

# FROM RELIEF AND REHABILITATION TO PEACE IN SRI LANKA?

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**T**he two worst-affected areas in the tsunami disaster – Sri Lanka and the Indonesian island of Sumatra – have both been suffering from intra-state armed conflicts. In the aftermath of the disaster, several political actors and commentators have pointed out that the present humanitarian crisis may actually constitute an opportunity for conflict transformation, as the scale and urgency of humanitarian needs may bring the protagonists together in joint efforts for relief and rehabilitation. The assumption is that practical collaboration in emergency assistance will yield communication and trust and lead to a political process of conflict resolution. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan expressed this view at a UN news conference on December 31, stating that: “We hope that this offers an opportunity both in Aceh and in Sri Lanka and that the protagonists are now working together to bring support to those in need. I hope that collaboration is not going to end with the crisis and that they will be able to build on that and use this new dynamic to resolve their own differences.”

Early reports on joint local disaster relief in Sri Lanka’s war-torn northeast province lend some support to this hypothesis. It is also noteworthy that the government of Sri Lanka has invited the LTTE to a joint coordinating disaster relief task force, that the leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has extended his condolences “to our Muslim and Sinhalese brethren in the southern coastal areas”, and that many Sinhalese individuals, businesses and organisations have provided relief to the Tamil areas. However, the current politicisation of aid and the stalled peace process also demonstrate that there are major political obstacles to going from addressing humanitarian needs to conflict resolution in Sri Lanka.

Several newspapers, including the Washington Post and the New York Times, have reported that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sinhalese-dominated Government of Sri Lanka have found constructive ways to work together at the local level to deliver much needed relief to tsunami-affected areas. Within the territory they control, the Tigers have set up a joint task force comprising representatives of the government, international aid agencies and civil society groups to oversee the flow of international aid and coordinate relief programmes. Journalists, aid workers and individual relief donors have pointed to the effectiveness of the LTTE and the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation to deliver humanitarian assistance on a mass scale under extremely harsh conditions and with limited material resources. The question now is what this local collaboration between LTTE, international aid organisations and local government representatives mean for the

prospect of a negotiated peace settlement at the national level. This question needs to be contextualised with reference to the politico-military realities and LTTE’s demands for self-determination in northeast Sri Lanka.

The undeniable reality of northeast Sri Lanka is that there are two structures of state power, which were locked in armed conflict for almost 20 years prior to the ceasefire agreement of February 2002. LTTE runs a *de facto* state, with military, administrative, policing, judicial and revenue-raising structures. Furthermore, the power of this rebel state is not confined to the LTTE-controlled areas but permeates society and state institutions throughout the northeast. While local state institutions have been seriously weakened during the past two decades of protracted warfare, the Tigers have systematically developed their own political structures and increased their ability to informally control the local state bureaucracy. LTTE have set up political offices in most parts of the province, brought most local NGOs under their coordination, and have developed a tax collection system that functions throughout the northeast.

The aforementioned local collaboration in tsunami disaster relief must be understood in this context. It is not an equal partnership between the protagonists of the conflict but an LTTE-led process, emerging from the areas they control but also extending into government territory. Rather than being a manifestation of national unity in a time of crisis, it is a continuation of LTTE’s state-building under their own leadership in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka. LTTE’s ability to mobilise aid from the Tamil diaspora and international aid organisations and to deliver relief and rehabilitation in an efficient and accountable manner reinforces their legitimacy among the Tamil population as well as in the international community. While the tsunami might have weakened LTTE militarily, their efficiency in international resource mobilisation and local relief administration is likely to strengthen and transform LTTE as a political movement.

The LTTE and the government are both hard at work delivering local emergency relief while also working on their political standing in the international community and thereby the domestic balance of power. The LTTE has criticised the government for ignoring the humanitarian needs in the northeast and the Sri Lankan Army for creating obstacles for the relief efforts of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation in government-controlled areas. The government denies these as false accusations and instead charges the LTTE of hijacking government provisions and distributing them in their own

name. Recently, the government prevented UN Secretary General Kofi Annan from visiting LTTE-controlled regions during his tour of tsunami affected areas in Sri Lanka. Not long after the disaster, local relief and rehabilitation is already in the process of being politicised. In this situation, what are the prospects for moving from joint relief operations at the local level to a revitalised peace process?

Sri Lanka's recent peace process (2001-2004) offers some valuable lessons in regard to this question. Most significantly, the peace process was characterised by an unusual sequencing of priorities, addressing immediate humanitarian needs in the war-torn areas before discussing political issues of power sharing and conflict resolution. Thus, the chosen approach came close to what is now prescribed as a way forward from disaster relief to peace in the aftermath of the tsunami disaster.

While the LTTE and the government agreed on basic development policy and the role of international actors, the question of development administration turned out to be highly contentious, as it impinged upon the balance of power between the protagonists and the future arrangements for power sharing. The LTTE saw an interim administration with a fair degree of autonomy and a guaranteed position for the LTTE as an absolute necessity to ensure the fulfilment of both short-term development needs and long-term demands for internal self-determination. The Sinhalese opposition (including the President) feared that the interim administration would constitute a first step towards secession and hence saw it as a threat to the sovereignty of the unitary Sri Lankan state. The then

government found itself severely constrained by constitutional as well as political factors to satisfy the LTTE's demand. A recurrent pattern has been that attempts to create workable peace arrangements with the LTTE have been challenged by the political opposition in the South, as majoritarian Sinhala nationalism has been used to mobilise popular support against any step towards power sharing or regional autonomy. The government, holding only a small majority in parliament and facing a strong opposition to the peace process, was trying to find an interim arrangement within the limits of the unitary constitution. In the LTTE's view, such an arrangement would inevitably reduce them to a junior partner with little or no formal power. An interim authority proposed by LTTE was, however, seen by the Sinhalese opposition as a first step towards secession and hence as a threat to the sovereign unitary state. While showing that addressing immediate humanitarian needs may provide meeting points for the protagonists, this recent peace process also demonstrated that this approach politicises development administration and inevitably leads to the conflictual core question of constitutional and institutional reforms for power sharing and conflict resolution.

The current humanitarian disaster may provide new meeting points and modes of collaboration between the protagonists, but the lessons from the peace process show that there is a need to be realistic about the prospect of going from relief and rehabilitation to lasting peace in Sri Lanka. As before the tsunami, the critical question is whether the Sri Lankan political elite will be able to overcome their fragmentation and constructively engage with the challenges of a multi-ethnic society. ■

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