

Post-conflict Sri Lanka: nation building and impediments to reconciliation and sustainable peace and security

SB Divaratne

Level 4, West Tower, World Trade Centre, Colombo 1

sptf@sltnet.lk

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper briefly reflects on the concept and operational strategies for a reconciliation process for Sri Lanka. In 2009 the terror of the armed LTTE which has shaped our society well over 30 years was decisively removed. The end of the conflict in Sri Lanka brings new era of hope and optimism to all Sri Lankans. The country is now at the cross roads facing formidable challenges in nation building; sustainable peace and security.

Immediately after the end of war, the Government re-aligned its priorities and focused on four major tasks. i.e. (i) Secure the territory held by the LTTE for nearly 30 years and to guarantee security for civilians, (ii) Displacement and subsequent resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), (iii) humanitarian demining in support of resettlement and livelihoods of the large areas identified as hazardous areas, (iv) Restoration of basic infrastructure and basic services, in order to ensure an effective post recovery delivery mechanism. The Government was predominantly and effectively engaged in this mammoth task until end 2012 and continues to help the people in need. Sri Lanka has made significant achievements in handling humanitarian and early recovery efforts, rehabilitation and reconstruction of social and economic infrastructure under its two ambitious programmes, i.e. "Uthuru Vasanthaya" and "Nagenahira Navodaya". Simultaneously, the Government generously provided amnesty to many of the LTTE cadres and ensured equal treatment by providing basic needs. Reordering the priorities by fast tracking infrastructure development and granting amnesty were the first visible signs of Government's sincere commitment towards peace and reconciliation.

It also made remarkable success in demining, resettlement, rehabilitation of ex-combatants, restoration of law and order, service institutions and initiatives for long term economic development projects. The massive reconstruction programme being implemented had certainly addressed the basic needs of conflict affected people in the North and the East of our country. However, other non-material human needs which are considered essential elements for achieving peace, harmony and goodwill need to be addressed aggressively.

II. PREVIOUS RECONCILIATION ATTEMPTS IN SRI LANKA

Political reconciliation is not new to Sri Lanka. There have been several attempts to break the dividing wall. The Presidential Truth Commission (PTC) set up in 2001, on ethnic violence and the Presidential Apology for 1983 Black July and the National Action Plan for Reconciliation in 2002 under the then Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Reintegration were some of the most recent attempts made in the field of nation building and reconciliation. Most of these attempts were not successful mainly because the time then was not ripe for initiating a national strategy, because the partners to the conflict did not seem ready for creating such a momentum. It also may have been that those efforts lacked inclusiveness and long term commitment. Further the Office of the Presidential Advisor on Reconciliation is also reported have formulated a programme of action and some work is in progress. Some time back, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights also took action towards policy framework proposal on national reconciliation. It also must be mentioned that during the conflict and thereafter for some time, on the initiatives of His Excellency the President, All Party Conference (APC) and All Party Representatives Committee (APRC) was in process. Nearly 13 party representatives were in the Committee and had more than 100 meetings. They were discussing 21 political issues relating to the conflict. After that in 2011, His Excellency the President set in motion a process of having a dialogue between delegations representing the Government and representatives from Tamil National Alliance (ANC). This dialogue has been going on and of course there are various reports. Subsequently, a Select Committee of Parliament was set up. But the progress has not been achieved as expected. But today, the situation is quite different. The situation is appropriate for initiating action for reconciliation. However, Sri Lanka needs to initiate further consultation and prepare a comprehensive policy framework encompassing policy guidelines, directives and implementation mechanism.

III. WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

Reconciliation is a complex term because it is both a goal – something to achieve - and a process – a means to achieve that goal. The goal refers to a future aspiration while a process is very much a present one. We are making all

possible efforts for reconciliation after a sustained and widespread conflict to construct a new society at the end of the war.

Reconciliation is an overarching process which includes justice, forgiveness, healing and so on. Additionally, reconciliation at its simplest, means finding a way to live alongside the affected communities – not necessarily to forgive or forget the past in any way, but to coexist and to develop the degree of cooperation necessary to share our society jointly so that we all have better lives together than we have had separately.

To understand reconciliation it may be prudent to briefly look at its comparison with politics. Politics is a process to deal with the issues that have divided us in the past. Reconciliation is a parallel process that redesigns the relationship between us. This is an immense challenge, and no one should think that it is quick or easy. But the effort carries a great reward: effective reconciliation is the best guarantee that the violence of the past will not return. If we can build a new relationship between us that rests on respect and a real understanding of each other's needs, fears and aspirations, the habits and patterns of cooperation, that when developed are the best safeguard against a return to violent division. (Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) Handbook, 'Reconciliation After Violent Conflict' (2003)).

A. *Reconciliation as a process*

It is a *deep* process: it involves coming to terms with an imperfect reality which demands changes in our attitudes, our aspirations, our emotions and feelings, perhaps even our beliefs. Such profound change is a vast and often a painful challenge, and cannot be rushed or imposed.

Reconciliation is also a very *broad* process. It applies to everyone. It is not just a process for those who suffered directly and those who inflicted the suffering, central though, those people are. The attitudes and beliefs that underpin violent conflict spread much more generally through a community and must be addressed at the broad level. Therefore, while there is a crucial individual element to reconciliation, there is also a community-wide element that demands a questioning of the attitudes, prejudices and negative stereotypes that we all develop about "the enemy" during violent conflict. Even those who have suffered or benefited little from the past absorb the beliefs of their community and their culture, and those beliefs can effectively block the reconciliation process if they are left unaddressed. Hence, reconciliation needs to be a broad, inclusive process. If it is to be a properly broad process, reconciliation must be inclusive of the many and various interests and experiences across a society enabling the achievements of inter related objectives of chartering a

new vision accounting for the past, reorienting institutions and policies to promote inclusive policies, taking diversity on a strength and performing attitudes and cultures.

Reconciliation strategies can be categorized as political and social. Sustainable national reconciliation is one that is an integral part of the broader agenda for national renewal and political transformation. It must reflect commitment, inclusive governance as well as establishing strong and effective institutional mechanisms to support and strengthen the process of reconciliation.

III. UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT

It is extremely important to look at the causes for the conflict our country had faced. Obviously, it did not erupt spontaneously; we need to analyze all factors, political, social and economic that created mistrust and polluted ethnic harmony. More particularly, how the conflict grew in to such a momentum so as to develop a separate concept of EELAM (the end state as visualised by LTTE leader Prabhakaran).

There are various areas where dialogue is required to understand the complex nature of the conflict. There is a presumption that the protracted conflict and finally defeating terrorism made victors and the vanquished. However, on the contrary, both are winners in the war against the LTTE. The distinction must be drawn between the Tigers who challenged the State and the ordinary Tamils who were the victims. If this is understood, much of the apprehension could be bridged. In fact, Prabhakaran succeeded in not only projecting the Sinhalese as murderers in the minds of the Tamil people but vice-versa. He was successful in making the Sinhala community think every Tamil was a terrorist. Because of that there was no neutral ground for the Tamil.

Another issue that we should understand is that some form of accountability for the past is critical to break the vicious circle. The history of the armed conflict tends to get passed down from generation to generation. It is not possible to judge how the people see the world a generation later. Perhaps, how they choose to act. Accounting for the past, means aiming to clarify and acknowledge the past, jointly agree on some kind of reparation to the affected, contribute to justice, to recommend institutional transformation and promote inter ethnic group relations etc. it is not intended to point fingers but collectively acknowledge areas where intervention is required by way of reparation, restitution to achieve lasting peace and reconciliation. In fact, the Government has already initiated and implemented several measures to redress those affected by building houses and rehabilitation of the entire livelihoods sector through various programmes.

IV. SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND PROGRESS

We have set the ground for achieving peace in 2009 after defeating the LTTE militarily. The Government has also taken many policy decisions and planned out strategies for working towards reconciliation and peace building. The GoSL had spent much money during the last three years for development of the infrastructure destroyed during the war and also to provide housing for the displaced as well as rehabilitating the misguided youth. The Government firmly believes that sustainable development could only be achieved, if there is sustainable peace. So, the nation building process shall ultimately lead to sustainable peace in this country.

We need not talk on conflict and the military victory now, but we should not allow the other side meaning those who perpetuated the conflict (I do not like to use the word losers) to capitalize on the defeat. There is so much of progress and peace in the Northern Province. Unfortunately, we have not been successful in delivering this message to the rest of the world. So let's make a drive even belatedly to showcase peace and progress in the Northern Province.

A. Need for a Comprehensive Policy

A comprehensive policy highlighting the rationale for reconciliation and a strategy encompassing all the areas that need to be addressed has to be in place. Although, ad-hoc arrangements have been initiated with a focus on building trust among the communities, such arrangements are not sufficient to achieve the best possible solution. What is required is a rational plan accommodating all aspects that need to be focused on. Reconciliation in a post conflict context, must not be approached in a vacuum, separate and isolated from other relative issues. In such a context, what is required is a nationally adopted policy on reconciliation, fostering a sense of togetherness among the ethnic communities. Such a policy will serve several purposes. Firstly, it will help the process of reconciliation, build amity and national unity. Secondly, it will provide a vision and direction to all the stakeholders of reconciliation and peace building. Thirdly, it ensures a coherent and coordinated effort.

I understand that a policy on reconciliation was prepared by the Office of the Presidential Advisor on reconciliation and it may be useful to study the content and recommendations of this report. The final report of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) recommends, among other things, formulation of a political solution acceptable to all communities. The report has been widely welcomed by key players and stakeholders across the board. A National Plan of Action for implementation of its recommendations was drawn up under the Chairmanship of Secretary to the President. It contains very useful material for use in the proposed Reconciliation Plan. The Commission's report constitutes a framework for action by all stakeholders, in particular, the

Government, political parties and community leaders. This framework would go a long way in constructing a platform for consolidating post conflict peace and security as well as amity and cooperation within and between the diverse communities in Sri Lanka. The Commission's report further emphasizes that the Government and all political leaders must manifest political will and sincerity of purpose to take the necessary decisions to ensure good faith in the implementation of the Commission's recommendations.

The Commission further emphasizes the areas where crucial decisions are needed sooner rather than later. These areas included governance, devolution, human rights, socio economic development etc. This report reflects the sincere commitment of the Government towards reconciliation and sustainable peace in this country. Subsequent to the publication of this report, a National Plan of Action for implementation of these recommendations was set up under the Secretary to the President and periodic progress by thematic areas is being monitored. Altogether, 19 Ministries are involved in implementation of these recommendations and this process should continue unhindered in order to ensure effective implementation of these recommendations.

The LLRC Report demonstrates clearly focused post conflict peace building agenda based on the representation made before it and what the Commissioners perceived after field visits to the North and meeting the people who were basically the victims of the conflict. The Chapter 8 of the report is exclusively focused on reconciliation. The Commissioners observations and recommendations have been spelt out explicitly in terms of the grievances of all communities' historical background to majority/minority relationships, issues relevant to addressing grievances and promoting reconciliation, issues of governance, the need for devolution of power, interfaith activities - role of religion in reconciliation, linguistic and cultural affinities as instruments for promoting reconciliation, people to people contact and need for political consensus. The issues highlighted in relation to each of these areas and the Commission's recommendations provide proper scope for further deliberations and ideal foundation to formulate a comprehensive policy for reconciliation. In this connection, I wish to quote what has been stated in the Commission's recommendations 9.176:

"Firstly, having emerged from a painful and debilitating conflict that lasted for nearly three decades, people of all communities now yearn for lasting peace, security, amity and harmony. They have been equally emphatic that we must do all we can to ensure, that never again should there be blood-letting on this blessed land in order to find solutions to problems that political leaders of this country were either unable or unwilling to resolve."

All these efforts were mainly directed towards political reconciliation which will deal with the issues relating to the conflict. Because the key purpose of reconciliation is to address the underlying suspicion/mistrust that have been manifested in the three decades long conflict. Creating a sense of interdependence between communities therefore requires a political settlement. However, my concern in this article is more towards the process of reconciliation.

Since the Sri Lankan situation follows a military victory which was launched to defeat terrorism and safeguard the sovereignty of the country, the leadership has to set the agenda. When one reads through "Mahinda Chinthanaya" (Policy agenda of the Government) it is clear that a reconciliation agenda has been set up; it refers to one nation one law. We could, by assimilating the crux of the message define the type of reconciliation strategy to adopt. It is time to launch the process by crafting a comprehensive reconciliation and an implementable plan within a reasonable time frame.

1) Consultation: A broad and progressive consultation is crucial to defining a model that is relevant to the realities of the country and the society. It is important to begin with the political leadership, political parties, religious leaders, influential leaders, academics and even ordinary folk. This consultation will lead to determine the level of understanding and preparedness of the various communities, which is critical before making the process public. This consultative mechanism was put in place when the resettlement process was launched in 2009.

2) Leadership: An inspiring and transcendent leadership who command the respect and the deference from all communities of the society will certainly have profound effect on how the people embrace the process. It is also important to have leadership at all levels of the society including inspiring women, youth and entrepreneurs etc.

3) Gender perspective: It is important to focus attention on women and youth, as these two segments visibly have become the most vulnerable and hence could be the issue that would look to the future and resonate with all. Neglecting to focus on these segments in the post conflict reconciliation process would be a grave mistake. For Example, women who were affected during this conflict, particularly, in Sri Lankan cultural context would have been subjected to harsh consequences Unlike in Western countries, affected widows and women had to undergo various hardships in bringing up the children, looking after the family and probably to face social stigmatization and marginalization. In the reconciliation process, we need to address this category quite vigorously. It is same with the youth, because the armed conflict has given them separate identity as that of a warrior and that itself has damaged self-perception as a provider or protector of the family. Since we have nearly 11,000 rehabilitated beneficiaries,

their capabilities in understanding the social fabric could be harnessed to foster a better outcome in the reconciliation effort. Therefore, gender perspective should be considered as an essential dimension of the reconciliation process. In fact, both these categories could be used to promote reconciliation using them as an informal sector. Obviously, women having undergone traumatic conditions and other hardships could well turn out to be moderators and useful contributors and balances to the reconciliation process. In addition, those who became widows from war and large number of women who joined LTTE as members of their cadre. I am happy to note that there is an exchange programme of widows from South to North initiated by the Commander of the Security Forces Head Quarters in Killinochchi.

4) People to people contact: as a confidence building measure: The protracted internal conflict in Sri Lanka had created a chasm between Sinhala and Tamil communities at all levels and in particular at the grass root level. This has led to considerable misunderstanding of each other's aspirations/perceptions and also has created mistrust/misunderstanding between these two communities. This is understandable given a long period of conflict and cultural separation. The conflict had made them strangers to each other in this small Island nation which they had shared for generations in amity and peaceful coexistence. For the ordinary Tamil person residing in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, the only contact they had for many years with the Sinhalese were the occasional meeting with soldiers and other military personnel serving in the North. These interactions were clumsy as there was a linguistic barrier. The ordinary Tamil person did not know Sinhala or English for communication with the military and on the other hand, ordinary soldiers also did not know the Tamil language other than a smattering of Tamil. Apart from that, the LTTE exclusively used its propaganda to label Sinhalese as their enemy and were responsible in instilling that image in the minds of the Tamil Community living in the North and the East.

The polarization of the misunderstanding and mistrust between the two communities is understandable, but is really tragic. It is unfortunate because there are many common denominators; cultural and otherwise which bind the two communities. These commonalities and affinities have been ignored or mostly overlooked in the discourse of the conflict. These similarities in cultural ethos and the peaceful co-existence that is recorded in history could be used as building blocks in furthering national consciousness as opposite to ethno nationalistic tendencies and promoting peace and national reconciliation in the post conflict period, which is a window of opportunity. However, the best opportunity to mitigate this misunderstanding has now come. We need to dispel the misunderstanding through various measures including historical anecdotal evidence to show that the two communities had lived with amity

and understanding of each other or mutual appreciation of cultural traits from the very beginning. If the two communities were continued to harbour resentment and mistrust towards each other with the mental set up of imagined societies future of the country could indeed be bleak. In this context, it is necessary to have very active programme to promote people to people understanding. For example, joint celebration of Sinhala Tamil New Year, exchange visits at various levels, starting with teenagers and with adults, conducting of joint relations ceremonies, sports meets and joint trips to historical places of interest, essay competitions island wide are the few programmes that can be adopted to promote people to people contact.

5) Language: It is true that the Sinhala and Tamil languages are both national languages. There have been many programmes to use Tamil language in administrative, judicial and executive fields; we must understand that language plays a major role at levels of personnel, community and a country. It forms an important element in the identity of individual. Yet there could be areas where improvements are necessary without which it would hamper the implementation of Tamil language as a national language in the districts other than in Northern and Eastern Provinces. Action taken for students to learn all the languages particularly Sinhala and Tamil irrespective of the ethnicity is a perfect move towards this. This should be instituted from nursery education onwards.

B. Economy

The economy of the Northern Province has picked up the development momentum. The impact of infrastructure development and rehabilitation of main livelihood sectors and restoration of normalcy has been manifest in the economic upturn of the Northern Province. Its contribution to the GDP compared to previous years has increased significantly. The private sector investment and banking services have also contributed to the upliftment of the economy in the Northern Province. It is only now the Northern community can see the development momentum which was denied to them for so long years due to the conflict. The people are beginning to experience the new quality of life and a better standard of living with this development momentum, which is the most resounding factor for sustainability in life.

C. Strengthening of Civil Administration

Civil Administration in the Northern Province is functioning similar to that of all other provinces in Sri Lanka exclusively with public servants. Every public institution is functioning facilitating re-establishment of normalcy in the Province. In fact, nearly 7,500 people have been recruited to the Public Service in the Northern Province. The establishment of Police Stations in all the districts has strengthened maintenance of civil administration. Nearly 39 Police

Stations and 28 Police Posts are operating in all the districts mostly served by Tamil Police Officers.

D. Employment

Employment is the best stabilizer and unemployment is a time bomb. Poverty and unemployment in the Northern and Eastern Provinces are still above the national average. The resurgence of the economy after 2009 undoubtedly has reduced this gap drastically. The contribution of the Northern Province to the National GDP has shown a significant increase in 2011. The accelerated development too has created job opportunities for skilled manpower in the North. Various programmes have been initiated to produce skilled manpower from these Provinces. The improved road network increased their accessibility to the market place. For the last two years nearly 10,000 job opportunities have been created. Island wide competitive examinations have been restricted only to the district candidates in these provinces. These are good examples that can be used to promote confidence and sincere commitment of the Government towards nation building. Yet, there may be some more opportunities that may be harnessed through dialogue and effective communication in reconciliation process to identify the areas that can improve employment opportunities and reduce poverty in the districts.

E. The role of the Media

Media can play an effective role in reconciliation. It can effectively and consciously become the peace builder by convincingly presenting the factual situation. There are many positive developments in rebuilding the Northern Province and the media can showcase these achievements and even highlight the short-comings for corrective steps. Vernacular media could use their papers to cover stories pertaining to the other ethnic communities, i.e. cross cultural fertilization for example, in the electronic media, films/ teledramas should include Tamil sub-titles, teledramas should have wider reach and multi-ethnic focus and even advertisements. Vernacular media could use their papers to cover stories pertaining to other ethnic communities i.e. Cross cultural fertilization, for example, in the electronic media, films/teledramas could include Tamil sub-titles; teledramas can have a wider reach and multi-ethnic focus .Advertisements too can reflect ethnic diversity.

F. The role of the Armed Forces

One wonders whether there is a role for the Army in this national task. The Security Forces have a definite role to play in the reconciliation process. They were engaged as vital partners in the resettlement process. This article does not permit me to give a comprehensive account of the services rendered by the Sri Lanka Army and the other Forces to make the resettlement a complete success. It is encouraging to note that an effort is being made to recruit

young men and women of the Tamil community in to the Forces. Involving the local community in development activities/projects initiated by Forces is yet another step towards promoting reconciliation. Already, the Sri Lanka Army has a separate unit to deal with the civil affairs in the Northern Districts and supporting the district administration to identify the humanitarian and early recovery needs of the newly resettled families. They are the nearest point of contact to the locals than the public servants and have been maintaining a close dialogue with the ordinary Tamil person living at the periphery that forms the most vulnerable segment of this community. The Sri Lanka Army should engage in this endeavour with a different outlook and possibly selecting the appropriate cadres who could interact with the civilians effectively. I would like to mention in particular that the Security Forces Head Quarters in the Northern Province are doing a commendable work in reconciliation in their area of operation. I, therefore, unhesitatingly state that the Sri Lanka Army should be a responsible partner in reconciliation and the nation building process.

G. Involving Tamil Diaspora

By Tamil Diaspora what I mean is the Sri Lankan Tamils who now live in other countries. Many of whom have supported the LTTE for creation of a separate EELAM. Of course, there are positive members among this group who really are interested in calling themselves Sri Lankans. Due to their long stay in other countries they have lost their identity as Sri Lankans and desperately want to be recognized as Sri Lankan Tamils and live with dignity. Many of them have been forced to leave the country and evidently are frustrated having to be distanced from their native places and more particularly the culture which is rooted in their home places. Efforts should be put in place to encourage dual citizenship by offering incentives to encourage them to return. Sri Lanka Embassies and Missions should lobby Diaspora, and encourage them to invest in Sri Lanka.

Diaspora should also be involved in resource mobilization/ supporting programmes in the North/East and elsewhere in the country so that they feel included. Embassies should regularly via newsletters highlight the accelerated development and the successful resettlement programme. So involving them in reconciliation process giving them the responsibility is an indispensable element in reconciliation and peace building process.

V. CONCLUSION

As outlined before, the current climate in Sri Lanka is conducive for operationalising the reconciliation process smoothly. It must be remembered that reconciliation is both a process and a goal. Hence, it will require time and space to bear fruit. It cannot be imposed on the nation as an event. The reconciliation process between the two communities should be based on mutual trust and should come from our hearts and not on what is there on legal documents. It requires both strategy and responsive mechanisms by the Government and other stakeholders to deal with the obstacles that may surface along the way. We have to accelerate a way forward by taking meaningful steps to address outstanding issues. The Government should take the ownership of peace building and reconciliation process as was the case with the resettlement of IDPs which took place since 2009. It should be a multi-level process preferably starting at grass roots level to ensure that all segments of society are involved. It should reflect a holistic approach encompassing all possible solutions with involvement of the affected community, civil society, religious leaders, intellectuals, politicians etc. Given the manner and the speed with which the resettlement of the IDPs was successfully completed by the Government through its unwavering commitment and dedication, it could be confidently forecast that the Government's endeavours put in place currently will usher in an era of peace, nation building and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.