

## Briefing No. 4

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### Peace activism, suicidal politics and civil society

*"Contemporary conflicts are fundamentally different from those that dominated the first 75 years of this century (Goodhand and Hulme, 1998a). These 'post -nation state wars' are largely internal struggles in which clear interests are difficult to disentangle (Duffield, 1999); death and disablement are concentrated on civilians rather than combatants; and population movements take place within as well as across national borders. In 1995, around 14 million people were refugees and some 23 million were internally displaced (forced to relocate within their own country; ODI, 1998,p.2). It is one of the great paradoxes of modern times that globalisation has been associated with increased intrastate tensions. Far from the 'end of history' predicted by liberal commentators after the collapse of communism, 'history' (or at least historical forces) has returned with a vengeance across Europe, Asia and Africa as ethnic, nationalist, religious and cultural groups have proclaimed their identities in often aggressive and exclusive forms. **While it has become fashionable to equate virtue with civil society, these events serve to remind us that civil society (like states and businesses) has a dark side too.**"*

[NGOs in a global future: marrying local delivery to world wide leverage : Michael Edwards et al, PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND DEVELOPMENT, Public Admin.Dev.19, 117-136 (1999)]

The aim of this briefing is to clarify our position on the following two connected issues:

(i) Virtual elimination of democratic space available in the North and East for public discussion on matters related to peace based on a political solution, going beyond LTTE's agenda,-- here we wish to address some of the issues raised by a recent press release of the National Peace Council (NPC) entitled "[One-Sided Criticism of the Trincomalee Peace Conference](#)", and

(ii) the role of peace activists and civil society organizations operating in an environment of internal and external terror in these regions.

At the onset we wish to dissociate from the tone and substance of the Island editorial on October 22, 2001 that called for an investigation of the NPC under the PTA. We are, moreover, concerned over the ever shrinking space for real and meaningful public debates/discussions regarding sustainable peace in Sri Lanka. We are well aware that in the North and East terror - created by the totalitarian politics of LTTE on the one hand and the judicial and extra judicial instruments employed by the State on the other - has severely curbed such democratic spaces. The call to investigate the NPC - a group that is actively working towards peace - under the PTA - is precisely the kind of activity that could become a threat to free public discussions on peace.

We wish to offer our sincere apologies to the NPC for any inconvenience caused. We are well aware that many of the NPC members share a deep commitment for peace and are working hard towards achieving that goal.

While UTHR (Jaffna) unequivocally supports efforts towards a political solution to the ethnic conflict, history has taught us valuable lessons in identifying and avoiding some of the pitfalls faced by peace activists. [Bulletin 27](#) of UTHR(J) discussed child recruitment in the East by the LTTE and flagged some concerns regarding the peace conference the NPC co-sponsored in Trincomalee. Their press release in response to Bulletin 27 brings out very pertinent issues facing all peace activists in Sri Lanka. We welcome this open exchange with the NPC. We would like to take this opportunity to present our views on the role and goals of peace activity in civil society.

### **On the Goals of Peace conferences**

In the following passages, we present a brief description of our understanding of the ground reality of peace efforts in Sri Lanka in general, and the North and East in particular. We will also elaborate our vision of the role of civil society organizations in this process. Our analysis is based on the following premises:

- We share the conviction that tasks of achieving peace based on a political solution calls for an open discussion & a mass movement - hence the effort will involve the participation of a range of civil society organizations.
- It has become clear that the LTTE will turn against any peace negotiations that do not recognize it as the sole legitimate representative of the Tamil people while giving unconstrained control of the North East. The LTTE's politics is primarily defined by its ideologically-driven military agenda and its ideology rather than by any concern for the civilian well being.
- The LTTE has eliminated all opposition and exercises total domination in the regions it controls - i.e., it appropriates or directs the efforts of all organized forms of civil society-through an organic surveillance system. As a result, in their areas of control, sustained independent protest and public dissent has become impossible.

We believe this to be the context in which all NGOs from the North and East participate in peace conferences. We have presented our analysis of the efforts to bring peace elsewhere and the ramifications of internal terror on the Tamil community, the character of the State, and the nature of LTTE [See [Briefings Nos 1, 3, Report 9](#) & [Peace: Understanding our Reality!](#) by R.H & K.S (the last one written during the 1994 peace process)].

**If we agree on the validity of these premises then peace activities must contribute towards opening up democratic space for free and unhampered public input and discussion on the goals and strategies towards sustainable peace.**

Accordingly, NGOs pursuing peace must recognize the consequences of this climate of internal terror in the North and East, of the near complete control the LTTE exercises over all civil society activities within its domains of control. We need to face difficult questions: What political space is available for local participants in peace conferences who wish to continue to function in their respective regions, to engage in a free exchange of views? If we want to hear

the views of the ordinary people of that region, how can we counter the climate of internal terror that already manages the stage and writes the script? What structures/mechanisms must be instituted in such conferences to best produce a map of representative views? What is our responsibility when those we proclaim to be our sole representatives are denying this democratic space by engaging in activities ranging from forced child recruitment to political killings?

## **On the Role of Peace Activists & Stage Management**

The first task that faces peace activists is to question the role of dominant ideologies that perpetuate the conflict in their respective communities. The peace activist must take responsibility for the actions of his or her community, and work towards values in resonance with sustainable peace.

For a Sinhalese activist this means challenging the politics of the majority and its implications on the minority communities and working towards changing that reality. On the other hand, Tamil activists cannot totally rely on the "victimhood" mentality to explain the LTTE's actions that can no longer be explained simply as a reactive violence. They should challenge the terror politics of the LTTE's and take responsibility for what the LTTE does in their name. If not, the peace they aim for is severely flawed.

We realize that it will not be possible to challenge the actions of LTTE and continue to function in the North and East. However, at the minimum, they must feel some responsibility for the LTTE's actions. And with the help from their Sinhalese colleagues, try to initiate a discussion of real problems facing common people in the North and East. Activating such a discussion among the Tamils requires very creative and real "stage management".

It is therefore, inadequate for Sinhalese activists, and the NGOs who visit the North and East to be only sensitive to the immediate reality of war. They need to be courageous enough to initiate discussions on a range of issues that limit the democratic space; to question the actions of the LTTE that has forced its war on the community. It is important for these NGOs to recognize that such moves would challenge one of the dominant themes of Tamil politics, namely that such an "opening up of space" is tantamount to "dividing the Tamil community from the LTTE".

Thus the Sinhalese and Tamil peace activists need to perform sometimes complementary and mutually reinforcing tasks. We shall try to give one example to illustrate our point. Consider the LTTE attack in early 1998 on the Dalda Maligawa that is sacred to the Buddhists. If a Sinhalese activist wanted to address the vindictive outrage an ordinary Sinhalese Buddhist might have felt, then it is a necessary strategy to situate the attack in the context of the State mixing politics with religion and resorting to indiscriminate aerial bombing in Tamil areas. While this context provides no justification for the terror attack, it attempts to explain to the Sinhalese, how the misdeeds of the State make the Tamil community angry and insecure. This is an important part of peace work.

What if the Tamil peace activists were to point only to the misdeeds of the Sri Lankan State in trying to explain the attacks on Sinhalese and their symbols? That will amount to no more than a justification of the attacks.

On the other hand, they could question the motivation for the attack. Was it to elicit a backlash against the Tamils? Why would the LTTE take a conscious decision to attack a religious place, deliberately sacrificing several of its own fighters, for no tangible military purpose? Can such an organization claim to represent the whole Tamil society? When we have been condemning the State for its indiscriminate bombing and damaging of many religious places, how could we now defend this? These are questions the Tamils in general, and Tamil peace activists in particular, need to address if we want to achieve long term peace.

It is regrettable that soon after the attack on Dalada Maligawa, a prominent activist from the NPC wrote an article in the Tamil weekly of the MIRJE, justifying the attack. In that article she posed a question: "Where else does one expects the LTTE to attack, the Peradeniya Gardens?" Here one is left with an impression of the peace lobby as a loose collection of individuals with private agendas, not subject to any discipline from binding values or goals. It needs to be appreciated that Sinhalese members of the NPC have done valuable work going around the South challenging Sinhalese chauvinism. By the same token, one would have expected the Tamil members to challenge Tamil chauvinism among Tamils. But they rather seem to be using the NPC to do the opposite, and thus undermining NPC functioning as a peace group.

Thus in the context of internal terror, the democratic space in any peace effort does not automatically open up when active Tamil groups with divergent persuasions are invited to participate. How safe is a Tamil who engages with the NPC (or any other NGO working towards peace) and voices opinions critical of the LTTE? We know that many participants of the Trincomalee conference have privately confided to individual members of the NPC their views and fears regarding the LTTE. Yet the NPC must be aware that these views and fears regarding the LTTE did not find expression in the final statement that came out of the Trincomalee conference. It is not that the Tamil activists do not trust the Sinhalese in the NPC. They do not trust members of their own community.

We, the Tamils, had in the past options in choosing our means, values and political directions. In the early days, many argued for various options and worked towards them. Just because the Sinhalese State was oppressive, most Tamils did not fall into the chauvinist trap. They found abhorrent the idea that massacring the Sinhalese and tearing the country apart by any means was the only way forward for the Tamils. This issue becomes more important when all the space is closed and very crucial when certain negative characteristics are being institutionalized.

The need to open up democratic space demands a re-evaluation of the very premises for peace building. Further, it demands of peace activists in the South to be creative and courageous enough to have an open discussion among themselves as activists in their organizations before they could go to the areas in the North-East. Unfortunately this culture of openness and discussion of values is not part of the present NGO outlook. Instead, strategic considerations and project formulations that fit into general models aimed at attracting funds to sustain the organization, seem to dominate.

### **Are we against negotiations for a political settlement?**

We wish to make it clear that the people and, especially, the Tamils want the LTTE to negotiate with the government over the country's political future and end the war. If the LTTE is to represent the aspirations of the people and wants to negotiate a peaceful settlement, we

shall be one hundred and fifty percent behind them, despite their horrendous past record of crimes against humanity. If that happens, it would wholly vindicate the NPC's claim that the "ultimate contribution to human rights lies in contributing to bringing about a negotiated peace".

Unfortunately, the political survival of the LTTE has come to depend on the perpetuation of the war. Hence the negotiation agenda of the LTTE has become delinked from the desires and aspirations for peace harboured by the vast majority of the Tamils under their control. Their focus has always been on establishing a monopoly of control. This becomes apparent when we examine last three instances when peace negotiations took place:

- The LTTE was on the run following the capture of Vadamaratchy sector in June 1987 by the Sri Lankan Army. This resulted in the death of 300 civilians. Much to the relief of the Tamil people, the IPKF arrived and peace reigned for a short while. To secure its monopoly on power the LTTE forced the IPKF into a war in October 1987. More than 1000 civilians were killed mainly in reprisals and many originating in LTTE provocation (See [Broken Palmyra](#)).
- In 1989, cornered by the IPKF, the LTTE entered into a deal with President Premadasa, who ordered the IPKF to withdraw. The LTTE used the honeymoon period to get rid of its political opponents by torture and assassinations (See Report 9 [Chapter 3](#), Report 10 [Chapter 4](#)). Then it started a war with the Sri Lankan government in June 1990. Here it ensured maximum provocation by massacring hundreds of Muslim and Sinhalese policemen who had already surrendered and further also by massacring about 300 Muslim civilians in the East. Thousands of Tamil civilians were killed in reprisals by the security forces and Muslim home guards (See Report [4](#) & [5](#)).
- In 1994 Chandrika Kumaratunge was elected to lead the country on a peace platform. It was announced on 9th September 1994 that she and the LTTE leader had exchanged warm letters expressing an eagerness to commence the peace process. The first session of talks was fixed for 13th October. Offensive military activities were frozen. While hopes for peace bloomed in the North and South, the LTTE leader intervened in his characteristic style. On 19th September he sent a suicide bomber to sink a naval vessel. In late October 1994 another suicide bomber killed UNP presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake. However, a ceasefire was agreed upon and messages were exchanged. The LTTE kept making demands of a military nature and avoided engaging in political talks. On 19th April 1995 the LTTE unilaterally broke the ceasefire by sinking two naval vessels and shot down two air force planes with newly acquired missiles. It also massacred 45 harmless Sinhalese fisherfolk in Kallara, hoping for government reprisals against Tamil civilians as under the UNP in 1990. Throughout this whole process the LTTE warned people in the North and East against reciprocating the peace activity in the South. (See [statement](#))

In addition to the LTTE showing very little interest in a negotiated peace, there are no signs of independent mass movements or civil society organisations capable of questioning and influencing the policies of the LTTE either. In fact, there has not been such movement in many years. The LTTE does not have a functioning political wing and has not allowed any independent activity in the Tamil community. It has been responsible for the death of considerable numbers of Tamil civilians and, particularly, those who were potentially capable of building such a mass movement. Therefore, laying foundations in the form of building a broad base of support for lasting peace and moving ahead is hard work but not impossible. While the outcome cannot be guaranteed, we can identify the obstacles and the

pitfalls and work towards creating conditions to ensure sustainable peace process that will lead to political solution. A vibrant peace movement will help constrain the violent excesses of the participants. It would further serve as a continuous reminder of the futility of war and give confidence to the people that they are not powerless entities who can only have to pray for the LTTE to change its politics. The vast majority of Tamils are prepared for compromises and have shown this in the 1994 presidential election and in later elections by voting even for the Southern parties.

This obliteration of democratic space in the North-East is the source of our prime concern. Contrary to what the NPC suggests, we are by no means opposed to any negotiations between the Government and the LTTE. But we are critical of any quick-fix approaches that ignore the need to lay foundations to make negotiated peace sustainable.

In the absence of a pressure from below, we are afraid that peace negotiations, more than in the previous three instances, would result in our community being pushed into a more devastating cycle of tragic violence. Short-term expediency should not blind the peace activists and politicians.

**Thus, if we want to avoid another repetition of tragedy, the main peace agenda in the Tamil community must be to work towards giving the people the means to make the LTTE accountable.**

### **Obstacle to peace stems from the politics of the LTTE**

We recognize that the LTTE as a group is rooted in narrow nationalist ideology bent on asserting its dominance through internal terror. It is a group that has made a virtue of political and internecine killings; It is a group that has successfully established a robust international network that can provide resources for relatively long periods; It is a group that has extended its terror among the expatriate community to silence the dissidents and, most importantly, it has perfected suicide politics to a point where, the resulting ambience of fear, works subtly on decision-makers in the region. However, it suffers from a severe mismatch between its huge material resources mainly flowing from outside Sri Lanka and the dwindling human resources at its disposal as the communities they control have become increasingly disillusioned and desirous of escape from the savage misery of prolonged war. Hence its inexorable need to compensate by virtually conscripting the whole community and relying increasingly on suicide bombers, women cadres and now children in sustaining its military machinery.

As mentioned earlier, at every opportunity to achieve a political solution, the LTTE disregarded the desire of the people for peace and imposed on them a further round of war. *Even if cessation of hostilities is successfully implemented, can it bring sustainable peace?* The LTTE has massacred Sinhalese and Muslim civilians which was rationalized as retribution; it has forcibly expelled Muslims from the North and claimed that it was to protect them; it has been responsible for murdering dissidents and potential competitors for political power within their regions of control. If we were to succeed in bringing about a ceasefire, will there be peace for the Muslims, Sinhalese and the Tamil dissidents in the North and East?

To attain meaningful peace, it becomes essential that the following issues are addressed in any peace forum.

#### **i) Use of child soldiers,**

## ii) Political killings and suicide attacks

To conclude, simply repeating that all political groups and the Tamil people want negotiations and ignoring much else the people are unable to say due to the terror in their midst, will reinforce the LTTE's terror. The LTTE cannot work towards peace in a united Sri Lanka, owing to its agenda of achieving a separate state based on inherent narrow nationalistic ideology. The various means it has successfully employed in that endeavor has given it an image of invincibility. The LTTE believes that even if temporarily their methods brought negative repercussions, in the long run they could manipulate the community, the "enemy", and other civil society organizations or structures, both locally and internationally, to their advantage in achieving their set goal. This illusion of power would not be shaken, - unless we bring into play the voices of the people into their schemes of thinking. Unless we could at least make them accountable in connection with the two crucial factors mentioned above, the chances remain dim indeed. All other adverse effects that are the general effects of war can be more easily contained, given the people's needs and current worldwide realities.

Its not only the Tamil people who have internalized the terror of the LTTE and become powerless. Many intellectuals and peace activists as well as NGO leaders in the South in some way continue indirectly to legitimize this terror. Instead of responding to the tragic plight of the people who are victims of its politics, they only see the LTTE's destructive power. It is this that evokes their respect, with a belief that to criticize and question the LTTE might provoke it. They elevate the LTTE to the status of Kali, the Goddess in Hindu mythology, and seek means to pacify it, rather than exposing its role, its politics and the resulting consequences.

It is part of this mindset to air such omniscient claims such as the President having become an obstacle to peace, because she has earned the LTTE leader's ire as expressed in severe attacks on her, first verbal, then also physical. This in turn is used to promote politicians who would appease the LTTE leader instead, with supposed quick fixes drawn from the peace-makers' tool-kit. In all this the interests of the people are glossed over.

The people need a political framework that gives them dignity and security to live in peace, but what the LTTE wants is total control over the North-East without having to expose itself by discussing a political solution. In spite of all its failures and the mounting obstacles it faces, it would pursue the goal of separation single-mindedly. Many in the South believe that allowing the LTTE the control it seeks over the civilians, and mollycoddling them with generous resources would transform them. This amounts to a total failure to understand the nature of the LTTE and its military dynamism. Like several times before, it will end in disaster. Thus negotiations based on a political agenda cannot be set aside for tactical reasons of pacifying the LTTE.

However, if a peace process primarily aimed at negotiations for a political settlement and opening up space, is not a feasible agenda for peace groups, and civil society organizations in the Tamil community remained totally subservient to the LTTE, then peace is going to be a pipe dream. That would leave only the international community, if they so desire, to make the State and, particularly, the LTTE, accountable. [[Top](#)]

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***"No peace without justice; no justice without truth"***

*We support all efforts working for a sustainable and just peace in Sri Lanka. To this extent we see that peace, the democratization of political space, and a fair political solution are distinct but deeply intertwined goals. While different actors may focus their energies on one or the other of these goals, their efforts should be informed by the essential connection between these issues.*

*It is from this perspective that we advocate peace building in Sri Lanka. Peace is more than the management of conflict; peace should entail movement toward the sharing of political power through substantial devolution and the recognition of the rights of minorities. Peace is also more than the cessation of hostilities between different armies; peace should also involve the cessation of hostilities between the political authority (be it the Sri Lankan government or the LTTE) and the population it governs, particularly its minorities and dissidents.*

*So we should always ask, "what kind of peace?" Had Hitler conquered the world there would be a certain kind of peace between different armies for a temporary period - but not a peace that is sustainable or just. When faced with the hardships of war we may be tempted to opt for an illusory peace that is merely a temporary hiatus in a war that becomes even more ruthless and brings on even greater hardship. We hold little hope for a short-term "peace" imposed by the state via pure military hegemony without inter-ethnic justice and the decentralization of power, or temporary military arrangements that appease the LTTE to manage the conflict. In our struggle for greater democratization of political space, for respect for human rights and accountability by all political actors, we seek to build a lasting and just peace*