

Setting the scene: Humanitarian Crisis and the ‘Undeclared War’

Mr. David Rampton

Lecturer, SOAS

This paper will focus on the current situation in the Eastern Province in the context of Mahinda Rajapakse’s claimed victory over the LTTE in the region and his pledge to resolve conflicts and tensions therein through development under the auspices of the ‘180 Day Eastern Development Plan’.¹ The contention of this paper is that whilst the current landscape in the East is one of humanitarian crisis and endemic human rights abuses, the current focus on human rights issues, which whilst performing the essential task of exposing the authoritarianism and violence of the current regime, is insufficient to capture the cold calculations and reasoning in the intentions of the Sri Lankan State which has once again returned the logic of Sinhala colonisation. What we must additionally scrutinise and track is the logic inherent in the state’s current development strategy and how this demonstrates continuities with but also departures from the historical record of colonisation, reflecting the current regime’s navigation of the current global aid frameworks through a mixture of resistance to, competition with and ultimately control and cooption of donors and development and humanitarian aid agencies in order to achieve its aims. In the course of this focus we must also understand the dangers implicit in the pursuit of ‘securitised development’ and the way in which this process acts to depoliticise both the dynamics of conflict as well as their resolution.² Whilst, securitised development suggests the militarisation of the development process, it also has wider implications that merit further exploration.

On the one, hand the securitisation of development refers to the manner in which, development has increasingly become a form of control over the conduct of populations considered within the terms of the discourse, as marginal or threatening to the socio-economic and political fabric of an increasingly globalised world. Thus we have seen a shift occurring from the 1970s onwards, from a situation in which development operated through the nation-state system allowing a certain autonomy to developing world states (albeit in the context of Cold War allegiances) towards, firstly, increasing imperatives laid down for economic development (in for instance the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s), and finally for imposing demands in relation to political governance and human rights issues which became hegemonic from the 1990s. As this reach into the developing world has expanded, those areas subject to conflict have increasingly been perceived within development discourse as problematic ‘borderlands’ wherein socio-economic and political factors have become intertwined in the reproduction of conflict and many developing world states have been adjudged weak, incapacitated, corrupt, subject to patronage, lacking in protection of citizenship and rights and riven by conflict and insecurity.³ In this context of perceived lack in state capacity, civil society actors IGOs, INGOs, and NGOs have come to act as the foot-soldiers of humanitarianism and development, forging a nexus between these actors and donor states residing in the shared assumption, implicit in the securitised development discourse that uneven development and under-development in ‘borderlands’ results in conflicts which increasingly have global repercussions in the spread of conflict and its consequences such as

¹ See SCOPP - ‘Sri Lanka’s East after Liberation: Prospects and Challenges’:

http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20070922_04

² See M Duffield - ‘Governing the Borderlands: Decoding the Power of Aid’ in *Disasters*, 2001, 25,4, 308-320 & ‘Social Reconstruction and the Radicalization of Development: Aid as a Relation of Global Liberal Governance’, *Development and Change*, 2002, 33 (5), 1049-1071

³ Ibid.

the global flow of refugees and internal displacement at the local level etc. According to this discursive logic, development becomes a means of attaining long-term global security to the extent that development simultaneously operates as a security measure. Although this scheme of things suggests that “aid and politics have been reunited” in the current era due to these shifts,⁴ it should also be noted that the securitisation of development also has the potential to depoliticise local landscapes and communities which become the objects and targets of development strategies stifling the channels for antagonism that are necessary for the long-term resolution of conflict.⁵ Indeed, development in this context, all too often becomes a solution imposed from outside in which local political articulation is papered over, an issue to which we will return after a brief focus on the background of development and colonisation in Sri Lanka.

The security/development nexus in Sri Lanka is not entirely new as the close connection between control of what the Sri Lankan State considered as unstable borderlands through militarised colonisation and irrigation projects demonstrates. It is also clear that development as it has evolved historically in the postcolonial period has itself acted as a dynamic in the reproduction of ethnic conflict. What occurred in the immediate aftermath of independence, as new ruling elites confronted the legacy of the colonial plantation economy and went in search of development strategies that would also secure their legitimacy and re-election was the eulogising and reproduction of the Sinhala small-holder cultivator through colonisation schemes for the resettlement of predominantly Wet Zone landless farmers in Dry Zone areas of northern and eastern Sri Lanka.⁶ In the Eastern Province, these resettlements were accompanied by new and/or renovated irrigation schemes, and a development discourse emerged in which the motifs of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism of the paddy field, temple and tank, key material elements of development, were interwoven and invoked a return to the glorious ancient past of Sinhala Buddhist hydraulic society in the Dry Zone, an infusion of development with religious overtones that is still significant in current conflicts over land and space in the East. The economic liberalization which occurred under the UNP regime of JR Jayawardene rather than challenging and reducing the overt nationalism of these development practices, tended rather to augment it to the extent that it deeply infused the foreign aid-funded Accelerated Mahaweli Programme which continued to pursue colonisation in an ever more aggressive manner in the context of the rising tensions and conflict between Tamil militants and the GoSL.⁷ For their part bilateral and multilateral donors had little conflict sensitivity and were still willing to grant the Sri Lankan State considerable autonomy partly as a reward for the island’s early venture into structural adjustment and liberalisation. In this context, as we know, state-sponsored development became aggressively militarised, using colonists as ‘frontiersmen’ in the state’s nation and state building projects, a development that fomented ethnic conflict over land and space as well as blurring the divide between combatant and civilians.⁸ The defence that such a form of development was about “practical necessity” as opposed to a rampant form of demographic engineering, through colonisation and

⁴ M Duffield - ‘Governing the Borderlands: Decoding the Power of Aid’ in *Disasters*, 2001, 25,4, p.312.

⁵ See J Ferguson - *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

⁶ M Moore – ‘The Ideological History of the Sri Lankan Peasantry’ - *Modern Asian Studies*, 23, 1, 1989. See also M Moore - *The State and Peasant Politics in Sri Lanka* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁷ S Tennekoon – ‘Rituals of Development: The Accelerated Mahavali Development Program of Sri Lanka’, *American Ethnologist*, 15, 2, 1988 & J Brow – ‘In Pursuit of Hegemony: Representations of Authority and Justice in a Sri Lankan Village’ *American Ethnologist*, 15, 2, 1988,

⁸ R Hoole - Sri Lanka: the Arrogance of Power: Myths Decadence and Murder (UTHR[J], 2001 & Y Thangarajah - ‘Ethnicization of the Devolution debate and the Militarization of Civil Society in North-Eastern Sri Lanka’ in M Mayer et al (eds.) - *Building Local Capacities for Peace: Rethinking Conflict and Development in Sri Lanka* (Mamillan, 2003).

administrative and electoral changes, remains difficult to sustain but this claim is again an indicator of the depoliticisation inherent in the development field.⁹ And it is this history that has also separated communities in the East as elsewhere that had once demonstrated considerable cultural, religious, linguistic, political and economic interdependence and sedimented layers and memories of distrust between communities and between communities and the intentions of state-sponsored development.

Into the 1990s the overt and authoritarian logic of this nationalist development discourse subsided as successive regimes from that of President Kumaratunga's PA alliance onwards pursued a developmental strategy in which military defeat of the LTTE was accompanied by a professed intent to provide a devolution package and to 'win hearts and minds' among the population of the northeast. Whilst it can be argued that this shift was a result of good intentions, one should also recognise that this shift is also symptomatic of the need of successive regimes and indeed, more broadly, of developing world states to adapt and realign themselves to the new aid paradigm which encompassed both economic and governance issues. In this sense whether we are looking at Kumaratunga's 'dual track' strategy or Ranil Wickremasinghe's CFA peace bid with the LTTE, both these strategies still operated within the new logic of securitised development. Indeed it has been a central criticism of the Wickremasinghe's 2002-4 peace bid that his strategy was far too heavily reliant on economic development and the securing of aid at the expense of engagement in furthering political negotiations, and furthermore a form of economic development which eventually undermined his peace bid.¹⁰

The rise of the current Rajapakse regime has seen a return of the Sinhala nationalist rhetoric and the pursuit of a military strategy to subdue the northeast. Evidently the Rajapakse regime also has to respond in some way to the changed context for humanitarian and development aid and governance but it is doing so through a mixture of resistance, competition and cooption. Resistance obviously because the current regime is implementing the nationalist project of consolidating a Sinhala majoritarian unitary state and this consolidation works not just through military conquest but through terror and fear and the instigation of the current humanitarian crisis perpetrated by the Defence and Environment Ministries, the security forces and their allies, the TMVP. The humanitarian crisis operates through the abductions of Muslims and Tamils, extrajudicial killings, forced returns of the displaced, evictions through the HSZ designation of East Mutur and Sampur in Trincomalee, obstacles to humanitarian access particularly in Batticaloa, attacks on and killings of humanitarian workers, violence over the acquisition or appropriation of land and religious and archaeological sites.

Yet the Rajapakse regime has also attempted forms of cooption of both donors and aid and development agencies. It has done this through the auspices of the ill-fated UNP-SLFP MOU, through the APRC, the Presidential Commission and IIGEP and, more recently through its pronouncement and plans that the conquest of the Eastern Province sets the stage for a development thrust that will benefit all communities, rid the East of conflict dynamics and act as a template for successful development that will win hearts and minds in the North as to the viability and desirability of the unitary state. Such high-profile statements of intent and premature celebrations are obviously intended as much for international consumption as for domestic legitimisation amongst the majority community and to mask the increasing micro-level instances of violence, harassment and intimidation pursued by the security forces and

⁹ N Hennayake – *Culture, Politics and Development in Postcolonial Sri Lanka* (Lexington Books, 2006).

¹⁰ S Bastian - *The Politics of Foreign Aid in Sri Lanka* (ICES, 2007), pp. 154-166 & p.177.

their proxies, instances which still bear the undeniable logic and expressions of Sinhala nationalism. Professions of secular and equitable development are also intended to veil the return of colonisation implicit in the forced evictions from or removal of access to residential or agricultural lands through, for example, HSZ designation in East Mutur/Sampur or by designating 'National Park' boundaries in Lahugala DS division of Amparai, actions deliberately targeted at the Tamil and Muslim communities of the East. One should also note the profound militarisation of development committees and the whole structure of the administrative machinery of the Province. In this sense, despite the gloss and spin of the current professed development strategy, in actuality, we see a return to the militarised and highly nationalistic and exclusifying colonisation of old.

The danger here is that the donors and development agencies will be won over by the development discourse and will give up on a political solution in the shared belief that accelerated development is the key to securing the resolution of conflict. If we focus on some of the planned development projects we can see the manner in which this pattern is being borne out. As I suggested above at the macro-level, the State is pursuing development shorn of the overt articulations of Sinhala nationalism that once characterised the AMP, whilst at the micro-level, on the ground and locally through threats and violence this logic is fully present. For example, if one scrutinises the creation of the SEZ which was gazetted in October 2006 well before the Mutur/Sampur HSZ and the design of the Metro-Urban Development Plan for Trincomalee, one can see that these plans might appear, especially to donors, as the innocuous pursuit of a much-needed strategy for intensive and accelerated industrial, port, tourist and rural capitalist development in the district couched in secular, technocratic language and that the reaction of some political actors and local communities to the issue is merely a result of confusion between the designation of the HSZ and the SEZ.¹¹ The same might be said province-wide, for that matter, of the proposed '180 Day Development Plan'.¹² As long as development is even handed and not outwardly tainted by ethnonationalist logic it is not only considered safe but also the route out of the conflict. And, once you have accepted that development is the key, it is only a short step away from accepting that, in the midst of conflict and tension, it is perfectly 'normal' to pursue intense securitisation of the process. The danger here as Danni Srikandarajah, once opined is that we are once again putting "the development cart before the conflict resolution horse"¹³ without the donors willing to face up to the fact that, as local Tamil and Muslim communities and their representatives in the environs of Trincomalee will tell you, 'development' has in the past resulted in demographic alterations and little immediate benefits to those from the minority communities. Furthermore, there are no safeguards to prevent this happening again through the logic of Sinhala majoritarianism and patronage. The only safeguard that can be pursued is a politically formulated one which must lie in radical devolution and decentralisation in order to curb the centre's hold over local and regional space.

Whilst, humanitarian agencies and human rights advocates have all drawn attention to the aforementioned serious abuses on the part of the State and its apparatuses, I would argue that

¹¹ See Gazette Extraordinary of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, No, 1467/3, October 16th, 2006, (Govt. of Sri Lanka Printing Dept) and 'The Development Plan for Trincomalee Metro-Urban Development Area', Urban Development Authority, 2007.

¹² See SCOPP - 'Sri Lanka's East after Liberation: Prospects and Challenges':

http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20070922_04

¹³ Dhananjayan Srikandarajah - 'The Returns of Peace in Sri Lanka: the Development Cart before the Conflict Resolution Horse', *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, 2003, Volume 1 Number 2.

unless we draw attention to the way in which the government is currently pursuing development, that bears all the hallmarks of the long-term strategy of colonisation, then we cannot fully confront the intentionality, and the cold calculations and reasoning of state that are at work. Human rights frameworks do not necessarily adequately capture this intentionality, they remain demands that the State respect the rule of law, that they follow universal norms, principles and conventions, that the displaced are treated according to the guiding principles on internal displacement, that HSZs are used for their declared purpose, that the freedom of movement for ‘minority’ groups is respected etc. but they do not always provide for a fuller political confrontation or contestation of what is currently at work in the Eastern Province or the frameworks for a political solution to the current crisis. I am not saying that we abandon the human right perspective as it is crucial but that the framework is insufficient as the State which, can readily absorb the pressure of the critique about human rights, may in the end control and co-opt humanitarian and development agencies in the process of achieving its goals, leaving humanitarian and development agencies as arms of state counter-insurgency. It remains essential therefore that donors, agencies and observers tie together the development and human rights perspectives so that the political intentionality of the present regime is rendered completely transparent and set themselves boundaries to combat cooption. However, it remains to be seen whether many IGOs INGOs and NGOs are willing to cross this bridge given the threat that pursuing a politically conscious programme may present to firstly, their often self-professed neutral, ‘non-partisan’ or non-political mandate, however empty such professions are, and, secondly, to the overriding imperatives of fulfilling humanitarian and development mandates regardless of the deteriorating context.