
Resettlement of War-affected Civilians and Winning the Peace in Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lanka has gone through a string of catastrophic experiences relating to displaced persons in recent years. On Boxing Day in December 2004, over a million people were displaced in a matter of minutes as the Tsunami surged across our shores. Not to mention the 34,000 who died. About 97,000 dwellings were either destroyed or damaged. Thousands of small businesses were destroyed. In 2007, approximately 187,000 persons were displaced when the security forces evicted the terrorist LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) from the Eastern Province. More recently, about 294,000 persons were displaced when the LTTE cynically herded the inhabitants of the Vanni into Mulaitivu and then used them as a human shield and as a bargaining chip in a deadly hostage game. Of course, all these people were rescued by the security forces subsequently. Now, many of them are housed in government-run camps.

However, it is interesting that almost everyone who was displaced by the Tsunami was returned to his/her home, sometimes, to a better home, within a period of three years. In some areas, reconstruction has exceeded 110%. Much of the business activity has resumed. The much anticipated epidemics and diseases did not occur. People did not languish in camps longer than necessary. This was owed to the well-developed health services of Sri Lanka and the generosity of its own people. The services infrastructure of Sri Lanka stood up to the pressures superbly. Significant assistance was received from the international community and well-wishers overseas.

Similarly, the persons displaced in the Eastern Province have now been returned to their homes. Despite all the reservations expressed at the time, these refugees have successfully returned to their villages and towns. It could be said with confidence that the persons displaced in the Vanni will also be returned to their homes as soon as possible once the mines have been cleared and their villages, with the attendant services, rehabilitated.

After 27 years of blood, carnage and frequent disappointment, winning the war was an unparalleled achievement. We did it convincingly and we did it substantially on our own, carefully and deliberately brushing aside the cards stacked against us. We may have ignored the script and the unsolicited advice, but the finale was overwhelmingly convincing. Our victory has generated much confidence in the country, as was demonstrated by the jubilation that swept the nation following the silencing of the guns, the outpouring of support for the Government, the record upward movement in the stock market and increased inward investment flows. The Government has continued to enlarge its support base, winning a series of Provincial Council elections emphatically. In fact, no government has enjoyed so much popular support after five years in office. There is very little doubt that the vast majority of the people in this country are behind the government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. This political confidence must be converted into sustainable peace and economic activity. The success of our security forces and our diplomacy has also aroused significant admiration around the world which, properly managed, would produce tangible benefits and, perhaps some

Dr. Palitha T.B. Kohona

Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the United Nations

resentment. Terrorist groups remain a threat elsewhere in the world despite the deployment of much more sophisticated forces, advanced equipment and substantially more resources. The displacement of civilians in other places continue without arousing much comment. Nearly 250,000 people have been displaced in Pakistan in recent weeks. Worldwide there are over 26 million displaced persons.

Caring for the displaced

Our next challenge is to consolidate the peace and ensure security and prosperity for all our citizens, from the Dondra Head in the South to Kankesanthurai in the North. And this will be as daunting and complicated a task as dealing with the Tsunami and winning the war and will require a range of different approaches. We recovered substantially from the Tsunami in about three years. Hardly a sign remains to remind us of it. Likewise, with that experience behind us, we will be able to restore universal confidence in the country, among all our citizens, win over those who may entertain reservations that Sri Lanka's conflict is really over, convince all that our victory will benefit our people without distinction, care for the thousands who were displaced and return them to their own homes, with better livelihood opportunities, generate investment capital, and establish an environment, socially, economically and politically, where every individual's dignity is respected

and their true potential is realised in full. We restored the lives of those who survived the Tsunami, now we have to restore the lives of those who survived the conflict. For over twenty seven years due to a conflict which was not of our own making, our resources remained under utilised, were diverted to the war effort, sometimes haphazardly, enterprises struggled to survive, tourism and inward investment suffered seriously, the cream of our youth went gallantly and voluntarily to the front and many paid with their lives, others were maimed, while quite a few took the easy way out and left the country, and a country that was meant to be a beacon to the region, stagnated in the global backwater. Now that the conflict is over and the guns are silenced, we have the opportunity stand up, dust ourselves, and rejoin the world as a proud and confident people. We have a unique opportunity created for us to catch up for the lost time and we must start immediately. Peace must be made a reality to all our people and not continue to be only an aspiration for some. It is important to us that the displaced return to their own homes and become economically active again. It costs approximately one million Dollars per day only to provide food for the displaced persons in the camps. We can ill afford this expenditure.

The immediate need is to care for those who became the involuntary victims of the conflict as we did with the victims of the Tsunami. The camps that dotted our coast-line after the Tsunami are only a distant memory now. Instead, neat, newly-constructed villages have taken their place. It is now history that the LTTE, as it fled from one town to another and from one village to another, swept with it the civilian population and callously herded them in to an ever decreasing area and cynically used them, the very people it purported to champion, as a human shield and as bargaining chips while

exposing them to the ravages of battle. They located their fighters and big guns among the civilians. The civilians were the involuntary victims of a terrorist group's deadly strategy. The LTTE knew well that these innocent civilians would suffer terribly by being forced to partake in this dreadful game. But they callously persisted and used them as pawns in their deadly strategy. The vast majority of these civilians clearly had no desire to be part of the LTTE game plan and as soon as the security forces broke through the terrorist defences in April and May 2009, fled in to government controlled areas carrying whatever they could gather. We saw this phenomenon unfolding on our TV screens. These were not reluctant escapees. They were making a desperate dash away from their ruthless captors, on occasion being subjected to gunfire from them. The security forces, demonstrating the impact of their training and planning, exercised amazing restraint as they advanced, at great cost to themselves. The infantry advance resulted in serious casualties for the security forces. We saw soldiers dropping their guns to assist civilians across flooded lagoons. Many a child lost its soldier father and a young wife her husband because of this policy of trying to avoid civilian casualties. Of course, as a consequence, the much anticipated and often trumpeted "blood bath" or the "humanitarian catastrophe" failed to materialise. In retrospect, one wonders whether the predictions of a "blood bath" was based on sincere logic. Today around 206,000 of these compatriots of ours, remain in camps in Vavuniya. While the large number of persons who fled from the unwelcome embrace of the LTTE, has stretched the resources of the government, efforts are continuing to be made to improve the conditions in the camps. This is our first priority. The government has provided temporary shelters which are more like small rural dwellings, including by obtaining 6500 large tents from China.

The shelters provided by international agencies could be improved considerably. The material used in them may not suit our climate and they create social problems. While it is agreed that these shelters should not become permanent dwellings, every effort should be made to make the temporary stay of the displaced as comfortable as possible. We have succeeded in avoiding the familiar images from refugee camps elsewhere of forlorn children with sunken eyes - waiting for a passing relief truck to throw out food. We would encourage international agencies and non-governmental agencies to take cognisance of these sentiments and respond to these needs. We are aware that some private sector entities are participating in the relief effort.

Rehabilitation

The internally displaced persons (IDPs) will be returned to their villages as soon as possible. The former LTTE cadres in the camps will be separated and sent to rehabilitation. Already over 12,700 have been identified. The others will return to their homes as soon as their villages are demined and the common services are restored. Already thousands from the Mannar region, Jaffna and the East have begun to return home. Over 17,000 individuals, separated from their families, have been reunited.

The major camp has a school. 40,000 children go to school within camps until they could return to their villages. They have been provided with facilities to sit for exams. This is symbolic of the government's plans for the future. While these children may lack many of the facilities of normal schools, elsewhere, it is testimony to the government's commitment to ensuring a degree of normalcy to the occupants of the camps until they return to their own homes. You will recall that the government placed equal emphasis on restoring damaged schools after the Tsunami. The Tsunami experience is

assisting us now. The children who for months had been herded from one LTTE defence line to another or dragged out into jungle training camps to achieve the deluded goals of a sick mind, now have the opportunity to do what other children do - study. To anyone who visits these children, their enthusiasm is palpable. A repeated chorus emanating from these, is their desire to continue their studies. It is the government's wish that they return to their own schools as soon as possible. Unlike many of their colleagues who were thrown up as cannon fodder and their young lives vainly sacrificed to satisfy a megalomaniac's delusional dream, it is everyone's hope that these children will grow up to be useful citizens and achieve their dreams in their own way. We also can make a contribution to this process by assisting with the needs of these schools and the children and also in the reconstruction of the schools in the North. For too long have the children of the North been regarded as a dispensable asset in a terrible war machine. The number of teenage girls who have become pregnant simply to avoid being sent for military training, bears testimony to the evil nature of the regime that existed. We can ensure that at least the next generation gets the opportunities that were denied to the present. The possibility of assisting these children in advancing their studies deserves our attention. Some may need financial assistance.

The camps also provide banking and postal facilities. In a welcome development, the banks received close to Rs 400 million in deposits in the space of two days in June. On the one hand, this clearly demonstrates that many in the camps had significant financial resources and that all were not uniformly destitute. Some obviously carried their money and gold carefully with them and managed to keep it away from the LTTE. This is in stark contrast to the IDPs who have poured in to camps elsewhere in the world. On the

other, it also indicated that these people have confidence in the banking system headquartered in Colombo. This is a confidence that needs to be nurtured further. It is also no secret that some residents of the camps receive sizable remittances from overseas, from family members and friends. Continuing financial support from relatives living abroad will assist significantly in restoring normalcy to the communities in the North in the shortest possible time as these people return to their homes. Those who either voluntarily, or through coercion, made monthly contributions to the LTTE, should now consider helping a close relative or a family friend through a similar contribution. The business activities, the agriculture, the services, the continued education of children, etc. will require large infusions of funds. There will be innumerable opportunities for the private sector also to engage itself also in these activities. Sri Lankan companies established overseas, may also wish to explore the opportunities opening up. The agricultural infrastructure that was destroyed by the LTTE to build defensive earth works and trenches can now be restored.

Resettling the Displaced

Within the next few months, consistent with the Government's 180-Day Action Plan, the bulk of the residents of the welfare villages will return to their own homes, their villages and their towns. The transit camp must remain a transit camp. It is the hope of the Government that the remaining 206,000 people will return home, not with the hatred kindled in their hearts by 27 years of LTTE indoctrination, but with the hope of a better life in front of them and the possibilities of being shareholders of a uniformly prosperous Sri Lanka. They must return to better homes with electricity and water and not to a marginal and fearful existence to which they were condemned by the LTTE commissars. We have seen the

footage coming from the battlefield of endless fortifications and extensive bunkers in LTTE areas constructed with steel and concrete and very little construction to benefit the civilian population. The children of the returning IDPs must have better schools to go to without the fear of being dragged in to jungle training camps. They must have better hospitals, and not only for the chosen few, but for all. They must return to an environment where democracy prevails, where people elect their own representatives to govern them and where no legacy of an all powerful and eternal 'supremo' remains. What is taken for granted elsewhere in Sri Lanka by way of democratic governance must be theirs to demand. Over the last two years elections have been held in eight provinces. We must not ever again permit a situation where freely elected representatives of the Tamil people are murdered by the dozen simply for not toeing the LTTE line, where dissent was suppressed and non-conformist views were buried with those who held them. A long line of Tamils who dissented, starting with Alfred Duraipappa, Mayor of Jaffna, were eliminated by the LTTE. All in all, they must return to a better life and it is our responsibility to ensure that. If what is happening in the East is something to go by, then we can have confidence in the future. Roads are being widened, electricity is being re-connected, shop fronts are being spruced up, new restaurants and hotels are being opened and economic activity is resuming. We all have a role to play, however small, in achieving the national goal. Every effort must be made to reintegrate our fellow citizens with the rest of the country. The same comfort level enjoyed by the 54% of Tamils who live in the South must also be available to all those displaced, as they return to their homes. The country has lost 27 years due to errors made in the past. We must run faster to make up for this lost time. We owe it to the next generation.

Reaching out to the Diaspora

As we restore the confidence of the displaced, we must continue to reach out to the Tamil community scattered around the world. Many of those now in the camps have relatives elsewhere in the world. Relatives who may have worries about their well being. There are many who have been fed a constant diet of anti-Sinhala propaganda by the LTTE and by a willing media ever searching for cheap headlines. Journalists who sacrifice their principles and impartiality to advance personal agendas, even those who may not have experienced the horrors of 1983 may have lived a life filled with such propaganda. One of our key challenges will be to reassure the Sri Lankan Tamil community overseas that today's Sri Lanka will not tolerate anything like 1983 again. It is a fact that despite the LTTE's repeated bloody provocations, like the attacks on the Temple of the Tooth and the Sri Maha Bodhi, or the massacres like at the Kaththankudy Mosque, there were no reprisals aimed at Tamil citizens elsewhere in the country. The civilian reprisals so desperately sought by the LTTE as part of its devilish strategy, did not eventuate. I am confident enough to say that there will be no repetition of that infamous event ever again. Minorities have continued to prosper in Sinhala-dominated areas of

the country, including Colombo. Some of the leading businesses housed in Colombo are minority owned. Many of the leading professionals in Colombo come from the minority communities. 54% of Tamils live in the South among the Sinhalese. The inconveniences currently faced by those with no familiarity with Sinhala or English will disappear in time with the implementation of the Official Languages Policy. What the Government is doing in this area has not been acknowledged. Even the nuisance of road blocks and sudden searches will become a thing of the past with the all pervading fear generated by LTTE suicide bombers diminishing and a greater level of confidence being restored, especially to the hard working security forces. In the East, a former child soldier has been elected as the Chief Minister. Elections have been held in Jaffna and Vavuniya. But, if we leave these things to happen on their own, it will take time. It is our responsibility to contribute proactively to the consolidation of that confidence. It is for us to proactively grab this unique opportunity and not let it slip by. President Mahinda Rajapaksa has repeatedly invited Sri Lankan Tamils from around the world to return to their homeland and become parties to the nation building effort. It goes without saying that in addition to the Government, the people must

contribute their voices to ensuring a confident ring to our message. A delegation of politicians from Tamil Nadu in South India has returned to Chennai expressing satisfaction with the developments in Sri Lanka.

The Government is also determined to reach out to all our friends and even critics as we set about the task of nation building. We have proactively *reached out to diaspora groups*. We will need the continued support of our friends. We will make every effort to convince our critics that our friendship is not fickle. Our friendship is firm and our attitudes will be conditioned by national interest and principle. In a fast changing world, we will not establish friendships of convenience. Our friends must recognise that what will be appreciated more would be concrete assistance rather than gratuitous advice.

Conclusion

We are at a critical juncture in our history. We have the unique opportunity to bring our people together and make our blessed island a better place for all. As the Bard said, time and tide waits for no man. We must grab this chance and ride the tide as it rushes in. We dealt with the tragedy of the Tsunami far better than most others have dealt with their own natural calamities. I am confident that we will deal with the aftermath of our victory over terrorism equally well. ■