Transition from War to Peace: National Unity remains a durable solution for Sri Lanka
By Srimal Fernando

The significant factor in the sparking of the crisis that led to the Sri Lankan conflict was the rivalry between the Sinhalese and Tamils living in the southern and in the northern provinces of the country. Sri Lanka was engulfed in a civil war from 1983 to 2009. The Tamil Tigers’ uprising was one of the most misunderstood political troubles in the island nation for decades. In 1983, Sri Lanka was severely unprepared for a war. A major landmark in the spiral of violence was a landmine blast in Tirunelveli, in Jaffna, causing deaths of 13 Sri Lankan soldiers. For decades Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) managed to create a de facto autonomous enclave in the northern province of Sri Lanka and repulsed the advances by the Sri Lankan forces. There was little potential for peace after failed tries at peace talks between the two conflicting parties. Once the war spilled over into the mid-1980s during the Eelam War IV, the Tamil Tigers prevented the Sri Lankan forces from capturing the strategic towns of Jaffna, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu.

In May 2009, Sri Lanka armed forces won the swiftest and most decisive battles in the modern history of Sri Lanka. Throughout the course of the Sri Lankan conflict, the predominantly Sinhala government of the country continued its state-centric bias towards the war on terror against Tamil Tigers and sympathisers of the Lankan Tamil cause using politically pro-government biased propaganda to mobilize the public at large. The operational plans for the final push by the Sri Lankan government forces from Muhimalai Forward Defence Line (MFDL) in Jaffna to Nanthikadal Lagoon in the Northern province of Sri Lanka changed countless times in the run up to the war. The Sri Lankan government’s effort to protect civilians in the conflict zone through creation of safe corridors and no fire zones and by adhering to a “zero civilian casualty”.

In the final days of the conflict in May 2009, along with the Tamil Tigers around 330,000 Tamil civilians had been trapped and packed into an area of few square kilometers on the island’s Northeast coastal belt. Tamil civilians, trying to flee Sri Lankan war during the final stages of the conflict, were blown on the streets due to
shelling by military. The disparity lay in the scope of the ground operations in the last phase of the conflict at Mullivaikal and at Chalai beaches. The battles intensified between both conflicting parties during the last days of the conflict in May 2009. The Tamil Tigers put a desperate defense amidst overwhelming fire power from artillery, multi barrel air sorties.

It is challenging to envision what the confusion of the final days and hours of this horrifying siege must have been. Sri Lankan military has an active fighting force of nearly 3,00,000. The Sri Lankan army, with nearly 200,000 personnel, was one of the most powerful branches of the country’s military apparatuses. The Sri Lankan government raised the defense spending to USD 1.95 billion in 2014. About 100,000 Sri Lankans died as a result of such intense warfare. By the end of 2008, the Tamil Tigers had lost not only thousands of its cadres in the Eelam War IV but also large swaths of Northern territory. After the guns fell silent in Chalai beach in the immediate aftermath of the victory, efforts of re-building of the war-torn areas and the conflict affected communities was to be shouldered by the government of Sri Lanka and the international community to make the area a better place to live in.

In the course of the conflict, the western countries had been struggling to make an impact for a long period to ensure peaceful settlement of the dispute. The new dynamics of global politics that emerged after the US government-led campaign against war on terror. There was a key shift in US policy during the Sri Lankan conflict from peaceful negotiations to war on terror. Of all the countries in South Asia, India and Sri Lanka can boast of an enduring experience in democracy for the past seven decades. India, initially maintained stable and friendly relations with Sri Lanka, but in mid eighties to early nineties, found itself drawn into the civil war. New Delhi remained calm when Sri Lankan forces ordered troops into Mullivaikal on May 18, 2009. This silence supposedly signaled to the Sri Lankan forces a nod of approval for an attack. India does not want to lose sight of the economic and security interest of the Indian Ocean islands like Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

China continues to be a major influence not only within the region but also in a broader framework of global politics. Changes in China’s international behaviour are clearly related to the countries changing image in global international society. It is clear that Former Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa’s ascendance to power led to a new era in China’s involvement in Sri Lanka; China-Sri Lanka relations developed more rapidly. The two countries observed a growing reliance. The Chinese also hoped that their support for Former President Rajapaksa’s regime at this crucial time would pave way for more influence on the bigger projects later. The Chinese manipulated Sri Lanka’s vulnerable situation and its willingness to make strategic
concessions giving Chinese free access to Sri Lanka’s maritime ports and to air facilities. Pakistan was an important provider of arms and training to the Sri Lankan forces during the conflict.

Analyst have offered a variety of explanations about the origin of the Sri Lankan conflict. The ending of the 30 year conflict in Sri Lanka pushed the majority of the Sinhalese towards a more specifically Sinhalese nationalism. The victory in the Sri Lankan conflict transformed and polarised the Sinhalese and the Tamil political matrix.

For Sri Lanka, the relations with India are the most important. The country’s bilateral relationship with India is deeply linked to Sri Lanka’s domestic issues of reconciliation with the Tamil minority. In 2009, Sri Lanka relations with India started on the high note given the silent role played by India on the final stages of the conflict. The relationship between the Tamil Nadu state of India and Sri Lanka have been tense during the post conflict period. The mandate of the Sri Lanka’s own post war commission ‘Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission’ (LLRC) report was made public after being tabled in the parliament on December 16, 2011. In 2015 with the election victory of President Maithripala Sirisena, there is widespread hope, especially within the Tamil community, for a transitional justice process to happen. This conflict in Sri Lanka experienced incalculable damage economically, politically and socially. Trauma in the 30 years of the Sri Lankan conflict has become synonymous with the dilemmas of humanitarian action. In Sri Lanka, there are still potential threats to national security. However a home grown solution is the best way to bring about reconciliation among the two ethnically divided communities. Even though the war has ended, the main problem’s on ethnicity still remains. Sri Lankan politicians representing the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic communities have not been able to come to one platform to obtain a sustainable solution to the national problem.

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