TAMIL WRITERS GUILD

Editorial

The War and Its Aftermath in the North East of Sri Lanka

All Wars are futile! They bring nothing but misery to the innocent. All warring parties will claim victory but in the end innocent civilians lose their homes and loved ones, their income and livelihood, face destruction and devastation and destitution will prevail everywhere!

The wars waged by successive Sri Lankan governments on the civilians of the North-East of Sri Lanka over the last four decades have caused death, destruction and untold suffering. Innocent civilians have been mown down with the death of over 250,000 including over 60,000 deaths during the last few months of the war. In addition, over a million Tamils have left for safety in foreign countries after their ancestral homeland was obliterated by the occupying armed forces.

Whether in Gaza, Ukraine or Sri Lanka the end result of the war is the same - a total destruction of civilisation. However, the rubble heap piled up in Gaza or Ukraine or Iran will probably be replaced by modern houses and buildings with infrastructure etc in the years to come but not for the Tamils in the North-East of Sri Lanka. The past 17 years show that the international community has abandoned it as waste.

From the time of independence of Sri Lanka in 1948 to the present, the North and East provinces were left without any major infrastructure, improvements or job creation for the youth in an attempt to deliberately marginalise and subjugate the population into surrendering their sovereignty. From the time of independence, potential improvements like developing the Trincomalee and Kankesanthurai harbour, the Palaly Airport or any other developments were overlooked, again to deprive the Tamil community of any economic prosperity or to force their exodus from the country – the mother land. Again, fisheries and agricultural activities could have formed as the prime source of income and livelihood given the region is surrounded by thousands of miles of ocean.

The general developments of these provinces would not only have fostered economic prosperity and improved facilities in the region but also would have helped alleviate the sufferings of the war affected and provided job prospects for the young who could then dream of a life in the homeland instead of leaving the country. Any substantial genuine action by the Sri Lankan central government aimed at removing bureaucratic embargos which block all foreign direct investment in developing Sri Lanka's war-torn North East Tamil dominated area would be perceived as a welcome gesture for reparation and hope for Tamils who could start to reconcile and to live a life without fear.

In confirmation of the international communities' desire to redevelop the North-East when the peace agreement was signed in 2001, a Development Fund to the tune of $3 - $4.5 billion was promised by foreign donors. The largest and most cited pledge was the 2003 Tokyo Donor Conference on Reconstruction and Development of Sri Lanka. Donors pledged more than US$4.5 billion over four years (2003–2006) to support reconstruction and development if the peace process progressed. The official Tokyo Declaration stated: "Assistance to the entire country, to a cumulative estimated amount, in excess of US$4.5 billion" and noted that significant portions were intended for the North and East.

Importantly, much of this funding was conditional on continued progress in negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.

After lengthy negotiations coordinated by the international community, the peace deal was signed in 2001 and peace followed. However, the new Rajapakse regime renegaded on the peace deal in 2006 and restarted the war which finally came to a brutal end in the year 2009 after huge death and destruction. Now, some 17 years later, the war affected are still left to pick up the pieces themselves with untold suffering resulting from a deliberate refusal to deliver funds to redevelop North-East both from foreign governments' funds and from the funds held by successive Sinhalese governments. However, now given that Sri Lanka has the impartial government of President Anura Dissanayeke, it's about time that some serious action is taken by the international actors to honour their past pledge and deliver the funds to North East so it can start to redevelop.

A study to establish the development areas and their needs, as well as research into Sri Lankan Tamil development in the North-East of Sri Lanka, needs to be understood through several interconnected themes: post-war reconstruction, economic development, education, infrastructure, governance, diaspora investment, and ongoing political challenges. In the absence of government or overseas assistance, it is heartening to know that the overseas Tamil funded charities have been working tirelessly to help the needy and abandoned until genuine help arrives.

The Tamil communities traditionally place strong emphasis on education. However, now academic results and the number of those who want university education has vastly dropped with most places in the universities in the North- East being filled by students from other provinces while the exodus of Tamil youth abroad continues due to lack of opportunities and hope. Nevertheless, both school attendance and university participation have recovered considerably since the end of war.

To overcome the above obstacles, we must deal with the fact that post-war development was often centrally controlled by Colombo, leading critics to argue that reconstruction did not always reflect local Tamil priorities. This has led many Tamil political and civil society groups to argue that infrastructure development alone is insufficient without political devolution and local decision-making. In addition, funding shortfalls emerged after 2009 with UN agencies reporting that major humanitarian and recovery programs were underfunded despite earlier pledges and expectations.

The Sri Lankan government argues that billions were invested in roads, railways, electricity, housing, hospitals, schools, and economic integration of the North-East after 2009. But academics and politicians have argued that these investments were mainly intended to promote settlement by the Sinhalese masses and colonisation of the Tamil dominated North-East and, therefore, the further eradication of Tamil traditional land. In this regard, many Tamil scholars, activists, and diaspora organizations argue that although physical infrastructure improved, the deeper objectives of regional economic transformation, political autonomy, employment creation, land restitution, and sustainable development remain incomplete whilst Sinhala colonisation of Tamil traditional land is accelerated.

This confirms that the Tamils have again been betrayed by the international community who have turned a blind eye on their past and present pledges intended to safeguard Tamils from any repeat of the past genocide.

All UN inquiries into injustice to Tamils etc will remain a futile exercise as long as perpetrators continue to have a safe haven whilst Tamil victims die away without justice and with their plight forgotten. Before Tamils' plight is completely forgotten, leaving victims without any justice by all, it is paramount that all Tamil Diaspora organisations, campaign groups and all Tamil decent politicians in the West recommit to urgently campaign on a daily basis and urge governments to address the above to ensure the North East remains a Homeland for Tamils and the future generations!

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