

Balancing aspirations and ambitions

By Ram Manickalingam

What do the Tamils want? What does the Tigers want? The Tamil people want personal security, cultural autonomy and regional autonomy. The LTTE wants security guarantees and political power. We need to understand the distinction between Tamil aspirations and Tiger ambitions to achieve a viable peace.

Personal security is a central concern of Tamil people in Sri Lanka. In the South, organised anti-Tamil riots have been unleashed against Tamils in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981 and 1983. In the North, Tamils living in war zones face a daily threat to their lives.

The second concern that Tamils have is cultural autonomy. Tamils wish to use their language in official business with the state. They also want to protect and preserve their cultural identity. The Tamil people wish to ensure that the state, in the hands of the majority, does not use political power to affect where the Tamil language can be used, and to change Tamil traditions and cultural practices.

Finally, Tamils lay claim to an autonomous region in the North and East. Tamils believe that an autonomous region will serve three purposes. First, it will provide a region where Tamils can ensure their personal security. Second, it will ensure that the Tamil language will be used and Tamil cultural autonomy protected in the pre-dominantly Tamil part of the country. Third it will ensure the political representation of Tamils and provide a basis for Tamils to share in the political management of the country.

The Tigers are concerned about their security. Having ruthlessly killed political opponents, they fear legal prosecu-

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tion and political persecution after a settlement. They will only pursue a political settlement that will guarantee their security as individuals and as an organisation.

The Tiger ambition is to exert Absolute political power over the North and East. The Tigers will seek to enhance their political control of the North and East through a political settlement.

Satisfying Tamils

An effective peace process must address Tamil aspirations as well as reasonable Tiger concerns, but not Tiger ambitions for absolute power.

It is possible for a peace process to only address Tiger ambitions. A peace process that strengthens the Tigers militarily and enhances their control over the North and East may succeed. But its success will be short-lived. The Premadasa-Prabhakaran Talks were precisely such a short-lived peace process. The negotiations were not about how to devolve political power to the Tamil people. They were about how to provide arms to the Tigers and expel the IPKF.

Similarly, a peace process can address Tamil aspirations while ignoring Tiger ambitions. After a package of devolution acceptable to the Tamil people is ratified by parliament, the Tigers can continue to hold out for more. If their concern is security guarantees, these must be addressed. But if they are holding out for greater power, appeasing

the Tigers may be counter-productive. Instead of leading to a viable peace it may lead to the disruption of the peace process.

A viable peace process must address Tamil aspirations, while making allowances for reasonable Tiger concerns. It must combine peace with democracy.

There are four bases of an effective peace process. First talks must proceed along multiple tracks. The government must negotiate officially with the Tigers, discuss informally with other Tamil parties and the UNP. This approach will encourage the Tigers to participate, but will not depend on them. Tiger participation is crucial for the negotiations to succeed peacefully. But the peace process must not stall if the Tigers opt out. Paradoxically, such a peace process is precisely the one that will encourage Tiger participation.

Second, the government must avoid the syndrome of "too little, too late", by granting a lot early. Federalism and merger, with special provisions for Muslims and fundamental rights under the purview of the central government will satisfy Tamil aspirations, while ensuring that minorities in the North and East are protected. Today these concessions are acceptable to a majority of the Sinhala people in

exchange for peace. The government should set a time table to proceed with a devolution package to circumvent holdups by Sinhala and Tamil extremists.

Third the government must take unilateral steps to "decommunalise institutions" and "humanise the conflict." A multi-ethnic military must be created by the concerted recruitment of Tamils and Muslims. The Official Languages Act must be implemented by ensuring that Tamils can conduct official business with the state in Tamil.

A proposal

Finally, in the absence of a ceasefire, the PA government can humanise the conflict by sending food, medicine and consumer items to the North and East. Senior and mid-level military officers must be trained in human rights and administration. It can form district peace committees that include NGOs, administrators, military officers and the ICRC to monitor the conflict and violations of human rights. With the assistance of the ICRC, the United Nations or other neutral parties, it can set up peace zones where civilians can move around freely without hindrance by armed personnel.

These measures must be part of a national campaign for peace. The PA government must increase the momentum for peace by building on the goodwill generated by the parliamentary and presidential elections. This campaign should simultaneously take the message of peace to Tamils in the North and generate support in the south for a wide-ranging package of devolution.

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