

The Renewal of Hostilities :

Keeping Issues in perspective

A Statement with an appeal

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As those who have continuously followed and been concerned about the violations of human rights by all forces and particularly the State and the LTTE, we feel it is necessary to highlight certain features of the present reality.

The decision of the LTTE leadership to break off talks with the Government, and the manner of its resuming hostilities, are neither of them in the interests of the people of this country, and most of all, of the Tamils themselves. The main reason cited by the LTTE for its decision, is the lack of response from the Government to some of its demands. Of these, some are of a military nature and are utterly unreasonable in the light of past experience.

A clear distinction needs to be drawn between the problem of the Tamils and the LTTE. The first needs to be addressed politically. The latter's emotional and irrational nature needs to be understood to grasp its dynamism. Its haunted past of murder and paranoia, invariably combined with its destructive course, has led to a situation where its isolated actions cannot be explained rationally. This has been the case historically, and for the Tamil community it has been both suicidal and ruinous.

Although the LTTE expressed a highly dramatised concern regarding deprivations affecting the day to day life of the Tamil people, they have shown total contempt for the latter's well-being and have used them as tools for their destructive brand of politics. The decision to embark on war when an overwhelmingly large section of the people yearns for peace, shows again the ingrained nature of the LTTE.

Its dehumanising politics that covers its crimes by rhetorically proclaiming the sanctity of the organisation, could give meaning only in death to the thousands of youth fatalistically moulded into its leadership cult. **It thus trapped itself into being accountable only to those cadres who had sacrificed their lives, leaving behind comrades who feel, even more strongly, that there is no meaning for them except to fight and die for Eelam. Consequently, it lost the ability to think of the needs of the living, whether cadre or people, except as sacrificial victims awaiting their turn.** Hence it will singlemindedly use every means, without inhibition, in an attempt to achieve that aim. But it has very little prospect of stabilising itself whether in a local, regional or a global context. Therefore the LTTE has been most afraid for itself whenever there was a political drift holding out the restoration of accountability to the Tamil people, and on every such occasion it has stolen the initiative by a resort to precipitate violence.

But there is a disingenuous attempt on the part of a significant lobby to present the LTTE's actions as not unreasonable and as the collective will of the Tamil people. It is as cruel and unrepresentative, as it is deceitful. We do know the anxiety of Tamil parents who await the return of their children from school fearing that they may be accosted and importuned to join the LTTE, and removed faraway without a single trace. We also do know the helplessness of parents, who if they happen to trace a child removed by the LTTE, are told not to become traitors to the cause and are sent away.

The LTTE has long since paralysed Tamil society well beyond the point where any form of collective protest is feasible. The dominant sections of religious, academic and other organisations unashamedly collaborate and legitimise this to the point of total moral suicide.

In this situation the civilians now have to face the not unlikely prospect of a resumption of large scale bombing and shelling, random arrests, missing people and even massacres. Any move to question the LTTE's claim to represent the people's interests is often termed an insidious move to divide the LTTE from the people. Sadly, positions approaching this have not only been taken by a few activists and media-men in the South, but have also been used by some peace activists to gain mileage within the Peace Movement. That such things could happen is a reflection of the confusion that prevails.

Several gains have been made during the present peace process. But all these gains are very fragile. If the state's only means to handle the LTTE's threat is to use the existing state structures, which have changed little, in much the same brutal fashion, it will only enhance the deep-seated alienation of the Tamils. In several detailed reports, we have brought out the perennial nature of the Sri Lankan security forces' atrocities against civilians and their inability to distinguish between the interests of Tamil civilians and the LTTE's aspirations. Little attention has been shown towards tackling the debilitating institutional inertia, largely owing to the disastrous and divisive politics of this country over the last four decades. Even to deal with legitimate security concerns in Colombo, there are no proper mechanisms or civilian structures involving Tamils. Frequent outbursts by Police Officers that Tamils cannot be trusted and the resulting humiliating treatment meted out to them, reveals the psychological division between the communities.

Although there is goodwill and widespread eagerness among the people to understand the ethnic issue, the state machinery is by and large still not geared towards enhancing the understanding that is key to the peace process. Although it is a long process needing time and efforts at various levels to make a qualitative change, the dominant Tamil politics has no desire to work towards that end. In this paradoxical situation, it is necessary to have both short and long term strategies to handle Tamil grievances centered around a political package. There is an urgent need for ad hoc structures with civilian participation to safeguard immediate civilian interests in combat zones.

We appeal to the government to take the political initiative, not as a means to handling the LTTE, but rather as a principled approach to address the Ethnic Crisis:

* A political package should be placed before the country soon. The rationale for it should not be that of satisfying or finding a mean between long held fixed positions of leaderships of the different communities. Such would be managing the problem, and it has

repeatedly failed. The rationale should rather be that it is right for the country and would solve the problem. That is the hallmark of true leadership.

* Take necessary steps to decommunalise all government institutions. Conscious decisions need to be taken to demonstrate clearly that the future political thrust will be one of nation building through bringing all communities together on the basis of equality by safeguarding their rights and interests of each community.

* Institute civilian machinery to guarantee basic human rights to all civilians in combat areas. Justice should be seen to be done. Particular sensitivity should be shown to the current reality that the armed forces are predominantly Sinhalese.

We appeal to the Tamil people to take cognisance of the dangerous course of our destructive politics and ask the pertinent moral questions regarding the conduct of the so called liberators: **-viz. The internal terror which, while deriving a legitimacy from state terror, totally paralysed our community, leaving it unable to creatively handle any reality; Child sacrifice of victims from among the poor and cornered people; the crucial legitimisation and support given to this phenomenon by a section of the Tamils now in the West, who further have no stake in the fate of the North-East and its people, apart from using their plight to stabilise themselves abroad or to satisfy their ego. It is time for us to abandon living in lies.**

We ask the International Community to press the Government to uphold the demands above and also urge the LTTE to come for talks on the clear understanding that these talks would be first and foremost on the political solution. The LTTE should further be pressed to allow democratic space for the Tamil people to articulate their interests without fear of persecution.

Finally, we appeal to the Sinhalese community to have the strength and character to withstand the crisis, as well as try to understand the Tamil people's predicament. They should moreover not fall for the chauvinistic rhetoric of those who seek short term political gain from this shared crisis of the entire country. The spate of tragedies over the last dozen years and the assassinations should have taught us that this is not a phenomenon to play games with. It can be confronted only through a dedication to clear moral principles.