

Will talks in Geneva dispel war clouds?

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Articles appearing in the popular media during the past couple of months have made reference to the LTTE being preoccupied in seeking for itself international legitimacy as a group that had transcended the narrow confines of being a military outfit and become an organisation having the requisite sophistication and wherewithal to run a state (or at least a semi-state).

These articles cite the importance placed by the Tigers on meeting multilateral and foreign government delegations, the work done by international NGOs in partnership with the Tiger administration in the LTTE-controlled areas, the activity of the Tamil diaspora in lobbying the international community etc., as evidence of this.

Based on this premise they have also concluded that the most effective restraint on the LTTE has been the international safety net that threatens to impose severe penalties on the Tigers if they violate the ceasefire and resume outright hostilities.

The school that propagates this opinion believes that the LTTE's agreement to go to Geneva rather than stick rigidly by its first choice, Oslo, vindicates this point of view. It has to be said however that this view is not correct. It might be correct to say that finding legitimacy in the eyes of the international community is indeed a political goal, perhaps an important political goal, but certainly not the most important one.

The Tigers realised that relying entirely on international support for their cause would be suicidal, ever since India began undermining the Tamil struggle by cooperating with the Sri Lankan state, which culminated with the signing of the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987. The LTTE might use the realities of international politics to push its own interests but does not depend entirely either on the international community, or on forces in the South Asian region, to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for it. Hence the LTTE is sceptical about placing the quest for international legitimacy above that of acquiring political and military capability to withstand its primary enemy – the Sri Lankan state.

The most recent example of this was the travel ban imposed on the Tigers by the EU with the threat there would be total proscription if the rebels continued to use violence. This came soon after the killing of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar (in which the LTTE denies complicity). Despite the EU threat however, there were a number of violent incidents where scores of service personnel died, which were attributed to the Tigers (though they did not acknowledge them either). These killings stopped only after the government agreed to rein in the pro-state forces that were attacking the LTTE, thereby achieving the military objective the Tigers wanted.

As obstacles are cleared before talks in Geneva, it is important that the government and southern opinion-makers are not carried away by the idea that the Tigers' quest for international legitimacy will relegate to second place all other issues and factors that are

of vital concern to the LTTE and the Tamil people. It will be naïve to think so.

The LTTE is expected to press two interrelated demands at the Geneva meeting: 1) that the Karuna faction be disarmed and 2) the military cadre now actively deployed in the northeast be at least partially withdrawn so that it facilitates the return to normalcy – an important section of the CFA. The question however is whether the government can accomplish these.

In the case of Karuna, though disarming him is unthinkable to the Sri Lankan state since his defection is, arguably, the biggest military prize it has won in the past 20-year war, there could at least be the appearance of placing restraints on him by deactivating his cadre.

There is fear however that the government does not have sufficient control, exercised through the military, to contain Karuna. As this article is being written, five NGO personnel working for the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) are reported abducted, near Welikanda. Though nobody is certain who the perpetrators are, the Karuna faction is active in the area.

Karuna's statement meanwhile, issued on 30 January is designed to make more than one 'statement.' Not only does it define him as a leader independent of the Sri Lankan government and military and who has the autonomy to make war and peace as he wishes, but his assertion to act in self-defence if attacked implies he will defy attempts to being disarmed even if the Tigers insist he should be.

The second factor is however much more complicated. This is the stipulation under the CFA that the security forces must withdraw from various physical spaces in accordance to different timeframes for the restoration of normalcy.

There are different categories of places that have to be vacated for this to be accomplished. The most important perhaps are the 100s of private buildings occupied by the military in various parts of the northeast. Though the security forces pay rent for some of them, a large number are held gratis. Whatever it might be, the owners of such dwellings would much prefer to have them back. Public institutions too such as the Webber Stadium in Batticaloa, Hartley College, Jaffna etc. continue to be occupied by the military inconveniencing the people. There are also places of worship, sacrosanct to believers, where the security forces are present.

Finally, there is the question of the high security zone. Its presence in various parts of the northeast, but most famously in Vadamaradtchi, has transformed not only the physical landscape, but displaced people by the 1000s. What the Tigers will demand on resettlement in the HSZs is unclear at present, but if human security is to be ensured in the northeast such zones cannot be allowed to go on as they are now.

It has to be noted that the LTTE and the Tamils are not demanding these measures be taken because the CFA says so. Everybody knows the horrendous privations the Tamil

public had to undergo in the hands of the security forces in the past few months. Indeed it could be said hostilities follow a familiar pattern: the Tigers attack the military and the military retaliates by targeting the civilians. Therefore, it is important that the security forces not only vacate the various places they are now occupying, but are withdrawn from where they come into contact with the civilian population.

The question is whether the political forces now in government will allow even a degree of restraint to be imposed on the military. The JVP and JHU would oppose this tooth and nail and construe such restraints as a symbol of compromising Sri Lanka's sovereignty. It will be remembered that withdrawing the armed forces to barracks was a sticking point even when the LTTE was holding talks with the UNP government of President R. Premadasa in 1989-1990.

When the withdrawal of the army from the Jaffna HSZ was being actively considered in the latter part of 2002, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, the present army commander and the then Jaffna security forces commander, drove a hard bargain. He was reported by TamilNet saying, "We are only worried about the security of the soldiers in the Jaffna peninsula. We are not in a position to think about the resettlement of IDPs in the HSZ at this juncture."

Fonseka in a report submitted to the Tigers through the SLMM said the army would consider a phased vacation of the HSZ only if LTTE cadres in the area were disarmed and the rebels agreed to decommission their long range weapons. An Indian expert Major General Satish Nambiar, hired by the Sri Lanka government, also wanted the LTTE's long-range weapons decommissioned before the military began withdrawing from the HSZ

Interestingly, the reciprocal concessions desired by Fonseka and Nambiar from the two sides have parallels with what the Sinn Fein and the British government tried to negotiate and failed. In this instance the IRA, expected to decommission weapons under the Good Friday Accords said they would do so only if the British Government agreed to demilitarisation – removing troops and bases from Northern Ireland. The British government rejected the proposal. However, decommissioning of weapons in the conflict between the IRA and the British government was no more than symbolic – it is much more fundamental in the conflict in Sri Lanka.

It is fairly obvious the LTTE does not place much confidence in the talks on the CFA rendering any positive fallout to stabilise the ceasefire. The politico-military gains the Tigers achieved such as forcing the closure of the University of Jaffna have not been reversed, nor have the people who were encouraged to immigrate to the Wannai to escape military brutality in Jaffna asked to retrace their steps back to the peninsula.

What has to be also borne in mind is that the defence and military hierarchy in Colombo are said to have informed the president they need a couple of months of preparation to be in a position to take on the LTTE militarily, either to begin an offensive or to defend

themselves if attacked. In which case the LTTE would also be cognizant of the fact the proposed talks are a time buying exercise.

If it is so one cannot expect the LTTE to put by military considerations for political ones and be a sitting duck to any military maneuvers planned by the government. The only guarantee against such a move by the government is the international community. And the LTTE is well aware the 'guarantees' that were given by the Norwegian facilitators in the past who had already engaged in the peace process in Sri Lanka (they did so in November 2000 when the Tigers declared a unilateral ceasefire) but turned a blind eye when the government launched Operation Agni Kheela in 2001.

All these point to very bleak prospects ahead unless the government is sincere. To believe that international legitimacy is all the Tigers are after and would sacrifice everything for that is a complete misunderstanding of the LTTE's mindset and intentions. Such logic could only be pursued to one's detriment.