

Glimpses from Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

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After a defeating one of the world's most ruthless terrorist groups 'Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Elam' (LTTE), Sri Lanka is now investing heavily in reconstruction and development of its conflict torn northeast region.

During the decades long armed violence of LTTE, Sri Lanka's northeast was in fact a hostage to this group which not only created a reign of terror but also subverted every development initiative undertaken by Colombo. The end of armed conflict in Sri Lanka therefore has created a historic opportunity for the nation to bring the region back to the mainstream development process and ensure accelerated economic growth.

In spite the complex and multifaceted challenges, the progress of reconstruction in the northeast for last two years is noteworthy. Visible change in the social indicators of the northeast reflects that the people of the region are getting the benefit of peace and reconstruction. Currently there are three priority areas for post-conflict reconstruction. These are: Humanitarian assistance, Socio-economic development and political empowerment of the Tamil community.

Humanitarian assistance is the first priority area for Sri Lanka. As the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka Professor G. L. Peiris said on 19 May 2011 "two years ago when the conflict ended at that time there were as many as 297,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Sri Lanka. Due to the rapid response of the Sri Lankan government, currently the figure has come down to 10,000." The existing IDPs living in camps are being provided with the basic facilities. The government is also building houses for IDPs.

Responding to a question on the *Darusman Report* the Minister said that "it is fundamentally flawed in many respects and that among other deficiencies; the Report is based on biased material, which is presented without any verification." He further said that "it is divisive, and disrupts Sri Lanka's efforts to reinforce peace, security and stability." Many international observers believe that during such a vital moment of Sri Lanka's reconstruction, publication such reports might have detrimental effect on inter-ethnic relationship in country.

There are many success stories in Sri Lanka which the world needs to know. Sri Lankan military after its historic success against the LTTE, has been involved in the reconstruction process. This has really been effective in building confidence among the Tamils. The military has build thousands of houses in Jaffna peninsula which has been a remarkable success in promoting civil-military relations in the region. The Commander of the Jaffna Security Forces Major General Mahinda Hathurusinghe has said on 3 December 2010 "we been tasked a more difficult job than waging and winning a war, we are re-establishing a relationship that is built on confidence and trust between the Sri Lanka Army and the Tamil civilians in the heartland of Jaffna." Walking in the newly built streets of Jaffna one can only be assured about the future of peace and harmony in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has undertaken a massive infrastructure development projects in the northeast region, this includes rehabilitation of Kankesanthurai harbour, rehabilitation of Palaly Airport, repair and construction of hospital and schools, setting up of Vocational Training Centre, construction of the Cultural Centre in Jaffna, restoration of railway lines and restoration of the Duraiappah stadium in Jaffna. The reconstruction work is creating new jobs for the local Tamils who were once marginalized by the LTTE. Besides the global brands and blue chip companies are relocating their plants in the northeast Sri Lanka. There has been a boom of garment industries

in Jaffna and almost all the workers are Tamil women. This is contributing to the Tamil women's economic empowerment and development of livelihood.

Political engagement of the Tamil community is one of the cornerstones of Sri Lanka's efforts for social reconstruction. LTTE was a self proclaimed sole representative of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. This armed group purged all the democratic voices within the Tamil community by brutally killing whoever opposed their violence. Therefore, the political leadership within the Tamil community could not come in the forefront. The restoration of peace is a unique opportunity for the promising Tamil leadership to come to the mainstream political process. The political engagement of the Tamil leadership is a part of the current reconstruction effort in Sri Lanka.

Though there is an air of optimism all over Sri Lanka, there are some issues which the government should be more careful about. Sri Lankan government has not engaged the NGOs in the reconstruction process on the ground of suspicions and lack of trust. The government has long been suspicious of the NGO activities in its northeastern areas. In the past the government in many occasions pointed out arms trafficking and strong militant activities in the areas where NGOs operate. Some of the cases might be true and genuine, but a few incidents should not prevent the government to be work in partnership with the NGOs especially for the development projects. For an accelerated progress in reconstruction NGOs can play a significant role in the current scenario.

Sri Lanka might have won a military success against the LTTE. But sadly, the Ministry of External Affairs has not been successful in countering the propaganda of the LTTE lobbyists and sympathizers abroad. As Professor Rohan Gunaratna said on 19 May 2011 "defeating LTTE in the battlefield of mind needs to be a priority area for Sri Lanka." Professor Gunaratna is of the opinion that the LTTE might be operationally dead but its ideological footprint is there, so sustaining peace and stability will require Sri Lanka to think out of the box, there is a need to develop leadership among the Tamil youth who can work in the forefront to refute LTTE's ideology with counter arguments. He says "Sri Lanka cannot afford to lose in the battlefield of mind."

For Sri Lanka, it is truly a moment of historic transition. Reconstruction is an investment for a prosperous future. The smooth continuation of the reconstruction and development process will endure peace in a promising country that has suffered from the brutalities of the LTTE for quarter of a century. It is also a crucial time when Sri Lanka needs sincere support from international community. The international community should respond in an enlightened manner to understand Sri Lanka from an unprejudiced perspective and mobilize moral and material support for Sri Lanka's post-conflict reconstruction and national reconciliation.

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