

Northern Spring, Truth And Reconciliation:

Report of a Field Mission by a Journalist on Behalf of the Ceylon Communist Party (Maoist)

Ground Realities:

There is a universal sense of relief that the war is over. By all accounts it was brutal, unrelenting and intense. However, the post war environment contains many old and new issues that deny any sense of liberation or victory for the people. On the contrary, they feel betrayed both by the LTTE and the State, both of whom promised them liberation. People are in a confused, disillusioned, abandoned and demoralized state of mind. Let us examine these ground realities in some depth.

Reconstruction:

It is apparent that the GOSL (Government of Sri Lanka) is engaged in a massive program of physical reconstruction throughout the Province, focusing on basic infrastructure such as roads and telecommunication. Government departments were reconstructed and modernized. Urban commercial centers and towns appeared to be vigorously active and flourishing. In fact, fifteen major banks and financial agencies had opened modern offices in Jaffna, almost next to each other. Military camps, bases and sentry points are being fortified and expanded. The presence of the army is everywhere, along the roads, in the villages and towns. Landmine clearing operations continue to be undertaken in many areas.

Humanitarian Issues:

In sharp contrast to this process of physical infrastructure reconstruction and the bustling commercial activities in the towns is the grueling, heart rending reality of a vast majority of the population, mainly farmers and fishermen, who were barely eking out a life below subsistence. It is a sheer struggle to survive. The entire population in the North could be divided into three categories; those who have been permanently resettled, those who have yet to be resettled permanently and those who had not been displaced recently and had remained in their original habitats. In general, all three categories of people had suffered from some form and degree of loss of lives, limbs, property and livelihood. There are no reliable statistics on the numbers of war widows and female-headed households, number displaced, resettled and yet to be resettled, those who had lost their loved ones, those who have been disabled, children who have lost both parents, people who have no basic means of survival and live on dry rations or with relatives, form and degree of emotional and psychological trauma, financial and economic loss of property and livelihood, degree of malnutrition, and so on. The lack of information on those who have disappeared, been abducted and or killed causes an abiding sense of grief and despair. This situation gives a sense of the ordering of priorities.

The State simply lacks the political will for undertaking an accelerated, comprehensive and integrated process of resettlement, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development, given that many super mega projects are off the ground elsewhere in the country. The strategy of the GOSL (Government of Sri Lanka) is to first develop basic physical and institutional infrastructure so as to attract foreign investment, which would then provide the dynamic for employment and income generation through large-scale agro-industrial mega projects. This 'trickle down' Capitalist theory and policy has only brought disaster, poverty and misery worldwide. This may be a boon for the rich and powerful, but gloom and disaster for the poor, marginalized and critically vulnerable masses. As it is, the ground reality is continued acute suffering, deprivation and degradation of the vast majority of the Tamil population in the Province, who have endured some three decades of unmitigated grief and despair, horror and terror.

Resettlement:

The reality and process of resettlement is a profound and enduring indictment of the prevailing feudal-colonial/ Comprador Capitalist political and social order. In general, people are given twelve sheets of tin (takaran), some utensils and five thousand Rupees to resettle. Some had been given dry rations provided by the World Food Program. Everywhere, people are huddled inside make-shift tents or in small huts. Some people simply place the tin sheets together without any structure, to make a shelter. These people are exposed to heavy rain as well as scorching heat, and to mosquitoes and flies. They have no access to safe drinking water or sanitary facilities. Most of them are yet to generate a sustainable livelihood. This reality is all the more pitiful, since the general public and civil society throughout the land is not being mobilized to launch and sustain a process of providing

relief and recovery, as they did so effectively and impressively in the aftermath of the tsunami. In fact, interventions by international and local civil society agencies are severely constrained and controlled, with only a selected few been granted permission to operate in the Province.

The continued presence, reinforcement and expansion of high security zones, military bases, camps and sentry points preclude a vast number of people from accessing or returning to their original habitats and livelihoods. The occupation of schools present a barrier in accessing even the bare educational facilities that had existed. Barefooted school children trek to school and back in the scorching heat through clouds of dust. Schools, clinics and hospitals that do operate are few and far between, and have no adequate facilities or staff.

Political Status:

Along the road, we saw signboards being changed so that Sinhala appears first, then Tamil and then English. Combined with the all-embracing presence of a predominantly Sinhalese armed forces, this change in the order of nomenclature, capped with a big welcoming signboard that says “One Country! One Nation”, gives the impression of a policy of subordinating, or denying, the political status of the Tamil national identity. The notion of one country-one nation implies that there is to be no recognition of the plurality of nations, nationalities and ethnic-religious communities that comprise the People of Lanka. Added to this, fears were expressed by some of efforts to change the demographic character of the Province from being predominantly Tamil, through settling families of armed forces and Sinhala settlers in Tamil areas, even while the Tamil population is left homeless, destitute and abandoned. We saw piles of material for constructing pre-fabricated houses on the side of the road approaching Killinochchi. This has raised a question as to whom these houses are being planned? While Buddhist shrines are sprouting, we saw Christian religious edifices- old and new- also springing up, while many kovils remained abandoned or destroyed.

Needs and Anxieties:

The most urgent priority need is a cry for physical-livelihood survival. People need to rebuild their lives first at least by securing their lands, which have been taken over or reserved for military facilities. Reclaiming and rebuilding their houses and land is a foremost need. It is estimated that in the Jaffna peninsula alone, some 100,000 houses had been destroyed. Farmers have the dire need to recover and prepare their land for cultivation, for accessing agricultural implements, including water pumps, seeds, ploughs, access to affordable credit, and transport and storage facilities. For their part, they are not so impressed by the large-scale infrastructural reconstruction such as roads and telecommunication, government buildings and luxury tourist hotels. Some farmers fear that they may be marginalized by local and multi-national corporations that may have plans to develop big-scale agro-industrial projects. Fisher folk have the need for institutional, technical and operational infrastructure, including mechanized boats, nets, fuel, storage and transport facilities. They too fear that, in time, they may lose their fishing rights entirely to other more powerful local and international players. In general, farmers and fishermen express a fear of being pauperized and marginalized, so they may have to sell their labor for a pittance, in order to survive.

Many feel the enduring need to be informed about the disappearance or loss of their loved ones. They need a means of finding an end to the pitiless emotional agony of not knowing. In the most generalized terms, the population of the North share an agonized need to end their suffering, destitution, misery and degradation so they may enjoy the right to a life with dignity, security, autonomy and democratic freedom, without being reduced to being suppliant beggars of the State. They need to return to their normal way of life based on reconstruction of the houses, schools, hospitals and other institutional and infrastructural facilities.

Anxieties:

One of the main anxieties is over the continued presence, reinforcement and expansion of the security forces of the State. People are anxious over the overriding role of the security forces in controlling and monitoring all social, cultural and religious activities, where citizens did not enjoy the right of free expression, association and conviction, due to the fear of reprisals. This is so, even though the incidence of abductions, rape and torture and generalized abuse has been drastically reduced.

Hopes and Aspirations:

People do not experience any sense of victory and liberation following the end of the war, but a foreboding and creeping sense of a new subjugation and suppression by a triumphal Sinhala supremacist state bent on depriving them of their political status, dignity, autonomy and freedom. The people feel betrayed by the LTTE and now by the State. Neither has delivered liberation to them. This truth is borne out by the fact that; The reinforcement and expansion of military facilities, the concentration of all decision-making in the hands of the ruling party, the lack of commitment to provide them access to information about the fate of their loved ones, the continued incarceration of some 10,000 Tamil political prisoners without being charged in a court of law, the lack of commitment to provide compensation for the losses-personal, physical and economic, the deliberate delay in addressing questions of basic survival, while colossal funds are being invested in lucrative mega projects, the lack of openness and transparency, the fact that no Tamil is represented in the Task Force for Resettlement, Reconstruction and Development, along with the evidence of Sinhala colonization of Tamil homelands. The post war direction points towards a liquidation of their political status as a nation to be reduced to a marginalized and dependent minority community, under Sinhala-Buddhist State hegemony. As final proof is the fact that still no political settlement has been presented, and that the Tamil nation has been effectively marginalized in the negotiating process in deciding their political status and their future.

The enormous tragedy that befell some 300,000 civilians attest to the bitterness that prevails. These civilians had fled into a 'no fire zone' for protection from the intense and sustained military onslaught by the security forces during the last stages of the war. They had then come under attack by the LTTE, when finally they had begun to flee to the government controlled areas. The war has left behind gaping wounds that need to be healed in order to achieve national reconciliation and integration. It is not the case, as claimed by the State that all these people fled to escape from the LTTE to seek liberation. They simply were trapped in a cross-fire and had no choice. It is pitiful that an organization that had claimed to liberate the people, had to kill its own people when they fled for life. It is equally pitiful that the GOSL waged the war with no regard for 'collateral damage' which placed the Tamil people in the tragic and desperate situations where they had to undergo such unaccountable suffering and degradation. Healing and reconciliation would require that we all share in this engulfing tragedy and grief, and all those responsible account for their role in bringing about such a pitiless humanitarian catastrophe upon our own people.

Conclusions:

The path to achieving the goal of "One Country: One Nation" is by first addressing the national-democratic aspirations of the various nations, nationalities and communities, so that they *voluntarily* and *consciously* desire to be integrated as one nation. This goal can be achieved only on the basis of a free and voluntary union, devoid of any form of coercion or subjugation. The post war scenario offered rare historic opportunities to initiate this process. Tragically, these opportunities are rapidly dissolving in a climate of renewed insecurity, distrust and seeding antagonism.

The path to freedom lies in mobilizing the workers, peasants, all exploited and oppressed classes, nations and communities to forge their revolutionary unity in rupturing with the whole structure and relations of imperialist/neo-colonial domination that have subjugated and devastated the Land and the People of Lanka for over five centuries. Until and unless we find the path to restructure our agricultural base, uprooting all archaic, parasitic, feudal-comprador relations of production underlying conditions of bare subsistence generating endless poverty and indebtedness, we shall forever remain a beggar neo-colony. Through these profound revolutionary transformations the productive potential of the toiling masses shall be unleashed. This will be based on an internally driven, self-generating logic and dynamic of surplus generation, capital accumulation and expanded reproduction, girded by an *integrated* program of industrialization, leading to strategic economic self-reliance and self-sufficiency. This will be the basis to achieve people's democracy and national independence. We will have to define a new developmental philosophy that has the liberation of the toiling masses and the independence of the country as the inspirational source and theoretical guide at the very center of the project.