

## Winning the war and loosing the future for the Sinhala South

*"Wars, conflict, it's all a business.  
One murder makes a villain.  
Millions, a hero. Numbers sanctify."  
- Charlie Chaplin*

It's all now a talk of living in a country free of "terrorism". The Separatist Tigers are almost eliminated. Driven to the forests of Mullaitivu and restricted to lick their wounds, till they are completely annihilated as promised by the Defence head. Ruthless and merciless as no other armed organization on this planet earth, the LTTE had to be cornered, tamed and eliminated politically, long before. That not done in a pragmatic manner, we are told "a full scale war" is the only option "within our unitary State". The hard and rigid position of claiming a non-compromising unitary State in a Sinhala dominated country, perhaps left no other option but a war for the majority psyche that believes it owns this plot of marooned land.

Yet, at what cost ? In rupees and cents, the total is huge. It was 130 billion rupees in 2007 plus a supplementary budget that enhanced the defence allocation by another 15 per cent, half way through the year. In 2008 it was 166 billion plus another supplementary budget allocation of 28 billion, making it a staggering 194 billion rupees for the war, with 177 billion budgeted for 2009, for now. Cost of war is not only the allocated annual defence budgets. It is also the cost of rebuilding and replacing the massive destruction caused to buildings, roads, bridges, rail tracks, electricity pylons and other infrastructure, after the war. How many billions more would we need for that ? That in rupees or dollars is not the total lost in this war. Add the productive cost of a society, how ever meagre that may be, that was and is being lost over the years due to war.

A very educated professional considered a friend by me, told me, "War has its own cost any where. It takes lives and there is no point in counting them. Its so in Iraq. Its so in Gaza." Whilst Iraq and Gaza does not justify a weeping and bleeding Vanni, but only makes it two plus one in human tragedy, he and his family are fortunately living in a very secure urban residency in Colombo, 450 km away from all the innocent people who speak a different language to his, who are dying, left destitute and in hunger and pain. With broken and shattered families, politically and ideologically distanced from the Sinhala polity. That cost of war tragedy has no assessment in rupees and cents in a modern civilised world.

Is that all ? No. Count the number of Sinhala youth who are permanently limping around you. Those who have their adult life maimed. Count the number of young widows who are staring blank into the future, with a fatherless infant on her lap. Count the little children who are often used as "exhibits", standing in rows for politicians to grin at them, the children of "war heroes". Make a note of all those teenage village girls who frequent the Anuradhapura town for a living, waiting to be picked up by vacationing young soldiers. They are looked after by organised mafia and the underworld is infested with army deserters in large numbers. Some allegedly used by powerful politicians.

Is that all ? Sorry. There are more. More that goes unaccounted and unaudited socially. The Sinhala society that supports the full scale war has also come under a sledge hammer of a rigidly regimented defence establishment that by now has become an indispensable factor in political decision making. The organised social fabric that defines and decides democratic functioning of the society is shredded. The media had been openly coerced into compromising and to live as told, through threats direct and indirect. With gunmen on motor bikes and white vans. The Sinhala society accepts with glee, the political explanations wrapped in military priorities doled out by this defence establishment in defending all that suppression and also how the democratic structures should behave in its day to day life. The judiciary has been ignored by the Executive to maintain its own indemnified power. The political regime uses all those regimentations in society to live an unchallenged, unquestioned life seeped in corruption, nepotism and political arrogance. Protests are allowed at the expense of protest leaders running the risk of meeting masked armed men on motor bikes and white vans there after, who would never be tracked down. Any dissent in society, any deviation in perceptions thus comes under brutal suppression.

The Sinhala society has been herded into this subordination and this subjugation on the twin slogan of "patriotism against Tiger terrorists" and "supporting the war heroes". What has now emerged is a totalitarian regime on the strength of crushing the LTTE terrorism and accepted and given the honour to be just that by a citizenry that for now wish to live with that euphoria. Like it or not, that's where we have come to in accepting a full scale war against Tiger terrorism and that's from where we would have to wake up, to see what the future holds for us amongst all this debris and human carnage left.

Right now, it's India and the international community that talk loud. The international community that lived to see a bloody human tragedy evolve, issuing diplomatically phrased statements blaming all sides and asking for respect of international law protecting civilian life, from a government they themselves accused of impunity in violating basic human rights, has now hurried to assess the possible rehabilitation of the devastated areas. Yasushi Akashi was around and in Trincomalee, meeting the Eastern Province Chief Minister too, in his 17<sup>th</sup> visit as a peace envoy to talk about humanity and development, even before the SL military entered Mullaitivu.

India that blundered at a heavy cost trying idiotically to manipulate in teaching the Jayawardne government a lesson by training and teething the armed groups, rushed Pranab Mukherjee, acting PM and Minister for External Affairs, to Colombo when the government was being accused in Tamil Nadu of targeting thousands of displaced and stranded civilians trapped in cross fire, with government forces pushing hard towards Mullaitivu. Indian strategy was always clear with Delhi only worried of Pakistani presence. Given the annihilation of LTTE and Prabhakaran, the armed menace they nurtured and promoted for a long time, Delhi would try to placate Tamil sentiment to the extent it would not embarrass the Rajapaksa government.

What more would you expect from a selfish world ? Till the next phase of armed Tamil politics gather its own strength and justification to fight on for yet to be honoured dignity as equal citizens in a shared country, the Rajapaksa government and its extensions would be showered with soft loans and grants for "rehabilitation and reconstruction of devastated life". It would now have the right to continue as it did through war. The carpet of savage suppression doesn't have to be rolled back. The South agreed to have it spread out all these years. Why roll it back now ? All indications are, that "patriotically bloodied" repressive carpet would now be legalised and strengthened for political arrogance to walk on. All indications are, with such change, the military would continue in politics. "Winning the war does not mean I have finished my job." said the Army Commander to the Daily Mirror a fortnight ago. "I have other work. I have to strengthen the army." he said.

It's a big price the South would have ended up paying to live without Tamil separatism. Without a decent and a sane Opposition that does not know it's in the Opposition to challenge an overstepping government. It's the price of living without its own democratic life for the South.

*Bob Dylan's definition of "peace" - the moment when you reload your rifle*

**Kusal Perera**