



Sri Lanka and the Peace Makers A Story of Norway and India

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More than two years after Sri Lanka militarily vanquished the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a manner few had anticipated, a Norwegian government-led investigation into the collapse of the 2002 peace process has resulted in a comprehensive and revealing report that is bound to reopen some old wounds as well as renew attention on the widely alleged human rights violations during the last stages of the military operation, besides Colombo's delay in finding a political formula to address Tamil grievances and aspirations.

I "PAWNS OF PEACE"

Titled "Pawns of Peace: Evaluation of Norwegian Peace Efforts in Sri Lanka 1997-2009," the 202-page report contains cautionary tales for international conflict resolutionists dealing with newly-confident non-Western nations that have well defined ideas of national sovereignty and the limits of outside intervention. Besides highlighting in a forthright way Norway's mistakes and its positive contributions, the report, released in Oslo in November, sheds light on the dissonance between New Delhi's ambiguous position on the military operation and its humanitarian toll – designed to suit all audiences at home and abroad – and its avowedly anti-LTTE policy that ensured there would be no Indian pressure on the Mahinda Rajapaksa government to stop the operations. Oslo's decision to investigate and introspect on its failure in Sri Lanka, where its ambitious moves to bring about a negotiated settlement to a quarter century of conflict failed, followed domestic criticism of its peace-making efforts.

Norwegian involvement in Sri Lanka spanned 12

long years – from 1997 to 2009. Although Norway was (and is) involved in several peace-making efforts around the world, Sri Lanka was the only place where it was the sole facilitator. Norway invested heavily in Sri Lanka, both monetarily and in human resources, aspiring to end a conflict that since 1983 had left tens of thousands dead, thousands more wounded or maimed and a once tranquil island nation battered. And the war, in a critical part of South Asia, showed no signs of ending.

What emerges from the study is an informed and, in some ways, disturbing story. First, Oslo was invited by Colombo and the LTTE to help usher in peace but which, like in the case of New Delhi earlier, later found itself at the receiving end of both parties. Second, the international community was also deeply engaged in the peace process but whose members did not always see eye to eye on the details. Third, India was undoubtedly a key factor in Sri Lanka but which, while seemingly took a middle path and seeking an end to the war and tilted heavily towards a militarily aggressive Colombo. Lastly, the Sri Lankan regime that decided to crush the LTTE, and in the process has become a mirror image of the Tamil Tigers; and LTTE which remained inflexibly wedded to its cause of Tamil Eelam, ultimately losing everything it had, leaving the Tamils it claimed to represent on bent knees.

II THE TALE OF INDIA

The report has numerous references to India. As Norway took cautious steps towards peace in Sri Lanka, holding confidential discussions with both Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran, Norwegian diplomats

began visiting New Delhi and holding meetings “with the Indian Foreign Secretary, the National Security Advisor and the intelligence agency (RAW)”. All of this was away from the media glare. It was the start of the process that ultimately led to the drafting of the February 2002 ceasefire agreement (CFA). After these meetings it became “clear (to Norwegians) that India will keep an arm’s length approach and will not take an active role in the process”.

Based on wide-ranging interviews and archives made available by the Norwegian government, it reveals India’s predicament as Sri Lanka took on the LTTE. Publicly, India unceasingly urged successive Sri Lankan governments to meet the “legitimate aspirations” of the Tamil community, giving the impression that it was supportive of negotiations with the LTTE. But as the peace process began to unravel, more particularly after the LTTE suffered a crippling and unprecedented split in March-April 2004 (a month before the Congress rode to power in New Delhi), India’s position against the Tigers hardened. “India criticizes Norway in private meetings for being too ‘LTTE friendly’ and underlines the need to ‘put the LTTE in its place’,” says the report.

Once Rajapaksa took charge in November 2005 after being elected President, India did not oppose Sri Lanka giving precedence to the military operation, in the process letting it to overwhelm the chances of a negotiated settlement. India quietly began providing critical radar and intelligence information to the Sri Lankan armed forces – a role also played by the US. And while maintaining that it cannot provide “offensive military assets”, New Delhi did not object to Sri Lankan purchasing weaponry elsewhere. “Most importantly, Indian opposition to the LTTE starts to translate into firmer backing for the Sri Lankan government.”

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casualties (towards the end of 2008), the Indian government makes it clear that it supported a continuation of the (military) offensive and the defeat of the LTTE”. The Congress-led government refused to apply pressure on Sri Lanka to call off the ceasefire even though the regime counted as members seemingly pro-LTTE parties from Tamil Nadu. But almost till the time the LTTE was crushed and its leadership wiped out in May 2009, India never came out in such undisguised manner in support of Colombo. “In public, however, the Indian government refrains from voicing these views.”

The study details the Rajapaksa regime’s worry about a possible defeat of the Congress party in the April-May 2009 Lok Sabha election. Colombo feared that if the Congress was voted out, “someone will come to the insurgents’ aid”. It alleges that India’s Home Minister, P. Chidambaram, a Lok Sabha member from Tamil Nadu, contacted Prabhakaran towards the end of the conflict – it does not say how the contact was made – and suggested that “the LTTE agrees to a pre-drafted statement that they will lay down their weapons”. The move (coinciding with other efforts globally to try rescue the LTTE leadership) apparently leaked to pro-LTTE Tamil Nadu politician Vaiko, “who rejects it as a Congress truck and assures the LTTE that the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) will win the elections and come to the Tigers’ cause”. This analysis proved to be a horrible blunder.

It is indeed true that LTTE supporters, like most people even in India, did feel that the Congress would not be able to retain power in 2009. And realizing that the Sri Lankan government was intensifying the military offensive because it too shared the fear, the LTTE attempted till the very last minute to rally the Tamil Diaspora around the world so as to put pressure on the West to try halting the war. But Colombo was in no mood to compromise. By then, the Rajapaksa regime had come to choking the Tigers for good and it saw no benefit in loosening its grip, come what may. Colombo had also formed an international arc that included, besides immediate neighbour India, countries as wide ranging as China, Pakistan and Iran to help it withstand intense Western pressures to go slow. “In hindsight,” says the report, “the Norwegian team underestimates the Sri Lankan government’s strength, both militarily and politically.”

It may be a coincidence, but LTTE chief Prabhakaran lay dead in northern Sri Lanka precisely when the Lok Sabha results were

declared in India, with the Congress proving pundits wrong by dramatically retaining power for another five years. And when the LTTE was crushed, DMK leaders in Delhi (and Chennai) were not discussing the fate of Prabhakaran and his family but jockeying for the most coveted ministries in the Manmohan Singh cabinet!.

A news story published by the author in February 2008 for IANS revealed for the first time that New Delhi had played a key but covert role in the events which culminated in the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA). While I did provide some fascinating and (until then) unknown details, at the specific request of sources who spoke to me, I refrained from saying that it was the RAW which was at the heart of India's covert involvement. My revelation produced disbelief not just in New Delhi, Chennai and Colombo but elsewhere too. Even some Norwegians were surprised. Austin Fernando, who was Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary when the CFA was signed in 2002, expressed surprise that there had been Indian covert involvement in the peace process.

III CONFESSIONS OF ERIC SOLHEIM

The Norwegian report, for the first time ever, makes a reference to RAW. But at the event where the report was released, and later while speaking to me also in Oslo, Norwegian minister and the former Special Envoy to Sri Lanka, Erik Solheim, came out with some startling details over the involvement of the Indian intelligence, acting (as I had reported much earlier) with the full backing of the Indian government.

Solheim revealed that when Norway decided to get involved in Sri Lanka, India counselled patience. "If you cannot be patient, then please go away," he quoted a senior Indian official as saying. "Otherwise, you will only complicate the situation." My own sources have told me that the draft of the CFA repeatedly travelled to New Delhi for comments while it was being quietly discussed by the leadership of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. Solheim confirmed this, saying he frequently met RAW officials, at times at the Delhi airport, and that India was kept aware of "each and every detail". In a confession that is bound to surprise many, he said that it was India which came out with a list of countries which could be members of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), the Nordic body that was formed to oversee the peace process in the country's north and east.

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involved in the Sri Lanka peace process "at every step" but none of this was made public. He also claimed that Indian government officials and LTTE representatives had a "secret meeting" ahead of the CFA but refused to say where this happened. (This may have been the reason why Prabhakaran, at his April 2002 press conference in Kilinochchi, claimed with an air of confidence that he was sure India would soon lift the ban on the LTTE. India did not.). Solheim told me that India was very clear right from the start that it would never accept any break up of Sri Lanka and it desired a peaceful end to the conflict. He said the Indian government accepted Norway's role but made it clear that they did not want "any major (Western) player to get sucked into Sri Lanka". Indian inputs over the nascent peace process, he said, were "sound" and "constantly good" although Indian officials were often sceptical too about the prospects of Colombo and the LTTE embracing one another for good.

Solheim also came out with revelations about Anton Balasingham, the LTTE theoretician and the one man who wielded a lot of influence on Prabhakaran. Balasingham, he said, "always understood that nothing will work if it went against Indian interests". Balasingham, however, told Solheim that Prabhakaran and his intelligence chief Pottu Amman had for months insisted that they were not involved in Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Balasingham told the Norwegian minister: "I did not believe their story, and they stopped lying to me once they realized I was not buying the story."

A leftwing politician, Solheim – who met Prabhakaran about ten times (in northern Sri Lanka) and Balasingham perhaps hundred times, mostly in London -- used the occasion to make some scathing criticism of the LTTE chief. The Tigers, he said, made "very major mistakes", one of which was the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Another was the killing of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman

Kadrigamar. Both killings fetched no dividends to the LTTE; on the contrary, the first destroyed whatever goodwill the Tigers had in India, the one country that mattered most in Sri Lanka. The second assassination turned much of the West against the LTTE. In free and frank discussions with Solheim, Balasingham once described Prabhakaran as “an isolated warlord” whose grasp of international politics was dismal.

Solheim defended himself against criticism that he did not anticipate the final war which finished off the LTTE. He pointed out that the Indian administration, which followed the conflict very closely, also did not think that the Sri Lankan government would be able to achieve a military victory – until 2008. It was only from that year that Indian intelligence officials began sharing their assessment with Solheim that Sri Lanka might militarily overwhelm the Tamil Tigers.

In any case, Mahinda Rajapaksa would never have come to power if Prabhakaran had not ordered Tamils in Sri Lanka’s north and east to boycott the 2005 presidential election. The decision deprived his opponent Ranil Wickremesinghe of crucial Tamil votes from the region, leading to Rajapaksa’s narrow victory.

Solheim’s argument was that while there could be legitimate criticism directed at Norway (some of which he accepted), too many things happened in that complex theatre called Sri Lanka that no one had anticipated. These included (apart from the LTTE asking Tamils to boycott the presidential vote), the split in the LTTE in 2004 and the death of Balasingham in December 2006. “After his death, there was not one meaningful political or military initiative by the LTTE.”

IV CONCLUSIONS & LESSONS TO LEARN

For Norway, involved in varying degrees in several peace processes around the world, there are plenty of lessons, as they emerge in this document. Norway had many positives to its credit in Sri Lanka. One was the CFA it helped bring about in 2002, which ushered in peace – or at least, an absence of war – after many years. In the process, without doubt, thousands of lives were saved. Norway was also able to keep Colombo and the LTTE talking even in adverse

circumstances, leading, at one point, to the two sides agreeing to work for a conflict resolution based on federal principles. But the peace process failed because it could not persuade Colombo or the LTTE to make “any significant shift” in their entrenched positions.

The peace moves were also constrained by the “structural features” of the Sri Lankan state and its ethno-centric politics. The reports makes the candid admission that “soft power mediator Norway” could not counter or transform many of the dynamics that ripped apart the peace process. It suggests different courses of action might have mitigated some problems. One such suggestion is that Oslo should not disengage itself from Sri Lanka when it became clear that a full-scale war had resumed again between the LTTE and Colombo. For the future, the report suggests that Norway “should avoid situations where it is a weak and isolated mediator, with limited and inconsistent international backing”. Mediators should attach firm conditions to their involvement. Western thinking that aid can be a substitute for politics turned out to be misplaced. And even-handedness between a state and non-state actor was not the desired option in the age of war on terror.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the Rajapaksa government’s decision to cock a snook at the West and count on the support of Asian countries to take on the LTTE – while disregarding the terrible consequences that followed, when tens of thousands of innocents were caught up in the slowly shrinking Tiger zone – make apparent the difficulties for traditional mediation efforts by Western countries. “The Sri Lankan peace process reflects broader global changes,” the report says. “It began as an experiment in liberal peace building and ended as a result of a very different ‘Asian model’ of ‘conflict resolution’.” Building on Westphalian notions of sovereignty and non-interference, a strong developmental state, the military crushing of the ‘terrorism’, and the prevalence of order over dissent or political change, this model may serve as an inspiration for other countries in the region,” the report says, cautioning that this “global eastward shift” may have far-reaching consequences for the possibilities of “Norwegian-style” mediation in the future.

The Views expressed are authors’ own.