

An opening for Peace

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In a recent encounter a group of eight soldiers came across a group of 20 LTTE fighters. The soldiers watched petrified as their foes ate breakfast and relaxed. They tried to withdraw without being seen, but a twig snapped. The LTTE now warned leapt to a deadly attack.

This may be an apocryphal story. But it is not simply about cowardice, though it might seem to be that. Rather, it is about a very human dilemma that any humane person would face if confronted with a similar problem. Would we be willing to shoot someone in cold blood?

Especially if he is a boy who has grown up in a village by the side of rice paddies and in the shade of the temple where he learnt that to even kill a mosquito is a sin, for it too is a living being with a right to its life. Now with a few months of military training behind him he comes face to face with other boys like himself sitting and eating in camaraderie.

Something has to die within a person who lifts up that gun and shoots to kill them in cold blood. Perhaps it had not died in those eight soldiers. Or was it that the odds of eight against 20, even with the element of surprise, seemed too high to take a risk?

This much is clear. To kill another in cold blood requires some passion. Ordinary Sinhalese boys who join the army do not have that passion because they have no cause to hate the Tamils who live far away from their villages and have never hurt them.

What happened during the JVP insurrection was entirely different. The vast majority of killings were

done by people who knew each other and probably and some cause to hate one another. Similarly the vast majority of killing done by the security forces were by a psychologically demented minority.

What is true of the Sinhalese would also be true of the Tamils. On their own they have no cause to hate the Sinhalese. Reliable reports say that the LTTE is making a concerted effort to indoctrinate the Tamil people that the government is making preparation to launch a massive and barbaric invasion of the north.

This is not too difficult to do. The random air

flame its population in combatting its foes.

That may be the most important reason why man for man the LTTE fights with greater zeal than the army. There are some other reasons as well.

Positive step

The new appointment of Lionel Fernando as Governor of the Northeast Province is a positive one by the government that is in the direction of confidence building with the Tamil people. Mr Fernando may be an efficient administrator and may have been appointed on that basis alone.

by Jehan Perera

bombing that lands even on places of religious worship, the lack of electricity to watch television, batteries for radio and the LTTE ban on newspapers from the south enables the LTTE to portray the Sinhalese as a barbaric people bent on destroying the Tamils. Grizzly videos of actual military operations and the consequences to the civilian population are regularly shown to the general public by the LTTE in "mobile theatres" as part of their recruitment drive.

It is therefore no cause for surprise that those who join the LTTE do so out of a burning sense of conviction that the army needs to be destroyed before it destroys them. With greater passion comes a greater willingness to kill. But no democratic government that needs to preserve the peace with a multi-ethnic population can afford to stoop to this level to in-

But what earned him the respect of the Tamil people when he served them as the Government Agent of Jaffna in the late 1970s, even as the militancy was building up, was their belief that he was fair and did not take sides for an ulterior motive of his own. With fairness comes moral strength.

The principle that should guide a negotiated settlement to the north-east conflict is fairness. What is fair has little or nothing to do with who has the "position of strength." Eliminating the LTTE leader Prabhakaran will not change what is fair though it may weaken the LTTE as a fighting machine and prevent it from demanding more than is fair.

In an elegant analysis, Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy showed that there is a Sinhalese political consensus, reflected in

the outcome of the Mangala Moonesinghe Parliamentary Select Committee on ethnic relations on an "arrangement that is federal in form" and which is based on the "Indian model." The majority of Tamils too

think that federalism is a fair solution. Even the LTTE has said on several occasions that it is prepared to negotiate on the basis of federalism.

If the government is serious about peace it should consider these two developments as an opening for peace making. On the other hand, simply saying it is open to negotiations, but laying down the condition that the LTTE should first lay down its weapons before negotiating, is to be playing with words. Such words may be politically astute but they are not statesmanlike.

Failing army

The real advantage that the government has is the possibility of democracy it offers to people who wish to live with decency in freedom and openness. Its advantage does not lie in war making. This can be seen in the irony of the government having to feed the LTTE as it feeds the people of the north. There are too many constraints that tie down a democratic government when it comes to fighting a war, especially one within its own territory.

The LTTE will not bother much about these constraints because it is primarily a military machine. It is, therefore, hardly a cause for surprise that this is another important factor that helps it to fare better than the government in the military arena.