

# THE COSTS OF WAR

Adrian Wijemanne

**A**t 1994 levels, expenditure on the war runs at Rs. 70-million per day; feeding and maintenance of 660,000 refugees resulting from the war runs at Rs. 5 million per day - a total of Rs. 75 million per day.

At current levels of exchange, this is just over £1-million per day. £1-million is the cost of constructing 1 mile of modern motorway in Britain. In Germany such roads are called "autobahn" and in the rest of Europe "autoroute". Sri Lanka does not have a single mile of such motorway - nor even a single mile of "A" class road which is the next level below motorways. Even in comparison with "B" class roads in Britain, the major trunk roads of Sri Lanka, such as the Kandy road, fare very poorly. The country's road system as a whole is about 40 years behind those of the South East Asian NIC's whom we hope to emulate.

The railway system is even more primitive. There is not a single mile of electrified line in the country. The UNP election manifesto of 1989 promised to electrify the line from Kalutara South to Polgahawela; the promise remains a dead letter. Double tracking extends only a few miles outside Colombo. The country's main cities are not connected by double track lines. The railway stations and rolling stock are far behind the times. The affluent class which can afford to avoid train travel have abandoned the railway altogether. It is patronised only by the less well-off who are ill-served by an appallingly backward system. Billions of rupees of investment are needed to bring the system up to minimum standards of modern service.

The supply of pipe-borne drinking water is available only in the larger urban areas. Even in these water quality is well below internationally acceptable standards and the supply itself is erratic. To make even drinking water of the present low quality universally available throughout the country, billions of rupees of investment in developing primary water sources, treatment works and delivery networks is required. Low income households which cannot afford to pay for such supplies will have to be subsidised.

Electricity generation and distribution also need to be modernized. The low quality of the electricity supply, perpetuated by the low rates charged, needs radical improvement. A modern, voltage-stable, system cannot be paid for by most households and charges will have to be subsidised on a long term basis.

An urban sewage disposal system exists only in some parts of the city of Colombo. It is in the same state as that in which it was under British colonial rule. No improvements or extensions to it have been made. Sri Lanka is well over 50 years behind the rest of the world in this respect. Establishing waterborne sewage systems and treatment plants in all the urban areas of the country will need billions of rupees of investment.

The story is the same with hospitals and schools, both now areas in which private companies supply the needs of the affluent. The vast mass of the population, however, depends on state provision and state provision is primitive at best. A modern hospital system

needs huge investments on account of expensive new scientific systems of diagnosis, treatment and after-care. In every branch of treatment, surgical as well as medical, Sri Lanka's hospitals fall far short of those of neighbouring developing countries, let alone the developed world.

Schools are just the same. Scientific teaching is rudimentary; language teaching through modern audio-visual systems non-existent. The literary norms of education are barely a step in advance of the mediaeval. Access to modern norms and values is taboo and extremely primitive and dangerous isolationism and chauvinism prevail. Modernizing the system will need trillions of rupees in investment.

All these are areas in which the world does not stand still nor do the needs of Sinhala society. The world advances rapidly at ever greater cost; the needs of Sinhala society grow at the same time. Even if the Rs.75-million per day now spent on warfare is saved entirely (which is not really feasible) and invested to meet the growing costs of modernization in the seven areas referred to, Sri Lanka will still be slipping back in comparison to her neighbours. If the war continues and eats up Rs.75-million per day this year and more in years to come, in 5 years time Sri Lanka will be the most backward country of the South Asian region and, perhaps, the most retarded in all of Asia. It will have a population of which the vast majority will be unfit to participate in an ever-shrinking world which imposes competitive and survival stresses arising from inexorable integration. The decline will accelerate exponentially as the cream of the modern-educated elite flee the country to areas of modern infrastructure, opportunity and living-standards never to return.

The war is being waged to resurrect the single, all-island state which disappeared in 1983. Spending Rs.70-million a day we field 10 to 1 against the LTTE in a 7800 sq. mile territory. In Northern Ireland the British government spends £8.9 million per day (Rs.640-million is the equivalent figure at current exchange rates) fielding 110 to 1 against the IRA in a 5400 sq. mile territory and has failed in 26 years of fighting to eradicate the IRA. The idea that we can bring the war to a successful conclusion at current rates of expenditure is derisory. It would be equally derisory if our current rate of expenditure on the war is increased 10-fold to Rs 750-million per day which we can afford to do only by dismantling civil government and all its services in toto.

In short, the object of our heart's desire is beyond our reach. What we can do is to ruin comprehensively even the slim prospect of modernizing the environment and living standards of the Sinhala people as a whole. It is not an objective worthy of any responsible government.

The Sinhala people need peace as soon as possible. This can be had unilaterally by recognizing the existing separation and should be followed up by a negotiated, balanced, mutually verifiable reduction of military forces to minimum levels so that the urgent work of modernization may commence. Any government that has at heart both the immediate welfare and the long-term future of the Sinhala people has no other option.