

Sri Lanka: Is the war over?

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Background

The end of the conventional war in the north and the east of Sri Lanka witnessed the almost total annihilation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) including its leadership. However, the Government forces are still carrying out clearing up operations throughout the island. Tens of thousands have been slaughtered; many thousands wounded; hundreds of thousands expelled from their habitats and many hundreds of thousands interned into camps. The deaths of the militants have been celebrated by the overwhelming majority of the Sinhalese and some of the Tamils and Muslims. The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) is allegedly engaged in destroying any incriminating evidence of its culpability in war crimes. The fate of three doctors, who were earlier praised by the UN for their heroic services to the wounded during the war, serves as an example.

History

The LTTE commenced as a guerilla force and over time developed its own conventional fighting capability by having a ground force, a navy and a rudimentary air force. It had a strong local and diasporic base and a vast fund raising network. The LTTE targeted attacks on civilian, political, security individuals, religious symbols and civilian groups, particularly in the south. Its initial aim was to fight against the Sinhala discrimination and the government security forces. In the process it began to kill members of other Tamil groups and repress its own Tamil community. The LTTE was ruthless in removing diversity of opinion within the Tamil community by armed force, not by political means. Thus many leaders of the Tamil bourgeois parties¹ and left parties and groups² were eliminated. The ruthless repression of any political opposition to it alienated many working people in the areas under the LTTE control.

I believe that the LTTE's defeat was brought about by its military strategy and tactics based on terror and over reliance on conventional force, its violent attempt to become the sole representative of the Tamil people; misreading of the international balance of forces and a lack of progressive economic or political policies. It simply believed that imposition of a separate Tamil state was the only

¹ Such as Neelan Thiruchelvam and A Amirthalingam.

² Such as PLOTE, EPRLF and TELO.

response to the discriminatory policies of the successive governments against Tamils. It substituted ethnic struggle for class struggle. As a nationalist movement it could have survived by either compromising with the capitalist class or resorting to mass struggle, but it did not do either. The political support of the Sinhala workers and the other oppressed people for the nationalist struggle of the Tamil people gradually diminished. The methods of the LTTE enormously helped the Sinhala ruling elites to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism to protect the privileges and interests of the ruling elites.

War Preparations and the LTTE

When the security forces of the GoSL went to war in 2006, they were well-trained and enjoyed superiority in firepower and mobility. They built up their force levels on land, in the air and at sea en masse to ensure success against the LTTE. Evidently, the LTTE failed to read this turnaround taking place in the capabilities of the Security Forces and adapt its military line of action accordingly. Instead, it stuck to a conventional warfare mode that was doomed to fail although it inflicted many casualties on the advancing government troops.

When the LTTE floundered in the Eastern Province in 2006, offering only limited stiff resistance, the regime made up its mind to go all the way against the LTTE.

Is the war over?

Elimination of the top leadership of the LTTE with many of their cadres assassinated or dead may not represent the total end of the LTTE. The post-Pirapaharan era of the LTTE may represent a departure from the strategy and tactics of terror previously adopted by the LTTE.

The GoSL and the LTTE have declared that the war is over. Does this mean that the GoSL will devolve political power to the North and the East? Those who lean towards the left and Tamil groups within the GoSL believe it will devolve power at least to the extent granted by the 13th amendment to the Constitution³. Those who lean towards the right within the GoSL believe it will not devolve power at all. Those who are outside the government are similarly divided. Given the sorry history of devolution in the country it is hard to believe that the optimists will succeed. The extreme nationalist forces within the GoSL have already commenced their campaign against any power devolution.

3 The Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of July 1987 led to the 13th amendment to the constitution under which the GoSL agreed to devolve some authority to the provinces. Provincial councils are directly elected for five year terms. The leader of the council majority serves as the province's Chief Minister with a board of ministers; a provincial governor is appointed by the president.

The GoSL has stated that the state of emergency and Prevention of Terrorism Act would remain in force for some time to come. The eastern province has been firmly under army control since mid-2007. There are army checkpoints in the town centre, armed thugs prowl the back streets and reports of abductions and disappearances continue. To quote the Defence Secretary, "The war is like a cancer. Even after curing a cancer, there is a period for radiation treatment. It is the same with the war on terrorism." Meanwhile the President in his victory speech has adopted a new doctrine following on the path of Bush doctrine. While inviting investments in the north and the east, while talking of a home grown solution to the political situation, there are no minorities in the island, he said. He branded the population into two categories: those who love the country and those who don't.

Media Freedom

The GoSL's vendetta against anyone critical of the war, particularly in the media continues. Targeting journalists for "treason" indicates a broad offensive against human rights bodies and non-government organisations, which have been branded as "terrorist sympathisers". The methods used are not limited to arrest and prosecution as evident from the assassination of Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of the Sunday Leader, who was posthumously awarded UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize 2009. As in numerous other cases, the police have made no arrests yet. Most of these threats seem to target international organisations that exposed to a limited extent the exterminatory tactics used by the GoSL. Only three days back, the Centre for Policy Alternatives⁴ received a 1989 type of threatening letter demanding compliance with the GoSL programs.

Disappearances seem to continue. On June the first, Poddala Jayantha, General Secretary of Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association was abducted by a gang who came in a white van, severely assaulted and later released.

Access to camps and war ravaged areas

Despite many requests by the international community, the GoSL has continued to refuse full access to the areas destroyed by the war and to the hundreds of thousands of displaced Tamil civilians interned in the so-called welfare villages encircled by barbed wire and security forces.

The Economic repercussion

4 CPA is an independent, non-partisan organization which receives funds from international and bilateral funding agencies and foundations.

Sri Lanka spent and will continue to spend a significant part of its gross domestic product on the war effort, thus exacerbating its dependence on the world capitalist system. The very high military expenditure has significantly contributed to a weakening economy, rising cost of living, inflation, unemployment and an impending economic collapse. The GoSL hopes to survive by relying on massive foreign loans. It is using the "war victories" as a mechanism to divert attention from the crises the country is faced with. The next pretext will be in the form of "an emergency" caused by the rapid deepening of the country's economic crisis and an eruption of working people against the imposition of new burdens. The broader fear in Colombo ruling elite is that the military defeat of the LTTE will be followed by a wave of political unrest and social struggles. The GoSL has mortgaged the Sri Lankan state to the hilt to finance massive military spending and imposed the full burden of the war on the working class. Now, confronting the impact of an unprecedented global economic crisis for which it has no answers, the regime has no alternative but to use police state measures to stamp out opposition, particularly by working people.

Key political decisions are made by a military cum political unit rather than in parliament or cabinet. Unelected bureaucrats can make outrageous threats against diplomats and journalists. GoSL operates with complete contempt for the law, the constitution and the courts. Elements of the Sinhala majority in the south now want the President to be treated as the King of Sri Lanka. The government will boost its armed force, already one of the largest per capita in the world, from 200,000 to 300,000 within a population of around 20 million. The navy and air force each have around 30,000 personnel and the home guard another 35,000. All of the above will be used against workers, peasants and youth seeking to defend their rights and conditions.

The role of China, India, Pakistan and the US

The Global political and economic balance of forces has played a significant role in what is happening in Sri Lanka. All the major powers, with the United States in the lead, have backed the GoSL while turning a blind eye to its abuse of democratic rights. Britain and other EU countries also assisted the GoSL by selling military equipment in the last three years of the war, it was reported. If the US is now raising concerns, it is only because instability in Sri Lanka threatens broader American economic and strategic interests in South Asia, in particular the growing influence of China. This is of major concern to the Indian Government also.

The US and India are intent on countering China's strategy. Thus under the guise of humanitarian concerns, India has sent a military medical team to Sri Lanka. Earlier the US proposed to send a Marine Expeditionary Brigade to northern Sri Lanka to evacuate refugees - an offer that appears to have been turned down. None of these moves is motivated by concern for working people in Sri Lanka who have borne the brunt of 25 years of war. Rather the island is being drawn into the international rivalry that is intensifying as the global economic crisis deepens and foreshadows far more catastrophic conflicts.

Military defeat and Political defeat of the LTTE

Yet, the difference between defeating the LTTE militarily and destroying the LTTE politically does not seem to have been completely understood by many.

The GoSL would require enormous amounts of human, material and financial resources to be spent on maintaining its forces in the north and the east. The psychological effects caused by the war on society as a whole, including the Tamils and armed forces of all sides to the conflict will continue to be challenging and daunting, which will make the dream of political unity an ever receding mirage.

The Tamil psyche is hurt as never before. Their feeling of subjugation has multiplied with the end of the conventional war. Most Tamils perceive this war as an invasion to grab 'their land'. Their sense of anger and resentment will remain for a long time. The war and its aftermath have accelerated the tensions and distance between the majority of the Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil diaspora. This has also brought the Sri Lankan national question to the forefront of international discourse, second only to the questions of Palestine and Darfur. It has become embedded in the maelstrom of conflicts that are currently inflaming large parts of Asia. The desperate and deadly situation faced by the many thousands of Tamil civilians interned in the camps will become a serious international issue.

These developments do not bode well for the GoSL or the Sinhalese, though Sinhala nationalist groups and the GoSL will try to put a positive spin on the situation. Almost all Sinhala nationalist groups seem to see this phenomenon as of a transient nature, which they believe would go away when the 'massive' infrastructure development programs for the north and east are jump started.

My simple question is: How could the capitalist ruling elites of the island, who have never been able to engender and sustain such development in the South of

the island, be expected to undertake such a development in the North and East of the island?

Link to Class Struggle

From its very origins, the war has been bound up with the class struggle. At every point of crisis, the weak Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has whipped up anti-Tamil chauvinism as the means of dividing the working class and shoring up its hold on power. The war was launched in 1983 by a United National Party government amid a horrific wave of anti-Tamil pogroms. These were being carried out in response to a growing rebellion by the working class against the impact of the government's free market agenda. Over the past three years, the GoSL has repeatedly accused striking workers and protesting students of being accomplices of the "Tiger terrorists". Having been strengthened by the defeat of the LTTE, the most reactionary sections of the ruling elite will soon be calling for the crushing of the new enemy, the working people.

The LTTE's defeat is primarily a political, not a military question. Its perspective of a separate capitalist state of Eelam has proven to be a deadly trap for the working people. Its sectarian outlook and attacks on Sinhalese civilians has only deepened the communal divide and played into the hands of the Sinhala extremists in Colombo. The LTTE's plans for a separate state represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not the Tamil masses, and always depended in the final analysis on the support of one or other of the imperialist powers.

The atrocities committed in Sri Lanka will serve as a warning to working people anywhere in the globe. As capitalism plunges into its worst economic crisis since the 1930s, the ruling elites around the world are reaching into the tool bag of political reaction to secure their rule. Anti-Tamil chauvinism in Sri Lanka finds its parallels in anti-immigrant xenophobia, various nationalisms and numerous forms of chauvinism based on religious, ethnic and linguistic divisions. These can also become the starting point for local and international wars. The only alternative to such barbarism will be to explore the path towards socialism.

Conclusion

In Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, cultural diversity and tensions were manipulated to divide and weaken the working people to preserve the interests and privileges of the ruling elite. In the process, the fundamental democratic and social aspirations of the people have been crushed. The military defeat of the LTTE has not resolved the fundamental issues that underpinned the conflict. It has

shown that the territorial unity of the capitalist state can be maintained only on the basis of ruthless repression of the people using military force. Through such repression it has reinforced its defence of Sinhala nationalism. The socio-economic problems of discrimination based on language and nationality and poverty linger on.

The LTTE's military defeat clearly confirmed that the struggle against imperialism and the fight to secure democratic rights can only be advanced on the basis of a program relying on the support of the working people of the world. The answer to discrimination and racial oppression lies not through a separate state, but through the broad unification of the oppressed people in a common struggle against it.

As I have indicated many times before, our stand in defending the democratic rights of the Tamil people against all forms of chauvinism and racism, was neither an expression of political support for the LTTE nor for separation, nor to bring about a Tamil capitalist regime in the north and the east. Rather it is an expression of our acceptance of the right of the Tamil people for self-determination and the necessity for building unity of the Tamil and Sinhala working people to defend their interests against exploitation and repression by the ruling elite which divides diverse communities along racial, religious and caste lines.

I believe that the way forward lies in the paradigm change Sri Lanka needs to go through, which is alien to its current political traditions of exploitation through repression and subjugation. Firstly the equitable distribution of the fruits of economic development and participatory democracy are essential for the society to progress, especially, when the majority of people are surviving from one meal to the other. Internationally, there is a widespread demand for a refashioning of the world economic order, an end to the unconscionable arrogance of the wheelers and dealers and a call for governments to be more accountable for the welfare of its people. Sri Lanka needs to understand this reality and act accordingly. Secondly, while recognizing the specific problems facing the Tamil community, the injustices faced by the Sinhalese, and Muslims and challenges they all face due to capitalist globalisation also need to be recognised and addressed.

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