

## **International Seminar: Envisioning New Trajectories for Peace in Sri Lanka**

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### **Session 1: Causes of the Conflict & Factors leading to Ceasefire**

#### **Dr. Rajan Sriskandarajah**

Founding Editor, Ilankai Tamil Sangam website ([www.sangam.org](http://www.sangam.org))

#### **Sri Lanka: State of the country before the CFA: Essential Social, Economic and Political Factors Leading to the Cessation of Violent Hostility**

The four-year period since the CFA (22 February 2002) has been the longest stretch without war in the 23-year armed conflict. The benefits accrued to all Sri Lankans by this respite cannot be overstated. The saving of an estimated 5,000-20,000 lives that would have perished if the war had continued, a pause in the destruction, an improvement in the daily lives of civilians, a reduction in fear with its psychological benefits, and the uptick in economic activity, all because the guns went silent, are valuable gains. Both sides benefited, albeit to different degrees. The longer the ceasefire lasts the greater this accrual would be.

Regrettably, the ceasefire is yet to result in permanent peace. The prolongation of the 'no-war-no-peace' state has several drawbacks, the most important of which is the complacency that is settling in. The state the country was in before the CFA is slowly but surely being erased from memory, and as a result the prospect of war is becoming less repulsive in the minds of many. If this situation is allowed to continue a return to war is very likely. It is for this reason that I wish to review the pre-CFA state of the country.

The state the country was in prior to the CFA was a condition of prolonged war. The so called Eelam war III began on 19 April 1995. In the preceding six months, there was a lull in the fighting, accompanied by an amateurish attempt to negotiate peace. When the war resumed, the only reaction was an angry determination by the government to pursue the military option. Alternatives such as, a breather to consider the mistakes made during the negotiations that led to its collapse, to learn from such mistakes, or to simply attempt to somehow salvage the peace process, were not even considered. For the next seven years the military option was pursued with a single-minded resolve.

The cost of this seven-year military adventure was staggering, and regrettably, most Sri Lankans are still unaware of the full extent of the damage. Most people in the south have not even seen pictures of the physical destruction in the northeast, let alone seeing the actual injury or in fact knowing anything about the human suffering inflicted. A surprising detail considering the fact that for most southerners the battlefields were less than a hundred miles away.

#### **Social Factors – the human cost**

The war, euphemistically labeled 'war for peace', took place mainly in the northeast, and it was fought with ferocity and with scant regard for the welfare of the civilians there. Often, civilians were targeted directly. The aerial bombings and the shelling resulted in Tamil civilian casualties of such magnitude that even the ICRC<sup>i</sup> and the MSF<sup>ii</sup> felt obliged to break protocol and report

them. They also prompted public condemnations by two Secretary Generals of the UN<sup>iii</sup> and a Director General of the UNESCO<sup>iv</sup> for the actions of a UN member state. The bombing of the refugees huddled in a church<sup>v</sup> and children playing in a schoolyard<sup>vi</sup> were particularly gruesome. The operation to capture Jaffna resulted in an exodus of nearly half a million people out of the peninsula. The statement of the US Deputy Secretary of State, Mr. Richard Armitage, on what he saw after the CFA, sums up the effects of the daily air-raids and shelling in the northeast.

“We first flew over the area in a helicopter and saw below us a blasted landscape, pockmarked with thousands of bomb craters and shell craters. For me, that view reminded me strongly of my time in the service in Vietnam. I really don’t think I’ve seen anything quite like it since...”<sup>vii</sup>

The south also experienced a few attacks in the form bombings<sup>viii</sup>, attributed to the LTTE. It is important to recognize that the attacks in the south were sporadic acts carried out from the ground; the bombings in the northeast were from the air (and as long-range shelling) on an almost daily basis. SLA actions on the ground in the northeast also included other forms of large-scale violence against civilians. These explain the disparity in the number killed – more than 90% of civilian deaths in this war were Tamil.

The social disruption caused by the war was not limited to deaths and injuries. It tore families apart, created widows and orphans in the tens of thousands and rendered hundreds of thousands homeless. One third of the Tamil population in the island was displaced, some repeatedly during this period. The precipitous decline in social indicators in the northeast, such as health and education, from being one of the highest in south Asia to the current near lowest level is noteworthy. More than half a million Tamils have fled the island due to the war. Thousands of families are still internally displaced four years after the CFA.

There was no public outcry over these effects of the war, because of a prolonged media censorship (self and externally imposed), and a ban on travel to the northeast.

### **Economic Factors**

The economic cost has also been large. Let us briefly consider the country’s military expenditure. There are no external aggressors in Sri Lanka (not even a threat) and therefore the entire military spending was to fight its own rebellious citizens.

In 1977, when the Tamil uprising began to brew, the military budget of Sri Lanka was Rs. 750 million. Each year thereafter it grew exponentially, and in the 2001 budget the defense allocation stood at a staggering Rs. 63.39 billion. There is more. For several years, the actual expenditure exceeded the budget allocations by huge amounts. In 2000, for example, the defense allocation of Rs. 52.43 billion was exceeded by almost two thirds of the budgeted amount<sup>ix</sup>.

Concurrent to this massive spending, the war also affected the economy adversely at the productivity end. In large parts of the northeast the economic activity came to a complete halt, while the rest of the northeast merely limped along. The south fared better but couldn’t reach anywhere near full potential. The loss in foreign investment and tourism were also significant.

Despite this massive economic loss, the military adventure neither brought the war closer to an end nor peace any more likely. It was entirely fruitless. In the final tally, it was the LTTE that gained in terms of recruitment, equipment and territory. The LTTE was able to boost its

recruitment base, while the SLA got depleted by desertions. With the loss of SLA camps, the LTTE was able to amass large quantities of weapons. The nine major SLA operations<sup>x</sup> of this period not only failed, but also resulted in the loss of four major SLA bases<sup>xi</sup>.

### **Political Factors**

Although the decision to conduct the prolonged war was that of the leadership in power, its continuance was enabled by the absence of a countervailing anti-war movement. For this, the media, the opposition political parties and the civil society must bear equal blame.

The absence of a credible peace movement also enabled the government to conduct the war with a degree of self-assurance and bravado<sup>xii</sup>. The media and the civil society merely cheered on. The media also assisted the government with the deceptions<sup>xiii</sup> and the cover-ups<sup>xiv</sup> of the period. Repeated ceasefire offers by the LTTE were rejected<sup>xv</sup>, the offers being interpreted (wrongfully, as we now know) as a sign of weakness. Numerous offers by international groups to facilitate peace talks were similarly rejected<sup>xvi</sup>. It took more than five-years after the Eelam War III began, for President Kumaratunga agree to consider Norway as a facilitator. There was a further 16-month delay before the CFA was signed.

The prolonged human suffering inflicted by the war was kept out of sight of the south (and the rest of the world) and hence did not create public/international outrage or pressure. The heavy cost of the war did not hurt the economy enough, until of course, the strike on the SLAF/Airport facility in the south on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2001.

The claim that the LTTE acceded to the CFA because of the post 9/11 international climate lacks merit. Both, the LTTE's ceasefire offer of November 1999 and the unilateral declaration of ceasefire of December 2000, took place before 11-Sep-2001.

The fact is, the CFA became a reality due to a confluence of factors – multiple defeats suffered by the SLA, the attack on Katunayake SLAF/Airport and its consequences, and the election of a new Prime Minister.

### **Conclusion**

The state the country was in prior to the CFA was a condition of prolonged war. The war was an unproductive and a wasted effort. It was also responsible for the creation of an acrimonious political climate not conducive to peace making.

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<sup>i</sup> The International Red Cross Statement on the Navali church massacre. [11 July 1995]

<sup>ii</sup> Medicines Sans Frontiers reported on 23 September that of 117 injured Tamil civilians admitted to hospital during the offensive on Thursday and Friday more than half had died from their wounds.

<sup>iii</sup> “Reports of the massive displacement of the civilian population in northern Sri Lanka are a source of deep concern to the Secretary General [Boutros Ghali]” - AFP, 4 Nov 1995.

UN Secretary General Mr. Kofi Annan expressed his concern twice regarding the escalation of fighting in Sri Lanka. (Press Releases: SG/SM/7385 - 9 May 2000 and SG/SM/7416 - 24 May 2000).

<sup>iv</sup> “I condemn in the strongest terms this attack on a school where innocent children were killed. Whatever the political situation in a country nothing justifies attacks on educational institutions.” - Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO. [UNESCO, Paris; October 1995]

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<sup>v</sup> “The Sri Lankan air force bombed a refugee-packed Catholic church in the northern Jaffna peninsula (Navaly), killing 65 people including 13 babies...” Reuters; 11 July 1995  
Also see ICRC statement and report (11 July 1995).

<sup>vi</sup> Nagarkoil; ‘Sri Lanka Bombs Civilians’; The Associated Press (23 Sep 1995).

<sup>vii</sup> Speech by Richard Armitage, US Deputy Secretary of State, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies; 14 February 2003

<sup>viii</sup> Bombings of the oil depots at Kolonnawa and Orugodawatte (17 October 1995), the Central Bank (31 January 1996), the World Trade Center (15 October 1997), the Kelanitissa Power Station (14 November 1997), the Dalada Maligawa (25 January 1998) the Central Telephone Exchange (28 April 1998) and the Katunayake Airport/Airbase (24 July 2001).

<sup>ix</sup> “Last year, Sri Lanka's budget was derailed by the protracted war against Tamil separatists, with massive defence spending inflating original estimates by almost two-thirds.” (Times of India; 9 February 2001)

<sup>x</sup> (Riviresa I (17 October 1995) and II (19 April 1996), Sath Jaya (26 July 1996), Edibala (4 February 1997), Jayasikuri (12 May 1997), Rivi Bala (4 December 1998) Rana Gosha (five phases from 4 march 1999), Rivikirana (3 September 2000), Agni Khiela (23 April 2001).

<sup>xi</sup> SLA lost its large bases in Mullaitivu (17 July 1996), Kilinochchi and Paranthan (27 September 1998) and Elephant Pass (21 April 2000).

<sup>xii</sup> Foreign minister Kadirgamar, in response to concern expressed by UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros Ghali, said, “We do not intend to permit any outside agencies, including the UN itself to carry out independent operations.” [Sri Lanka Daily News; 7 November 1995]

When the UN High Commissioner for Refugees expressed concern over 22 civilians killed in an air raid, the foreign minister Kadirgamar responded: “They should be more concerned with malaria and mosquitoes, not domestic political issues”. [IPS; 28 September 1999]

In response to a statement by Peter Hain, a British minister that the international community would support the ‘principle of self-determination and control over most if not all the key policies affecting daily life’ Kadirgamar retorted “we will make it clear to the British government that we do not welcome such statements... As foreign minister of Sri Lanka I do not welcome statements made by people outside the country...” [Sri Lanka Daily News; 14 December 2000]

Chandrika Kumaratunga, on her re-election for a second term as President and four years into her disastrous ‘war-for-peace’ said, “let all those who act in the name of hatred and terror in the northeast and their supporters in the south be warned; far from being weakened by fear of attack, our resolve has been incalculably strengthened... the days of terror are numbered and that number is small...” [PIRU; 22 December 1999]

Minister of Defense, Anuradda Ratwatte: “I will meet him (Pirabhakaran) and shake hands with him, but only after we win and he is defeated” [Sunday Times; 14 December 1997]

In the midst of operation Jayasikuri getting bogged down in December 1997 the minister of defense said at a press conference, “the operation would be completed in time for the independence day (4 February 1998)” [Sunday Times; 14 December 1997].

<sup>xiii</sup> For example, when Mullaitivu camp was overrun with 1,400 SLA men killed the defense minister announced in parliament that “12 were killed in action and 1395 as missing in action.” [Sunday Times; 14 December 1997].

<sup>xiv</sup> For example [When operation Edibala managed to capture 70 km road] Lt. Gen. Rohan Daluwatte announced: “most of the battle with LTTE is over”. [Sunday Times; 2 March 1997].

<sup>xv</sup> Ceasefire offer of November 1999 and unilateral declaration of ceasefire of 26 May 2000 and 24 December 2000.

<sup>xvi</sup> Sri Lanka Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said: “Third parties coming here is absolutely out of the question. This is an internal matter... several governments, individuals and non governmental organisations had offered out of goodwill to help end the war but.... It [is] an interference in our internal affairs and we will not tolerate it at all.” [Reuters; 20 February 1997]

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'Sri Lanka has rejected an offer by a British legislator to mediate a settlement to the drawn out Tamil separatist war ... The British MP, Simon Hughes of the Liberal Democratic Party, has been told Colombo will not assist him if he goes ahead with his planned visit to Sri Lanka in the New Year... "The government has said that no ministers will meet the British MP and denied his request to go to the Wannu (to meet the LTTE)," the newspaper reported, adding: "It has made it clear that it will not accept mediation from any individual"... [AFP; Dec 27 1998].

Others who offered to mediate include the British Commonwealth Organization, President Mandela, President Carter, Harvard University, etc.