
MUCH DESPAIR, YET A LITTLE HOPE

Jayadeva Uyangoda

The LTTE's recent commando attack on the Anuradhapura Air base and the retaliatory killing of Thamilselvam by the Sri Lankan Air Force no doubt add to the process of greater intensification of the war between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE. Retaliatory violence by both sides is likely to increase, thereby further reinforcing the reproductive logic of Sri Lanka's protracted civil war. Against this backdrop, the government and the LTTE will be compelled to demonstrate their capacity for destruction in a spirit of competition for world attention.

At present, both sides appear to emulate each other's commitment to a military outcome, with no space allowed to develop for a new political track to open up. The government, under a new ideological and military leadership, is pursuing a strategy of militarily defeating the LTTE. The LTTE on the other hand has been complementing the government's policy of war by its own strategy of belligerence. In the present logic of war intensification, there is no realistic possibility of either side opting for military disengagement.

War Burden

The war in the short run is not likely to bring any tangible benefit to the Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim people in Sri Lanka. The economic burden of the war and massive corruptions associated with the 'war economy' has already begun to be felt among the poor and the middle class people. With the severe shortage of milk powder and spiraling price hikes, millions of children of the poor and low income families have already begun to bear the brunt of this 'war economy.' Inevitably, and despite the JVP's mild protests, the only the poor and the middle classes will continue to pay the rising war cost.

Meanwhile, the war will further widen the gulf between the already alienated the Tamil populace and the Sri Lanka state while reinforcing latter's Sinhalese ethnic-majoritarian character. The claims made by the government leaders that their war is a 'humanitarian' one aimed at 'liberating' the Tamil people will have only a few takers.

War Trap

Despite its massive economic, social and human cost, the government is not in a position to extricate itself from another two-to-three years of intense war with the LTTE. The government is actually in a self-made 'war trap.' Although the government's political, military and ideological leaders are convinced that they can win the war, defeat the LTTE and then impose a victor's settlement on the Tamil community -- that is what they mean by the phrase 'honourable peace' --, the real trajectory of the war cannot be that easily managed as envisaged by an ideological agenda. As processes, both war and peace in Sri Lanka have been characterized in the past by the extreme unpredictability of their actual paths and outcomes. There is no compelling reason for it to become different this time around.

The LTTE is also caught up in a 'war trap.' The LTTE leadership does not have any trust on the Sinhalese political leadership for a negotiated settlement. They opted for resumption of military engagement under the present Rajapakse administration, claiming that the path of political engagement had reached a stalemate. But, there is another reality; the LTTE is fighting an asymmetrical war in which the state has greater legitimacy, much international support, regular supply of military hardware and easy access to international resources. The logic of this asymmetrical war for the LTTE is that until some measure of symmetry in military power balance is achieved, there is no way for them to unilaterally and temporarily withdraw from military engagement.

Besides fighting an asymmetrical war to achieve a condition of strategic equilibrium with the state, the LTTE also has the added burden of defending their regional state structure. This is the second dilemma the LTTE is facing at the present conjuncture of the conflict. The LTTE seems to have opted for addressing these two fundamental dilemmas only by military means, and not by political means. This is the essence of LTTE's war trap.

Two Scenarios

In terms of the way in which the war might unfold in the coming months, one can only think of a few possible scenarios. One is an all out war. Only the government side seems to be convinced of the utility and viability of a full-scale war. They apparently think that a massive and multi-pronged thrust on Wannai would cripple the LTTE's military machine. According to their thinking, the blockade of LTTE's military supplies, coupled with the paralyzing of the LTTE's international financial networks, would eventually make the war unsustainable for the LTTE. They also appear to believe that by means of relentless use of fire power, to be expressed through continuous artillery and air attacks on the Wannai, it would be possible to separate the Tamil civilian population from the LTTE fighters, as happened in the Eastern province a few months ago.

Such a dramatic turn of the process of war towards greater escalation will have grave economic and political costs for the government. The government seems to be determined not to allow economic, political, international or humanitarian consequences – the so-called extra-military factors-- to deter its strategy for what they see as an inevitable victory. The government leaders display confidence that they can manage the political, economic and diplomatic consequences of war escalation by a strategy of stubborn resistance to internal and external pressures.

Meanwhile, fighting a symmetrical war, the LTTE might not want to take the initiative for an all out war. The LTTE's military thinking seems to be pointing towards a protracted defensive war, which would be fought in multiple fronts, including targeting military, political and economic installations. They might also widen the theater of war, beyond the Northern Province. In the past too, the LTTE has demonstrated that they can withstand concentrated military assaults by the state, re-group and then attack back in a strategy of protracted defensive war. It is also possible that the LTTE's military thinking is constrained by their long-term political goal of self-rule/ separate state. But the LTTE cannot be unaware of the government's immediate military-strategic objectives. In that context, one has to wait and see whether the LTTE would resort to the offensive as the best form of defense.

If a scenario of an all out war is ruled out, the other possibility is a protracted war of attrition. This path would be decided upon by both sides, only if they rationally work out the limits

of positive gains that an all-out war can possibly bring to each side. A protracted war of attrition will keep the military balance of the two sides substantially unaltered; yet it will produce very high levels of violence and suffering to civilian populations. The economic cost of such a war of attrition will also be great, yet manageable as long as the government does not have ambitious plans for rapid economic growth in the short- and medium-run. But, it may not be the case that the government is now in a mood to choose that option.

Peace?

Is peace possible in this frightening scenario of war escalation? Caught up in the war trap, it is extremely difficult for either the government or the LTTE to take any serious step towards de-escalation, negotiation and political re-engagement through a new cease-fire. Both sides will if at all call for negotiations only as a corollary to the dominant war strategy.

What can those who are committed to a peaceful outcome to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict do in this situation? First of all, in the build up to war escalation, the political space for peace and political solution becomes quite limited, and sometimes even non-available. In a context of highly polarized political debate, defined by the logic 'you are either with us or with the enemy; there is no middle path,' belligerents usually see peace advocacy as amounting to weakening the war effort, and worse still, as an act of treason. There are also popular expectations, built through relentless media campaigns, for imminent victories and the hope that 'at last this headache will be over this time.' In ethnic conflicts, it is war, more than peace that has a greater capacity to generate popular expectations.

Humanitarian Focus

What can the international community do to prevent further escalation of Sri Lanka's war? Judging by the relative silence as well as inaction of the Co-Chairs on Sri Lanka's sustained relapse to war during this year, one cannot foresee any significant role for the international community, until the conflict becomes truly unmanageable, with very grave humanitarian consequences as a result of generalized violence even outside the North. One of the tragic features of the present phase of Sri Lanka's conflict is the relative independence and immunity that both the government and the LTTE managed to acquire vis a vis the international community. This continues to enable Sri Lanka's conflict

parties to define and execute the future path of the conflict with a sense of autonomy which they may not have enjoyed in the past.

Perhaps, the only issue that the international community cannot abdicate its responsibility in the coming phase of the war is about the plight of civilians. Among many unpredictables, one predictable outcome of the escalating war would be grave human suffering and humanitarian consequences. Humanitarian assistance, and not peace, will have to be in the immediate agenda of the international community as well as peace advocates.

This poses a great challenge to the human rights and peace advocacy groups in Sri Lanka. It is important for them to

recognize limitations of the present context while continuing to own, sustain and defend, amidst difficulties, the argument for peace, a negotiated political settlement, political reforms and inter-community reconciliation. Their belief that the future well-being of the Sri Lankan people lies not in war, violence and destruction, but in establishing inter-ethnic reconciliation, promoting dialogue for compromise and working towards negotiated peace needs to be sustained amidst the impending and obviously inevitable 'war crisis' in Sri Lanka. Exhausted by a mutually-destructive war, both the government and the LTTE are most likely to explore political means of getting out of the 'war trap', not unilaterally, but jointly. Such a scenario will hopefully create new space for political and peace interventions. ■

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