



EU and its Conflict Resolution Potential: The Case of Sri Lanka

by Martina Klimesova

On May 18, the Government of Sri Lanka finalized its military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by killing the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and other senior leaders. The triumphant picture is however tainted by a great number of civilian casualties and about 200,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in government camps with dire living conditions and lack of sufficient medical facilities. The European Union (EU) has appealed to both the government and the LTTE to resolve the conflict by political means; however, its leverage is limited to setting constraints on development aid and trade relations.

Political Solution Still Needed in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan Government launched the massive military operation in the North against the LTTE to re-claim the territory and eradicate the LTTE after the collapse of the peace process facilitated by Norway in January 2008. In the past seven months, the Sri Lankan army has pushed what is believed to be left of the Tamil Tigers to a continuously shrinking strip of land. Until yesterday (May 17), a great number of civilians were trapped in the area. The success the Sri Lankan army have been tainted by the great great number of civilian casualties and reports of alleged attacks on civilian targets. Independently verified news from the region is not available as the Government sealed off the area, preventing independent monitoring of the situation on the ground. At the same time, the Government proclaimed the military operation against the LTTE as a humanitarian mission to rescue trapped civilians; yet its reluctance to cooperate with international humanitarian agencies thwarts the Government claims.

In contrast, the LTTE indicated that the is army targeting the civilians. Both sides hold each other responsible for attacking and confining civilians. Escaping refugees reported that they were under fire from both the Tamil Tigers and army forces. The UN estimates that fighting has claimed 6500 to 7 000 since January. The information cannot be verified as independent reporting from the area is still scare or non-existent.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa has asserted on a num-

ber of occasions, that the military offensive is targeted against the LTTE and not Tamil civilians; however reluctance of the Government to let international humanitarian workers and an UN mission access the conflict area and alleged atrocities against Tamil nationals by paramilitary groups raises criticism against the government actions. Some indicate that it has been sacrificing the Tamil civilians in its pursue to achieve full victory over the LTTE. Even if the Government was concerned with the safety of international rescue workers, it should have clearly communicated with the aid organization and avoid negative publicity.

In Colombo, crowds celebrate the end of the war, but their joy may be premature as the conflict is still far from over. In the immediate future, it remains to be seen how the government will manage to accommodate nearly a quarter of a million IDPs, secure stability, and launch much needed reconciliation initiatives.

The Government has been resisting internationalization, of the conflict, but expressed desire to cooperate with the EU and foreign countries. Sri Lanka will need the international community on its side to support its planned post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Nevertheless, the Government will have to convey a strategy that would, at least to some extent, address the underlying causes of the conflict such as political, social, and economic grievances of the Tamil minority. Social Minister Douglas Devananda announced that necessary social reforms, in



this respect, have already been prepared as well as power devolution through revival of the Provincial Councils. He also announced that local elections in the North could be held within two months. In my view, the districts recently reclaimed from the LTTE should be given more time to prepare for the elections, and for organizing the leadership needed to genuinely represent the Tamil interests.

All these efforts will be of utmost importance as the Sri Lankan leadership will have a unique opportunity to demonstrate its determination to end the conflict by introducing measures that would guarantee self-governance and a fair and equal position of the Tamils supported by the devolution of state power. If the government finds credible tools in reaching out to the Tamils, it would be far more difficult for a new radical Tamil organization to arise after the fall of the LTTE to gain popular support. The Tamil population in the North, exhausted from the living under the authoritarian oppression of the LTTE administration, would greatly appreciate Government's reconciliation initiatives and accommodation of their political, social and economic grievances. At the moment, the trust between the Tamil community and the Sinhala majority is very low, yet if the Government could capitalize on its picture as not only the Tamil liberators from the LTTE but also as its protector from the Sinhala nationalism, it would serve as a solid base for building trust between the two communities.

EU's Role in Sri Lanka

The EU's role in Sri Lanka stems from its position as a Co-Chair of the 2003 Tokyo donor conference, where along with Japan, Norway, and the United States, the Union represented the donor community. The EU itself has never been directly involved in facilitating dialogue between the Sri Lankan parties in the past. In the light of recent fighting during the past weeks, some EU member states called for ceasefire between the Government and the LTTE to find a political solution in order to end the suffering of the civilians. Initially, the appeals were directed solely towards the Tamil Tigers, but as the conflict became more unclear, the appeals directed towards both adversaries.

When appealing to the Government, the EU has only a few, predominately economic, instruments. Effects of the global economic crisis in combination with waging the

war in the North have taken a toll on Sri Lanka's economy, and the country is suffering from negative economic growth. Thus, the EU could use its position as Sri Lanka's main trading partner as leverage. The GSP + trade preferences are up for revision due to alleged lack of effective implementation of three UN Human Rights conventions. There are also other signs that conditionality policies may be used despite their limited effectiveness in the past. The British Foreign Minister, David Miliband, allegedly indicated that Sri Lanka may not meet the criteria to be granted loan of 1.9 million USD from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), due to its failure to protect civilians and adhere to international humanitarian law during its military campaign against the LTTE. The same was reportedly indicated by the U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton.

And lastly, the EU and its member states represent an important donor group for Sri Lanka, who badly needs resources for reconstruction. It remains unknown, however, whether the EU will condition its donor aid to Sri Lanka to improve the situation of Tamil civilians.

With regards to the LTTE, the EU Council has listed it as a terrorist organization since May 2006 (the UK already in February 2001). Some EU member states have Tamil diasporas (mainly UK), but these groups have only limited influence on their adopted home countries.

Potential New Role For the EU in Sri Lanka: Monitoring and Supporting Reconciliation Efforts

Generally speaking, the EU has a significant conflict resolution potential, due to its accumulation of resources and expertise; immense donor potential and a diversity of experience in dealing with armed conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction. In addition, the EU could provide an enticing alternative to conflicts where UN involvement is not desired, and where there is not sufficient regional organization.

Monitoring

For instance, in the case of the Aceh province in Indonesia, the EU together with five ASEAN countries composed the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM), which was well accepted by both parties of the conflict. It should be pointed out, however, that the EU involvement in Aceh



was suggested by facilitators of the Aceh peace process, the Finnish Conflict Management Initiative led by former President Martti Ahtisaari. It can be argued whether a similar monitoring mission can be established after a military victory rather than after a negotiated agreement, and, more importantly, whether the government in questions would welcome such an initiative. The activity of the most recent monitoring mission, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) composed by the Nordic group (Sweden, Finland, Denmark and two non-EU countries, Norway and Iceland) was shaped by their desire to remain impartial whilst dealing with actors' asymmetry. The perception of the SLMM should not affect decision making when assessing the current situation. The Government of Sri Lanka will most certainly be opposed to involvement by any external actor at this stage, however, the international community, spearheaded by the EU, should emphasize the need of independent monitoring of the situation in relation to post-conflict reconstruction and treatment of the Tamil minority, and should offer its assistance in this matter. A caveat about the media situation should be mentioned; it is disturbing that the Government has been preventing independent journalists from entering the Northern territory, but it is even more worrisome that violent attacks have been reported against a number of Sri Lankan journalists, both Tamil and Sinhala, who attempted to report independently about the Government military campaign against the LTTE. The Government officials have strictly denied any involvement in the attacks, and insisted on a thorough investigation of the crimes, which has not brought any results yet.

Supporting Reconciliation Efforts

The question remains whether the EU is willing to back up its political and donor involvements in peace processes by providing monitoring missions in regions that are not in its immediate neighborhood. It could also be argued that the EU's leverage is limited in parts of the world where it cannot offer its greatest incentive, the prospect of a potential membership.

In conclusion, impartial monitoring will be essential for reconciliation and restoring trust between the Tamil and Sinhala communities. The question remains whether the EU would be interested in this role, and whether it would be accepted by the Government and the Tamils. Regrettably, there is not a regional organization, that

could assume the role, should the EU involvement turn out to be unsuitable. With regards to the current situation in Sri Lanka, it can only be speculated whether the military victory will boost national sentiments and give rise to Sinhala nationalism. It is very important that the government continues presenting the situation as a victory of all and a beginning of Sri Lanka as a country with equal conditions and opportunities for all its ethnic groups.

**written on May 15, updated on May 18*

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