



## LESSONS LEARNT AND RECONCILIATION

While former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans and retired Sri Lankan Army Commander Sarath Fonseka have become strange bed-fellows looking for those who violated human rights during the war against the LTTE, the President of the country has appointed eight eminent citizens to look into the situation after the ceasefire and up to the elimination of the terrorist outfit, and report to him with recommendations for action to avoid a repeat of such disasters. The commission in fact

scared for his life because he had helped the Tigers. Either this reporter or her bosses back in Australia ought to have known that quite a few Army Officers too had helped them and were under custody pending legal proceedings. So was Sarath Fonseka, who commanded the army in its war against the Tigers. Even the reporter would be subject to the country's laws and rules.

What most of these critics, including the ICG big shot who was claiming that Tamils and anyone opposing the government was not safe in Sri Lanka seem to forget that even during the time the war against LTTE was going on,

a) The greater majority of Tamils in Sri Lanka were living outside the LTTE-controlled area among the Sinhala population,

b) There were Tamils Ministers including an ex-LTTE activist in the government. And after the defeat of the LTTE,

c) At the last election, at least three candidates from the ruling party were elected by the voters in North and East with one hundred percent Tamil vote. This happened after a lapse of nearly fifty years when the last M.P. from a non-Tamil party from the south was returned.

It is against this background that these claims by the so-called watchdogs of world peace and human rights are clamoring on behalf of the now-defunct LTTE. They represent the same vested interests that were pressing the government for a ceasefire at a time when the LTTE was about to collapse. Now that David Milliband does not have the same powerful voice as he had when enjoying the privilege of a British Minister, others have to take his place. Enter the new spokesman in the form of Gareth Evans.

However, one has to accept the fact that the government has lost a lot of time celebrating and preaching the doctrine of peace and co-existence. Even now, they seem to be repeating the same process, at immense expense and wasting valuable time and effort that could have easily gone into the

improvement of the lot of the displaced and resettlement of those still in camps. One important fact they seem to ignore is that whatever celebration is done, will not be totally approved by many of the victims of the war, whether they supported the LTTE or not. My gut feeling is that good many of them would in their heart of hearts, entertain some sympathy for the 'fallen heroes.' One has to accept reality in such situations.

Another important aspect of the rebuilding process the government seems to pay little attention to, is the need for a constant dialogue with whoever is elected to represent the Tamil voters in the North and East. One advantage they have is the willingness already shown by those M.P.s to engage in a conversation with the President and the government. Whether the talks would bear fruit or not, the M.P.s should not be allowed to feel neglected or ignored. One must remember that all the people in the country and abroad are watching and the voters in these areas would be most concerned.

About the politicians of the opposition who are at pains to exploit any opportunity to attack and steal a march over the government, government has to be more patient and careful, as in the long run it is the support of all sections of the people that would matter in finally solving the ethnic issue. Even while they are on the attack, they ought to be brought into the picture if not as active participants in the process, at least as silent observers. They should never be allowed to feel safe as mere critics without sharing the responsibility of solving a problem that has been a curse for the entire nation over a long period of time due to the inaction and/or mishandling by leaders from both sides of the political divide. If a meaningful dialogue could be established with these unwilling politicians that would make the international community also take Sri Lanka seriously as a country capable of dealing with its problems without outside assistance.

Winning the hearts and minds of the people in the North and East is a challenge that the President is more qualified than any of his predecessors to accomplish. He happens to be the first and the only head of state to address the people in the north in their own language. No one earlier had thought it fit to learn the language of an important section of the population. It is obvious that Mahinda Rajapakse made a special effort to do so, well before running for presidency. That in itself speaks a lot about a man fit to be the

leader of an island with people speaking two man languages. It displays not only his concern for his people, but respect for a section taken for granted by earlier rulers. Coming from the deep south which gives him the essence of Sri Lankan village ethos, his familiarity with the language of the minority gives him confidence and competence to speak to, and on behalf, of them. He is ably supported by his brother Basil, a politician who had impressed the visiting Victorian M.P.s soon after the war ended, as a man of action.

It is equally important to make sure that the whole nation is behind the government in its effort to usher in real peace and to build a united and prosperous nation. That is why I would suggest that celebrations be put on hold until after real peace is achieved. Aren't the people already tired of celebrations? Isn't the country itself tired of all this tamashas? Isn't the country looking forward to better times, now that the war is over? Better in respect of cheaper food and other facilities?

To get the people behind the government in its work for the prosperity of the nation, they should in the first place feel looked after with essentials available for a decent life and where things are not alright a genuine attempt is being made to do so. On this count too, the government cannot take credit for people can always say that politicians are only feathering their nests. If the rumours about M.P.s getting the bulk of medical supplies for themselves is true, the President will have to discipline all his men before getting the people behind him. Whatever the truth about these allegations is, it is imperative for the government M.P. to show restraint in all their activities and the use of public money. This will be a key factor not so much in the peace process, but in the overall government efforts on solving country's economic and social problems which are not very easy to tackle. Only after the government M.P.s display genuine interest in these activities, will the people at large will be prepared to shoulder their part of the burden.

Let us hope that the President will be able to earn the goodwill of all sections of the people and get his men behind him by the time the commission comes up with its recommendations. Hopefully we will see real peace in our time in Sri Lanka.



will be trying to identify the lessons learnt or maybe to be learnt and how to bring about reconciliation between the parties involved.

Not everyone will be jubilant over it, and there would be many critics saying it is too late and too little. Granting they are correct, one must admire the president for his brave act, for apart from fact-finding which had become the regular feature after every catastrophe in Sri Lanka, reconciliation is something never thought of. And it has so happened that every report had been just an exercise in showing extreme interest in a national occurrence which would end with the shelving of the report. The use of the term reconciliation itself points to a new approach, leading ultimately to some real action subsequent to the handing of the report to the President. Let us hope such expectations on the part of interested citizens and outsiders will not be in vain.

This commission is being appointed at a time when fresh allegations against the Sri Lankan government are leveled by the ICG, which has not been well-disposed towards the island at any time. Not merely that, the Australian TV, both the ABC as well as the SBS, broadcast this news with enthusiasm. One can say they have every right to do so, but their past actions do not speak well of them. I remember the ABC reporter Sully Sara speaking to a Sinhalese man hiding somewhere near Colombo, and pointing out that he was