

Continuing Threats to Peace and Development in Sri Lanka

Continuing Criticism Following the Victory over Terrorism

I intend, in this essay, to explore the paradox that, despite overcoming terror, the Sri Lankan state still has a number of problems to face. Though we might have expected that our victory over terror would be celebrated internationally, and that countries striving themselves to combat international terror would have seen what we did as providing a model to be followed, the reality is sadly different. Instead of congratulations, we have had to face criticism and even vilification from countries that claim to be in the forefront of the war against terror.

What is the reason for this? The simple explanation, given that continuing criticism of Sri Lanka is led by European countries with a well-organised Tamil diaspora, is that they are giving in to political considerations. There is certainly some truth in this, as is obvious from the attacks on Sri Lanka made by various parliamentarians in Britain, whose seats could be lost if Tamils voted against them. The threat, for instance, by the influential Tamil Councillor Mr Idaikkader, of what might happen if the Tamil community changed its allegiance¹, goes far to explain the anxiety of many British parliamentarians with London constituencies to try to stop our victory over terror. Given the likelihood of Labour losing the next election, and the desire of David Miliband to command support in the next election for a Labour leader, it is all too understandable that he has decided to hitch his star to this particular bandwagon. In that sense, the lesson we learn is that global developments are always subject to parochial considerations, and the demands of British and other electoral

considerations will outweigh any general principles.

The same could be seen in the United States, where we know the pro-LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam) diaspora decided early in the Presidential campaign to put all its eggs in the Clinton basket. When this became obvious, Hillary Clinton tried to dissociate herself from any association with terror, but obviously some of the more sophisticated contacts stuck to her like a limpet, and it was all too easy to continue to convince her of the importance of their cause, and their support².

At the same time, whatever her personal predilections might be, there is no doubt that, if we are to ensure that we are not overwhelmed again by international pressure, we should not rest content with the assumption that it is only a matter of diaspora pressure that makes so many Western governments critical of our victory. On the contrary, the current attention paid to the newly-emerged Tiger leader, Mr Pathmanathan, suggests that there is much more to fear. Mr Pathmanathan has, after all, been anointed now even by Channel 4 in Britain, in addition to being put forward by some Europeans as a respectable interlocutor at the United Nations Human Rights Council³. This suggests that they are more concerned with the Tigers than with Tamils, though their pretext is concern for the Tamils in Sri Lanka.

The Continuing Attraction of the Tigers

What distinguishes the Tigers now, or rather the rump of them that exists in Western countries, with Mr Pathmanathan evidently being able to pass in and out of Britain with ease, even though he is wanted by Interpol? The answer obviously is money, the

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millions the Tigers raised through extortion and criminal activity though, as with the Emperor Vespasian, British arms dealers and Swiss bankers and other votaries of commerce have never worried about the sources of the money they make⁴.

In short, we must accept that the Tigers have been a wonderful cash cow in many fields of activity, that are essential to keep advanced economies going, and there is no reason for the West to allow us to get rid of them, if they present no threat to what solipsistic Western leaders describe as European values. What those values are the rest of the world has known well for over five hundred and more years, but the ability to dress up naked self interest in morality, which was a brilliant British accomplishment for several centuries, has now extended itself to other countries. We can see, therefore, endless examples of the type of Puritan ethos that more enlightened Western writers, such as, George Eliot and Hawthorne exposed so vividly.⁵

Destabilisation and Division as Methods of Control

The profits to be made from transactions with Tigers, and indeed further profits from what we ourselves would have to spend to deal with resurgent terrorism, is not the whole story either. At its simplest, stability in the Third World is not a cherished goal for some Western adventurers. Thankfully, there are more people now who understand the importance of stability worldwide for increased global trade as well as development, but unfortunately, the concept of

fishing in troubled waters has always appealed to many of those who contribute to foreign policy. Thus, for instance, the glee with which the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and its chosen political commentators declared that the Indian election would lead to chaos, with a spoiler role accruing to politicians from Tamilnadu. Listening later to the confident predictions of an opposition victory in Iran too, one realised that no longer is serious analysis the main purpose of political commentary in a highly politicised media⁶. The Western world did not want President Ahmadijad to continue in office, so their reports insisted that he would lose by a massive margin. The wish in effect became father of the conclusion, in a concerted attempt to ensure that stability continues as purely a Western virtue. Countries not under the control of the West are seen as volatile, with power or the balance of power gravitating towards those who support the West.

Dividing up countries has, after all, been an old habit with the West. To cover only the last hundred years, the principal outcome of the First World War was the dismembering of the Austrian and German and Turkish Empires. Whilst the components of the first two became a plethora of distinct countries, only Saudi Arabia emerged as an independent country from the Turkish Empire, and it was endowed with preposterous borders to enable the British to control the sea routes through a multiplicity of protectorates. And in Lebanon and Palestine, we had even more thorough controls through mandates, which, then became the precursor of further geopolitical manipulation.

The Contrasting Lessons from Yugoslavia

In Europe itself, we had the establishment of a highly pluralistic Yugoslavia, which lumped together the Southern Slavs in the belief that such a large entity would be a bulwark

against future Teutonic ambitions. They did not work perfectly in the Second World War period, given the support Croatia gave Nazi Germany.

However, on the positive side, as far as the optimism of opponents of Germany is concerned, the German invasion of Russia was held up in 1941, because of the fierce resistance of the Serbian component of Yugoslavia. Indeed, it has been argued that, had the invasion happened as scheduled, the resistance of the Soviet Union may not have continued until the winter that ultimately put paid to German ambitions.

But times change, and so do alliances, and in 1991, it was the German approach to the dismemberment of Yugoslavia that triumphed. I remember still a fervent debate of the Liberal International Executive Committee in Warsaw or Berlin, when everyone agreed that Slovenian independence should be recognised, but the British put up strong arguments against recognising an independent Croatia quite so soon. Croatia, it should be remembered, had basically supported the Nazis in the Second World War, and saw religion and culture now as a more important component of identity than the racial identification that had led Croats to accept a Southern Slavic unit as their country after the First War.

British affection for the Serbs who had precipitated that earlier War, and then helped them against the Nazis, may have played some part in the approach of the somewhat old fashioned British Liberal delegation⁷, but its argument was that a rushed recognition of Croatia would lead to bitter resentment. So, it turned out. And, it was in fact the Bosnians, the even more multifarious component of Yugoslavia that next wanted autonomy, who suffered from what the British delegation had, ironically in the context of its later rush to recognise Kosovo, characterised as premature in the case of Croatia.

What might be termed minority complexes kicked in on all sides, and in the ensuing melee interventionism became fashionable in the drawing rooms and then the control rooms of the West. This overcame the respect for state sovereignty that had governed international relations during the post-war period, and led to the emergence of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as an alternative source of authority to the United Nations⁸.

The climax of all this, it could be suggested, was the declaration of independence by Kosovo, supported and indeed precipitated by the West. The ground had been carefully laid in the political dispensation set up when the West intervened, having made it clear to Serbia that a blitz would follow if such intervention was resisted. Serbia might however still have resisted, thinking the price well worth it for an area they saw as the cradle of Serbian nationhood, so the demarche was sweetened with a commitment that the process would not lead to independence. The subsequent cynical violation of that commitment has however served to crystallise fears about the underlying aims of such interventionism. Hence the delay in what the West had hoped would be universal recognition of yet another country they have created.

Other Methods of Control

But, external military intervention and the encouragement of separatism are not the only ways to exercise control. Earlier, as we know, the different techniques included cooption of a ruling elite, or the imposition of reliable allies. Hence regimes changed, with notable examples over the decades being the Shah of Iran, Idi Amin, General Pinochet and, most bizarrely perhaps, the Taleban. But what was, if not acceptable, perhaps understandable in the Cold War period, became shameful in the aftermath, so a less crude way of control had to emerge.

So, in the new world order that emerged, we see that what is termed the 'international community' has the role or arbiter of all excellence. Instead of the old bilateral system of assistance, aid goes through the United Nations, and then through what are termed non-governmental agencies which turn out to be dependent on funding from particular governments. Decisions which should be the business of national governments are gradually usurped by external authorities, who claim allegiance to higher values.

This sort of approach became easier in Sri Lanka with the Ceasefire Agreement of 2002. The idea emerged that this was an Agreement between two equal partners, and therefore there was need of a higher authority to hold the balance⁹. This may have been understandable with regard to security issues, in a context in which the government was trying, in good faith, to win the confidence of the LTTE, but it soon extended too to decisions as to the focus and use of aid.

The Exercise of Patronage in Sri Lanka

This mindset was exacerbated by the tsunami, when so much money was on offer that government, recognising its own incapacity to use all of this productively, seems to have abdicated its decision making role in several areas. So the idea emerged that the international community would be in charge, and this was institutionalised through what was termed the Common Humanitarian Action Plan, an appeal for funds that was conducted by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA).

UNOCHA then set up what it called an Inter-Agency Standing Committee, which included many representatives from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). This was done under the aegis of a particular United Nations official¹⁰. Others who had interacted with the individual

concerned found him malignant, and I soon found that, though minor in status, he had exercised a disproportionate influence over the entire system, and done much to damage Sri Lanka's standing internationally.

The CHAP, the Common Humanitarian Action Plan which should have been under the aegis of government, had hardly any consultation with relevant line ministries, and there was scarcely a reference to government with regard to what was to be done with the funds collected on behalf of the Sri Lankan people. Though we managed to change this last year, it was only towards the end that we got rid of the idea that the whole process had to be monitored by the IASC (the so-called Inter-Agency Standing Committee an epitome of the doctrine of power without responsibility, components of which were of course benefiting, without any requirement to report on outcomes to government, from the funds that were collected).

All this contributed to a mindset that totally contradicted the notion of state sovereignty. We were told, for instance, by NGO representatives that they could not conform to government policy because that contradicted conditions laid down by donors¹¹. Of course, foreign governments have every right to attach conditions to any assistance they provide, but this should be transparent, and with the agreement of the government, which can then reject any untoward clauses. But, the secretiveness of NGOs that wished to set themselves above government, made it clear that they saw their role as above that of an elected government.

The United Nations System as a Tool of Particular Countries

And unfortunately, the UN system too has fallen prey to the predilections of particular countries. I cannot believe that this happens quite so easily in

other countries, but Sri Lanka, given the mindset of the period immediately after the Ceasefire Agreement was signed, has got used to the idea that the symbiotic link between the UN system and some donors cannot be questioned. Thus, the readiness with which spouses of diplomats work for the UN, in a context in which we find information calculated to embarrass Sri Lanka leaked to not just foreign governments, but even foreign journalists with axes to grind¹².

So too we find that particular countries fund, without full explanation or prior permission from the Sri Lankan government, officials who work for the UN, but whose primary allegiance must then be in doubt. We are simply told that the UN Agency wants some sort of special coordinator in place in a sensitive area, and discover only subsequently that the particular candidate for the post has been identified and will be funded by a country that sees itself as a moral arbiter with regard to the actions of the Sri Lankan state. An organisation, then, that should be accountable to its member states, which include Sri Lanka, ends up serving rather the interests of individual countries.

This can be damaging, given that so many of those countries are prey to the considerations outlined previously. Some of this, of course, may spring from genuine concerns, exacerbated by the outlook in the social circles in which many diplomats work. Unfortunately, not just the communications strategy, but even the communications skills of the current government are not as well targeted to deal with the modern world order as those of their political opponents. And even though, as far as democratic decision making within Sri Lanka goes, practical competence counts for more, democracy can be manipulated as we have seen so often in Sri Lanka, beginning with the financial inducements that toppled Mrs Bandaranaike's first government¹³.

Strategies for National Empowerment

Such manipulation can be much easier in a situation of economic crisis. Even though there is a sense of triumph now in Sri Lanka, history teaches us that this can quickly dissipate in a climate of economic deprivation. Obtaining the international monetary fund (IMF) loan has certainly helped, but complacency will be misplaced. We need to make sure, over the next few months, that the foundation is laid for rapid economic development. There is a window of opportunity now to attract investment, but we need to make sure that it is beneficial to the people at large, and in particular to those who have suffered so much. Apart from this, being dictated on moral grounds, there is the wholly practical consideration that, if we fail them now, we will have to deal with renewed hostility abroad. This can translate in the long term into another terrorist uprising, and we know from the two consecutive southern uprisings that the betrayal of expectations can lead to explosive resentment.

The programme of rapid infrastructural development that is taking place in the country at large, and particularly in the previously conflict-affected Eastern Province, indicates that, as far as what might be termed macro-planning, the situation is reasonably in hand. The danger, instead, lies in what might be termed exploitation of development opportunities at lower levels, because of insufficient accountability. This, in a sense, mirrors what happened in the disbursement of aid after the Ceasefire Agreement and the tsunami, when we had neither the structures nor the capacity to ensure both proper monitoring of activity and due transparency.

In short, what we need is rapid development of Human Resources, for what might be termed senior secondary levels. This reflects a deficiency in our education system, which provides excellent basic education, and also top

quality tertiary education in areas which demand distinct professional skills. In terms of what might be termed general education, however, we seem to be failing, precisely because the system does not encourage the soft skills that planning and management demand in a globalised society.

The education reforms of the first part of this decade were intended to address this question, but as yet, there has been inadequate progress. More seriously, there has been little attempt to address the problems of the past, through enhanced high-level training for public servants, both at the centre and at regional levels. There is clearly great talent, as can be seen in the manner in which basic services continued to be delivered in the face of enormous pressures, but the capacity to make swift informed decisions, to solve problems, to innovate and respond to particular needs, requires better training and more confidence. Deficiencies in these areas contribute to the perception in the international community that they are more capable, so that, even those without exclusionary agendas are caught up in the general belief that they should make the decisions, not their Sri Lankan counterparts¹⁴.

There is also need, it should be added, to ensure proper reporting, so that, the information needed for high-level decisions is more widely available. Now, that we have several systems superimposed on each other, we require clear coordination among central government, the provincial system, and district level administration. In addition to these, since security considerations will continue important in all parts of the country, in particular in the North and East, we must promote due consultation of all interests with proper understanding of the different perspectives that should be taken into account. And to facilitate this, as well as appreciation of the interests of the public at large, we need, obviously, to fast forward the pluralistic language

policies that were put in place earlier but which have only begun to be activated in recent years¹⁵.

Promoting efficiency as well as comprehension of the wider issues involved is the most urgent need, in view of the alternative power structures that can be imposed on us, if we are not careful. After all, the financial resources available to the international community mean that it can absorb the best of our talent. This is no bad thing if we ensure national ownership of the decision making processes, but to do that, we must strengthen the capacity of our own administrators. They should be able to lay down guidelines for action, and ensure compliance.

This does not mean that they should not be open to advice, and certainly studying best practices elsewhere in a spirit of openness should be encouraged. But what happened, far too often in the last few years, was blind acceptance of the second rate. It was assumed that control of finances, in the form of the aid that was intended to benefit our people, meant control of decision making, but this goes against all the principles, the world has laid down with regard to assistance, as set out most clearly in the Paris Principles. Certainly donors are free to give or not give, but what they give cannot be tied to conditions that detract from the primary purpose of developing the capacities of, and thus empowering, the recipient state.

My argument then is that we need to be constantly aware of the possibility of threats to our sovereignty as well as our unity. We can best guard against these by empowering our people, not only economically, but also administratively. For this purpose, we need training that develops our own skills of communication as well as judgment. We must, therefore, stress education in the broadest possible sense, on the lines of a country like Singapore that has managed to emphasise excellence that can hold its

own internationally, while also promoting social equity and interaction amongst all its citizens.

Footnotes:

¹ He said: "There are 10 constituencies in London that are very marginal and could be affected by Tamil voters... If they switch sides Gareth could be a goner." Harrow West MP Mr Thomas has a parliamentary majority of 2,028' (Harrow Observer, February 12 2009)

² Hence, perhaps what seemed a change in the American approach to terrorism in the period before the LTTE was overcome, when it seemed as though the United States was encouraging us to negotiate with terrorists who had not forsworn the use of arms. Secretary Clinton's speech in May that indicated opposition to the IMF loan Sri Lanka sought was perhaps the climax of this particular approach, though subsequently America seems to have gone back to a more principled approach, albeit still engaging in symbols of solidarity with its European allies, as in abstaining finally at the IMF Board Meeting with regard to the loan.

³ Speech of Norwegian envoy to the Human Rights Council, May 28 2009. This article was written before the arrest of Mr Pathmanathan, a seminal event that suggests that at least some international players have seen sense about his potential for encouraging international terrorism.

⁴ See the seminal work on LTTE fundraising of Shanaka Jayasekera, presented at the Conference on Terrorism held at the BMICH in Colombo in October 2007.

⁵ 'Middlemarch' and 'The Scarlet Letter' are obvious examples. The former is subtle and telling on the corruption that arises through commerce, for which the Protestant ethos was well suited, not only for the activism Durkheim diagnoses, but also for the casuistry to cut corners.

⁶ Fascinatingly, some newspapers insisted that the opposition candidate was sure to win on the first ballot, even while reporters on the ground made clear the support

enjoyed by the incumbent at levels of society Westerners might interview, but with which, they would scarcely interact generally.

⁷ As personified by Richard Moore, former Secretary to the Liberal Group in the European Parliament, and now a Patron of Liberal International – who was a few years later quite emotional about what he saw as a moral imperative to recognise Kosovan independence.

⁸ The absence of unanimity within NATO on the invasion of Iraq led in turn to yet another euphemism for individual decision making to give it the guise of internationalism, the essentially Anglo-Saxon Coalition of the Willing.

⁹ The CFA says (Article 3) 'The Parties have agreed to set up an international monitoring mission to enquire into any instance of violation of the terms and conditions of this agreement... It shall be the responsibility of the SLMM to take immediate action on any complaints made by either Party to the agreement'. This seems intended to deal with matters covered by the Agreement, but in time the international community pushed for an agreement as to the 'Mode of Operations for all Humanitarian and Development Actors in Sri Lanka'. This involved language suggesting that these Actors were to hold the balance between the government and the LTTE. When I pointed this out and had it removed, the proponents of agreement forgot all about it, after a cursory attempt to insist that it had previously been agreed.

¹⁰ Personal communication with former Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Mr Palihakkara.

¹¹ Guy Rhodes, former Head of Solidar, which had swept up contracts for aid from the European Union. The EU claimed that their rules of engagement mandated that they work only with international NGOs and not local ones, which seems to conflict with the Paris Principles, which make clear the need to build up local capacity. The policy seems even more specious in that much assistance is given to local NGOs that are engaged in advocacy, which translates in

Sri Lanka into partisan criticism of the government.

Interestingly enough, the British government revealed on May 8 2009, in a written answer to a question put by Conservative MP and Shadow Minister of Defence, Liam Fox, that it did not provide direct Budget Support to the government of Sri Lanka. Of the NGOs, it supported, only one was Sri Lankan, and that was the Centre for Policy Alternatives which used donor funding to publish its diatribes against the government, including one that referred to the President and 'his band of murderous thugs'. The British High Commissioner also told me that they gave much funding to two other organisations which turned out to be part of the interlocking directorates of NGOs that voted money to each other and attacked the government, but this was not reflected in the answer given to Dr Fox (see the article from the SCOPP website entitled 'The Great NGO Game' in 'Pursuing Peace, Fighting Falsehood', International Book House Kurunegala, 2008.

¹² Note the problems caused by Bernard Dix (who had worked previously for Solidar) and John Campbell (who had been in the British army), discussed at length in releases on the website of the Secretariat for Coordination of the Peace Process (www.peaceinsrilanka.lk), reprinted in 'The Best of British Bluff', International Book House, Kurunegala, 2009.

¹³ See the account in my 'Declining Sri Lanka – Terrorism and Ethnic Conflict: the legacy of J R Jayewardene', Cambridge University Press Delhi 2008.

¹⁴ The Government Agent (GA) for Jaffna has already put forward a proposal for training for his staff, while the GAs for Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu have stressed the need for upgrading the skills of public servants in their areas, if development is to be sustained and have maximum impact.

¹⁵ Note recent policy decisions initiated by the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs and National Integration. It has also set up a Centre for Language Training, but, unfortunately this has not been used thus far to its full potential. ■