

A PROMISE OF PEACE

Radhika Coomaraswamy

While the rest of the world seems to be marching to war, Sri Lanka, wearied by a military stalemate after 18 years of war, is walking slowly, haltingly and surprisingly toward peace.

It is a peace tempered, however, by the remembrance of the 64,000 people who have been killed. The yearlong cease-fire between the government and the rebels, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, has not generated a spirit of celebration.

Mistrust between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority remains strong, and the campaign by the Tigers to consolidate their control of the areas they dominate is making everyone uneasy. Nonetheless, there is some reason for optimism. Both sides seem to have realized that a military victory is neither possible nor desirable — at least for the moment.

The Tigers failed in their campaign to expel government forces from the north in 1997 and 1998. Besides, they realize that even if they had succeeded, the international community would have refused to recognize them as a separate state because of their appalling history of suicide bombings and assassinations. Peace gives the Tigers an opportunity to gain legitimacy.

The government, too, seems to recognize that war won't work. It is clear that without a peace a Sinhalese-dominated army will always face resistance in the Tigers' stronghold, the north and east; that the Tigers and their sympathizers will always be able to disrupt the rest of Sri Lanka; and that the death toll of an all-out war will not be internationally

acceptable. For these reasons the government of Ranil Wickremesinghe seems committed to peace through negotiations.

In addition, the cease-fire has had tangible benefits. The economic growth rate for the last quarter exceeded 5 percent, up from a 1 percent decline a year ago. With the help of international reconstruction money, people who fled war are returning to their homes, land is being cleared of mines, and commerce is reviving.

The Tigers, meanwhile, have declared that they are willing to explore a federalist model as an alternative to a separate state — an important shift in their thinking. And because of the work of Norwegian mediators, negotiators on both sides seem committed to resolving conflicts in the peace process through committees and expert groups rather than by the piecemeal efforts of earlier negotiations.

If Sri Lanka is to thrive, the international community needs to continue to press for respect for human rights and to make sure that funds for reconstruction are not squandered. The Tigers will have to adapt, learning to respect the rights of their own people and embracing a democratic ethos.

And Sri Lankans have to start imagining themselves differently, to accept the plurality of their heritage and the multiethnic nature of their society. Judging from the outpourings by both Sinhalese and the Tamils in the national newspapers and journals since the peace process began, however, that will be a long time in the making. ■

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