is certainly the preferred course of action for many and for me. But if such changes are not forthcoming then the Tamils must be able to opt out of a state that is oppressive to them.