

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

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### **Session 6: Strategies of Parties in the Peace Process and Net Impact for the People**

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### **Strategies for Peace: Comparing Aceh with Sri Lanka**

#### **Introduction**

Although the primary focus of this conference is to debate and articulate a wide variety of issues central to the peace process in Sri Lanka, we should not, however, miss factoring in a comparative perspective. While a comparative perspective might oversimplify complex issues, it might nonetheless provide a minimalist understanding as to why peace succeeded in some places and not in others. In this respect, I believe that debates and discussions about the trajectories of peace in Sri Lanka might benefit from learning the experiences of how other conflicts were resolved in some places. One such example is the successful resolution of the conflict in Aceh, a province in the north of the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Despite significant differences between Aceh and Sri Lanka, the nature of ethno-nationalist conflicts in both the places shared similarities in terms of their longevity, objectives of the separatist forces and the manner in which these conflicts were impacted by the humanitarian disaster (tsunami).

#### **Aceh**

.On August 15, 2005, the Government of Indonesia (GoI) and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM or Gerakan Aceh Merdeka) signed the historic Helsinki Agreement that ended the three-decade old conflict in the province of Aceh. What were the factors that responsible for the successful resolution of the conflict mediated by the Conflict Management Initiative (CMI) of Finland. While the whole peace process is rather complex, there were some significant causative factors that were responsible for the peace deal.

First, the impact of the tsunami, although not addressed very comprehensively during the peace talks, provided a humanitarian backdrop for the peace talks to commence. Second, GAM did not give up political independence for Aceh, it was nonetheless open explore different forms of self-government within the territory of Indonesia. Third, the Indonesia government under its new president and his deputy gave a firm commitment to the international community to resolve the Acehese conflict within a short span of time.

Fourth, the mediator in the peace talks, CMI headed by the former President of Finland, performed a significant balancing role in sustaining the peace talks for six rounds. Fifth, the willingness of the European Union (EU) to form the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) convinced both the parties the seriousness of the international community in backing the peace process.

In a more specific sense, the presence of EU in Aceh was a great morale booster to GAM. With EU around, GAM was convinced that spoilers of the peace process would have no chance at all.

GAM's willingness to go for a less solution in the form of self-government rather than outright independence was determined by ground reality and changed international circumstances. First, the inability of GAM's guerilla armies to mount serious offensive against the well-armed Indonesian armed forces factored into the strategic calculation of the GAM leadership. There was a realization that a relentless or reckless pursuit of armed struggle might do more harm than good to GAM. Second, for GAM moving away from a strategy of armed confrontation to diplomacy meant among other things that it had to get the support of the international community. Third, since it was realized by the GAM leadership that its objective of independence had no takers in the international community, it decided that it would experiment with other political options that would endear it to the international community. Fourth, at the beginning of the talks in Helsinki it was realized by the GAM leadership obtaining substantial autonomy in the form of self-government would mean that it would get the respect and support of the international community.

Although the Helsinki Peace Agreement provided the Acehese with the formula of self-government, independence is not something easily forgotten or abandoned. In the aftermath of the peace talks, GAM had a difficult time in explaining to many of its local level leaders as to why it had to move away from its original objective. While the peace process in Aceh so far has been quite smooth, problems remains. If the provisions of the Helsinki Peace Agreement relating to the formation of political parties and the election of an Acehese legislature, problems would emerge. Beyond this, many Acehese and supporters of GAM are not really convinced given past experience that the GoI would be able to implement the provision of the agreement properly. There is fear that the Indonesian armed forces (Tentera Nasional Indonesia, TNI) might throw spanners in the peace process as they have done earlier. For those Acehese who are still committed to political independence, there is total distrust of GoI. For them, the Helsinki Peace Agreement has no potential to provide lasting peace for Acehese; it is merely an agreement that will postpone conflict for a while. Thus, in this context, fiercely nationalists Acehese believe that absence of conflict should be utilized to regroup and strengthen GAM's armed forces to face the TNI in the near future.

Once GAM decided to experiment with other political options rather than political independence, the GoI was forced to accommodate to this new kind of thinking. There are number of reasons as to why the GoI moved to accommodate and finally reach a peace deal with GAM. First, even before the commencement of the peace talks in Helsinki and after the tsunami disaster, Indonesia came under increasing pressure from the international community not only to resolve the Acehese conflict, but also conflicts in Maluku and Papua. Second, as long as GAM pursued independence, the GoI had all the excuses and the international support not to engage in talks with GAM. But such a scenario changed after tsunami. When GAM showed willingness to pursue other political options, GoI had to embark a similar change. Third, the peace scenario appeared much optimistic when Susilo Bambang Yudoyono became the new president. He placed the resolution of the Acehese conflict as his government's top priority.

## **Sri Lanka**

After more than two decades of armed conflict contributing to the loss of more than 60,000 lives, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed the historic Ceasefire Agreement (CA) in February 2002 brokered by the Norwegians. The CA had a positive effect in the sense that it brought an end to open armed conflict between the two sides and paved the way for the adoption of mechanisms and structure for the permanent settlement of the conflict. The peace talks commenced after the CA collapsed after six-round of talks.

The LTTE withdrew from the talks on the grounds that its engagement did not result in anything concrete to address the everyday humanitarian problems of Tamils in the northeast of the country. It was in this context that the LTTE's requested the government of Ranil Wickremesinghe to endorse the idea of interim administration to be managed and controlled by the former. Having rejected the offer made by the GoSL, the LTTE came out with its Interim Self-Government Agreement (ISGA) in 2003. Alas, with the dismissal of the Wickremesinghe's government by President Chandrika Kumaratunga in early 2004, the ISGA proposal was permanently shelved from discussed between the two warring parties.

International pressure on Kumaratunga to begin negotiations with the LTTE was somewhat eased as result of the devastation wrought by the tsunami in late December 2005. Since the tsunami affected all ethnic groups in the country, it was hoped that the colossal disaster would provide an opportunity and goodwill for both the GoSL and the LTTE to engage in talks not only to address the immediate humanitarian problems faced by the people but also to address the long term goals of peace in the country. It was in this context that the international community gave its blessing to the creation of a Post-tsunami Operation Management Systems (P-TOMS) so that both the parties could participate and make decisions as how to allocate funds to affected areas pledged by international donors. However, despite the government's willingness to participate in this post-tsunami structure, there was much opposition from radical forces in the south of the country. In the end, the entire structure was made ineffective with a decision made by the country's Supreme Court to strike down some of clauses as unconstitutional. The P-TOMS structure could have provided the warring parties a golden opportunity to work together to address some of the humanitarian needs of the country, but then it was blocked by of the lack of southern consensus on conflict resolution.

The rejection of the ISGA and the nullification of the P-TOMS Agreement made it difficult if not impossible for the LTTE and the GoSL to seek a platform to address the concerns of the people affected by war and the future direction of the peace process. Problems between the LTTE and the GoSL were further compounded when Colonel Karuna, LTTE's eastern commander, broke away from the mainstream organization.

Such a split provided an opportune moment for some of the security agencies of the state to strengthen the already existing paramilitary forces particularly in the east. With Karuna's faction functioning within the fold of the armed forces, a stage was set for systematic attacks against the LTTE's leaders and members. The strengthening of the paramilitary forces and their constant attacks against the LTTE targets introduced a new dangerous dimension into the existing conflict. While the use of paramilitaries contravened the provision on disarmament in the CA, the GoSL did nothing serious to address these serious problems. Thus, only when pro-LTTE's peoples' force staged attacks on army and navy convoys (a kind of LTTE's answer to paramilitaries) that the prospect for an open outbreak of conflict seemed rather imminent.

Meanwhile election of Mahinda Rajapakse as the president of the country was not very conducive for peace talks. Upon winning the presidential elections, he sought to accommodate with the right political parties by rejecting federalism as a solution for ethnic conflict and questioned the role of Norway as mediator.

However, to his dismay, he soon found that his rejection of federalism and questioning of the role of Norway had not takers in the international community. India was unimpressed. Soon the escalating violence in the country with the possibility of an open hostility forced him to invite Norway to broker talks once again. In February 2006 the Norwegians played a crucial role to save the CA by arranging for talks between the GoSL and LTTE in Geneva. In the meeting it was agreed that the CA will be upheld and that both the parties will ensure the effective implementation of the CA.

Sri Lanka might have preceded Aceh in terms of having the Ceasefire Agreement, but no serious developments to address the prospect of long-term peace have emanated from the agreement. Conversely, what has happened in last few years after the ceasefire is the development and sustenance of low intensity conflict not only reducing the much need trust and faith for the search for peace but also attempts that seek to undermine the CA itself. Developing and sustaining strategies for peace in Sri Lanka means among other things examining and understanding the obstacles that stand in the way of peace.

First, the intense competition between rival political parties and organizations for electoral support in the south has historically prevented the development of a southern consensus on peace and what should be done. Second, the failure on the part of the Sri Lankan state to strike a peace deal with the LTTE under changing political, economic and social circumstances especially after the conclusion of the CA.

The Sri Lankan state failed to engage the LTTE effectively when the latter moved away from separate state to substantial autonomy, refused to consider and discuss the ISGA and recently the P-TOMS agreement. Third, rather than engaging in constructive ways, the Sri Lankan state took subtle and overt measures to undermine the LTTE by a policy of international entrapment, providing support and guidance for the anti-LTTE paramilitary forces and not the least by engaging in an international propaganda to belittle the LTTE and to get it banned in other countries. Fourth, given the deteriorating security situation both inside and outside the country, the LTTE took on the defensive posture that did not endear it to the international community.

How could one differentiate the peace process in Aceh and Sri Lanka? First, the peace process in Aceh backed by the international community had the commitment and sincerity of both the parties. But however, in Sri Lanka, trust was not only completely lacking, there were too many spoilers of the peace process. Second, the GoI and GAM gave full commitment not only to the CMI but also to the European Union, however, such an undertaking was absent in Sri Lanka.

In fact, some southern political parties especially the extreme ones sought to not only to undermine the Ceasefire Agreement but also questioned the role of Norway as the mediator. Third, the impact of the tsunami and the nature of the humanitarian disaster was an eye opener to both the warring parties in Aceh and provided the springboard for the revival of the peace process. However, in Sri Lanka, the impact of the tsunami only succeeded distorting the ground realities. Fourth, the peace process would not have taken shape had not the GoI given its undertaking to disarm and transfer the various units of paramilitaries. The reverse took place in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan armed forces particularly some of its hawkish sections found ways and means to revive and strengthen the Tamil paramilitaries to undermine the LTTE.

## **Conclusion**

The Helsinki Agreement has revitalized the peace process in Aceh. Changed international circumstances, the pressure exerted by the international community, change of new leadership in Indonesia, commitment on the part of GAM's leadership and ability to consider different political options provided way out for the parties to engage in the peace process. Peace is an on-going process in Aceh, the final integration of the Acehese society into the larger Indonesia society will take time. Meanwhile there are news that implementation of the Helsinki Agreement is proceeding well. The ultimate test for the Acehese whether they will accept the present formula of self-government or revert back to their original objective of independence will depend on the commitment of both sides, the role of the international

community and most importantly whether ordinary Acehnese stand to benefit from the peace process.

While the going seems to be good for Aceh, politics in Sri Lanka is still in a quagmire. Despite the CA, there is no early prospect for an effective political settlement of the conflict. On the contrary, day to day developments suggest that there are numerous forces at work to undermine the tenuous peace that prevails. Viable strategies for peace in Sri Lanka must address a range of complex issues. However, for the moment there is glaring lack of trust and confidence among the parties to the conflict. The international community could be hardly described as neutral or fair in the on-going conflict. Some very basic and fundamental issues have to be put forward and debated.