PURSUIT OF PEACE IN SRI LANKA

Bertram Bastiampillai.

Usually when internal peace is absent, and communities remain unreconciled as in Sri Lanka, conflict erupts even with little reason.[1] Then among those who oppose reconciliation and pursue war often are the greatest profiteers such as the arms dealers and commissariat contractors who paradoxically turn out to be the loudest patriots. For peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka initially the need for eschewing violence and intolerence is imperative. This has been done to a little extent.

The prudent value peace and avoid conflict since peace alone makes living pleasant, and there prevail harmony and cordiality among diverse communities. Violence and conflict can lead only to perdition. Those who indulge in strife inevitably perish at the end however strewn with temporary success the path to it may be. Moreover, in conflict and turbulence, trivial causes produce tragic consequences that wreak immense damage. We see this illustrated in Sri Lanka since the mid seventies.[2]

A failure to resolve differences by political means in Sri Lanka led to war.[3] If peace is aimed at, it would be prudent to pursue reconciliation through political dialogue and negotiation rather than to resort to arms to settle differences. War never ends discord. It is a myth that there could be waged a war so as to end wars.

The failure of diverse communities to have been integrated in pre - independent Sri Lanka led to differences, and war later.[4] It was a failure to conduct life among different communities in a fair or equitable manner that began the destruction of peace and accounted for the origins of war among the Sinhalese and Tamil. This bloody conflict has wrought senseless destruction ironically in the name of liberty and democracy. Among communities the better practice would have been upholding non - violence and reconciliation. In Sri Lanka we have failed to do this at such enormous cost.

During the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes, was convinced after experiencing mayhem and murder in the civil war in England that the First and Fundamental law of nature " .... was to seek peace and follow it"[5] In Sri Lanka, it is the older people who have declared war but it is the young who have

to fight and lose lives. The poor and the disadvantaged have gone to the front in a lamentable civil war, and tragically to slaughter. But paradoxically those who clamor loudest urging the pursuit of war rather than reconciliation among estranged communities happen to be the affluent and live insulated from, unaffected by the misfortunes that protracted war has brought upon Sri Lanka.

Those who cry out for war ignore that victims of war are often innocent human beings.[6] It is gruesome that these helpless human beings. are placed in an unenviable position taking on a job as a soldier or sailor to aircraftman or fighter since they are unemployed. They lay down their lives because some others in a better off position decide that a war is necessary. As Aldous Huxley said it in "The Olive Tree" (1937) hapless individuals are condemned by the monstrous convention of politics to murder or be murdered in quarrels not their own"[7]

"War should belong to the tragic past in history. It should find no place in humanity' s agenda for the future" In Sri Lanka authorities have to be firm because many objections are raised against steps taken toward peace.[8] At the same time, militants also have to change their course as they appear to do now. The authorities should never fear to negotiate: there should be a willingness to compromise on both sides. Neither the state nor the militants should be intractable. People have to put an end to this war or else it is sure that war will put an end to this war or else it is sure that war will put an end to people as John Kennedy said in the United Nations in 1961.

Until the war cry is forgotten there is unlikely to be ethnic peace or communal reconciliation. In our Island's conflicts there are some who argue: first win the war, finish it, and then think of any settlement. This does not take into account that wars could be unwinnable. Waging the war to a bitter end till the militants are exterminated demonstrate indifference to the fact that war can be the greatest plague that afflicts all.

Owing to the war, families are being destroyed and values are being lost. There is no real freedom because you cannot be free of fear without peace. The foremost faith in Sri Lanka is Buddhism and a German Philosopher sums up: "The things necessary to

Buddhism are a very mild climate", customs of great gentleness and liberality, and no milifarism,[9] All other faiths professed similar values and foster peace. Yet we have failed in restoring peace.

In managing the militant conflict in Sri Lanka it is significant to recall that a good general not only sees the way to victory but also knows that when victory could be unlikely compromise, along with negotiations, would be more sagacious and needed. The state and the military have to acknowledge and accept this . Furthermore, it is easy to commence a war, but difficult to end it since it's beginning and end are not under the control of the same authority. This is all too clear in Sri Lanka.

War is really barbarism. Some of us who have neither fired a shot nor heard the groans of the wounded are those who clamour most for blood and vengeance. Such persons forget that war is hell for a good portion of our citizens, and it is best to cry aloud for reconciliation and peace instead of for war. In the unending conflict that had badly hurt Sri Lanka , the peace one should seek for is peace without victory, a peace that should be built upon common participation by all communities in a common benefit. Then there will develop reconciliation even among hostile parties.

Positive peace in Sri Lanka should entail integrative and co - operative relations among communities. Moreover, there should be no salient inequalities in the opportunities in life among the diverse peoples. Certain social conditions furthermore are essential to foster integration, equity and mutual security. But all these could be cultivated only if there is no conflict and peace prevails. Finally steps have to be undertaken to keep the   peace by establishing conditions for maintaining and expanding non - violent relations and fair and equitable transactions among all in our country.[10]

In regard to the civil conflict within Sri Lanka we have to encounter and overcome the pressure of the forces, be they military, industrial and political elites maintaining heavy military expenditure. We also have to ward off unhealthy competition among political elites to garner electoral support by sustaining the war. Popular support for military preparedness is mobilised. Masses are canvassed to be supportive of the war on the grounds that there is an

awesome threat to national integrity and sovereignty. Those who prefer peace should patiently and rationally educate people on whether such fears are genuine or not.

Furthermore, in Sri Lanka, we have to focus attention on some of the media in the way in which language is utilised to discuss the conflict and to urge waging it[11]. The media seems to be at times over emphasising violence in discussing the conflict. Consequently people become dehumanised in getting engrossed in the conflict. This accounts for excessive conflict escalation and an unmanageability of strife. It would be beneficial if more information is disseminated by the media about effective non-violent ways of settling conflicts which unhappily is not often the case in Sri Lanka.

If integration of communities within Sri Lanka which would involve exchange of personal relations, goods and ideas is encouraged then chances of conflict could be reduced. Integration enhances mutual security and decreases chances of conflicts erupting or communities threatening each other's security. Firmer integration creates stronger bonds of mutual identity and interest and also improves communi cation and exchanges that communities within a country will consider valuable. In Sri Lanka the communities remained disaggregated in colonial times and allowed to remain so even after independence was gained in February 1948[12]. Also , unfortunately, the less development of non - violent or civilian based decence which is less threatening was not allowed to thrive. If it had been allowed to grow, provocation leading to violence would not have developed so intensively and persistently.

Today Sri Lanka's enduring conflict will figure among the ethnic and nationalist conflicts that have grown badly prominent. The violent militance and intractability arising from the obduracy of a group could be unique. The struggle in Sri Lanka focuses on strife over territory and authority. In a settlement of this sort of conflict there is often an " avoidable denial of what is needed to satisfy fundamental needs" This, of course , was that which provided the cause for the genesis of the problem that has now got more complicated and compounded.

In looking out for the nature of the conflict that is ravaging Sri Lanka one must look back to the political situation, aims, and decisions which

gave rise to it. We hark back to the nid nineteen fifties when the official Language Act was enacted within a context of political competition when one political party vied with another to get on to the commanding political centre.[13] Political aims and decisions became controversial. They become popularly emotive, and in turn extreme. Consequently. the resultant conflict also grew bloody costly, and lingered unabated.

To bring about reconciliation and peace among Sri Lankan communities it would br good at first to endeavors to limit escalation of the conflict. If should be contained . Steps need to be taken to de - escalate the conflict, at least, in stages and as a transitional measure . New fighting has ceased. Negotiations so far had failed and have not proved to be the means to end the conflict. Yet there should be a readiness to negotiate as at present perhaps a facilitator like Norway could bring obstinate parties and militants back to the negotiating table. Compromise is needed neither surrender nor defeat.

Popular forces should be induced to pressure governments as well as their adversaries to shift toward accommodation. Public opinion and organized public pressure in Sri Lanka should influence authorities, their critics, as the "militants" in the direction of peace making. To break a deadlock in peace making it may be at times essential to make unilateral conciliatory gestures that could de - escalate conflicts. On other occasions, crises have to be so managed so that they become changing agents of obstinate conflicts into negotiable problems. Techniques should be sought for negotiating mutually acceptable agreements among conflictual parties. These strategies could help in ending Sri Lanka's intractable conflict.

One must pay attention to the role of non official groups in the process of peace making. These groups could serve as links and channels of communication between adversaries. Even those groups on one side, could furnish some mediating services in limiting or redressing the intensity of a prolonged strife acting more or less as quasi - mediators. Whatever it be, one should not overlook the likely roles of mediation in de - escalating conflict, and an eventual resolution of it even in Sri Lanka. The practice of a Mediator relates to getting petting parties to a negotiating position and venue, to facilitating their meetings, creating new options for and

building support for agreements. In settling strife it is not merely non official and informal mediation that matters. We have to take also into reckoning the part playable by governmental actors who often command greater resources and consideration of roles that could be taken by in - governmental organisations. Sometimes useful initiatives lie with them.

The need is not only to bring about cease fires as a preliminary step to making peace and effecting reconciliation but also vitally to sustain such cease fires and truces. Disputes about peace agreements should be settled with minimum delay so that in the meantime, misunderstandings do not grow. Moreover, confidence between the erstwhile alienated parties should be nurtured and not allowed to collapse. This seems to be happening, happily.

When we think of the Sri Lankan conflict it is prudent to ponder on the words of Hanan Ashrawi of the PLO, "If the Arabs and the Israelis can resolve their conflict, anyone can". This should give us hope. Sadly However, she had spoken too soon but yet wisely. In South Africa things have gone better. On the contrary often Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Sri Lanka continued to confront ethnic strife, and we have to strive for reconciliation and peace.

A virile democracy can be of invaluable assistance to avert conflict as would some sort of power - sharing arrangements that permit various ethnic groups to have a voice in their own affairs[14]. Minorities need the right to use their own language. Sri Lanka has recognised this but it has to be more effectively translated into practice. They yearn to have their cultural values reflected in their education, and devolution could provide room for this. Strong leaders are needed. We do have a firm and far seeing government and heard at the helm. But we also need a responsible Opposition. One has to hope for this. South Africa had these and was able to initiate a process of peace and reconciliation that seems to work up to now well.

There should be inclusion of the diverse peoples in the political framework and process as in South Africa. Sri Lanka is trying to bring about this. But we also need disengagement from violence. The way to evolve a solution of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict in the protection of the ethnic identity of diverse peoples because "It is precisely when ethnic or cultural identity is

threatened that it becomes most important to people[16]. Now in Sri Lanka the protection of the ethnic and cultural identity of on minority is being assured. but not so much is practice howler This augurs well for peace and one can entertain some hope of harmony among communities in a multi communal society.

Outside forces too help in settling internal conflicts as was evident in Norway mediating the Palestinian - Israeli settlement and the Clinton Administration quietly intervening in Ireland despite already failures in Northern Ireland. But necks hon ban slow and halting. Mediation could perhaps help in Sri Lanka too but a settlement imposed by strong nations may not work as the example of Somalia had illustrated. Once the hand of the strong power the settlement cracks.

If citizens define themselves in civic terms as Sri Lankans rather than as Tamil Sri Lankans or Sinhalese Sri Lankans then ethnic diversity is unlikely to produce violent or other then ethnic diversity is unlikely to produce violent or bother types of ethnic diversity is unlikely to produce violent or other types of ethnic conflicts. Unfortunately, in Sri Lanka people saw and see themselves as polarised ethnic or communal groups. This naturally provoked conflicts. Moreover, these diverse ethnic groups viewed themselves as separate groups and not as fellow Sri Lankans. Attitudes in society matter much in bringing about concord and peace. Sri Lanka should foster attitudes which do not demonstrate that ethnic differences mean much. Sri Lanka. should under - play differences and build cordiality.

A federal or like system of government wherein provinces or regions experience substantial power could work better in Sri Lanka with it's diverse and highly conscious distinct ethnic communities. It would help minority groups to get their voices heard. Although the United states, Canada, Australia, India and Nigeria are federal to a greater or lesser extent they have not cracked up because of their ethnic problems. And federalism of course implies existence of a democratic framework, which fortunately exists more or less in Sri Lanka.

The Soviet Union was federal, but it also was a command state conducted from Moscow with hardly any authority devolved to constituent republics. Once the centralised dictatorship collapsed the federal set up

broke up. In Sri Lanka it is possible in a federal - like framework to accommodate various identities and induce reconciliation. Ethnic communities could be reassured of their identity through the enjoyment of cultural freedom. Language rights, education rights, and guaranteed representation in the Central Government through a second chamber or so could be coupled with regional self-rule. These are measures that should contribute to building up durable peace in Sri Lanka among communities. Centralisation or assimilation will not work in Sri Lanka since divergences are felt and lie embedded.[17]

In Sri Lanka peace will have to confront several obstacles. Cynics and sceptics will look with doubt after so many failed cease fires of the past and disappointments over unhonoured agreements. Will the militants really give up their bellicose attitude for the give and take and compromise of peaceful political experiment?. It is however only the opinion of the concerned and affected that will perhaps influence militants to consider seriously a formula for governing a province. Bitterness, mistrust, threats and counter threats are likely to accompany even

peaceful reconciliation but should not discourage or deter peace makers.

Perhaps, even if militancy is suppressed, discontented communities may not give up the objective of seeking autonomously managed units. The path toward a peaceful resolution of severe intractable differences could be strewn with impediments. But if both sides could be coaxed to dialogue and not fight one another progress could follow.

The militants can claim to have suffered much discrimination at the hands of a majority. Yet if they decide to take on accommodative terms now laid bare there can be room for hope. If the stalemate con be broken an it now seems, it is an achievement. Then there can be ways of reaching peace. Terms made known could be discussed, and made to be even fairer to each other but for this to happen hostility has to cease as it has, now. Both sides should reduce and cease aggression. Then the framework of settlement could be worked out by both parties and jointly the picture not be forgotten that for durable peace to emerge and for lasting reconciliation to occur several parties have to concur and contribute to make up an acceptable settlement although the principal roles devolve on the Government and the militant fighters for freedom.

Notes

1. Little, David. **Sri Lanka - The Invention of Enmity** (United States Institute of Peace press, Washington, 1993 pp 1 - 47

2. M.R.Narayan Swamy. **Tigers of Lanka - From Boys to Guerrillas** (2nd edition with Epilogue, Yapa Bookshop, Delhi, 1996).

3. Sivarajah, Ambalavanar - **Politics of Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka** (South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 1996).

4. Bose, Sumantra. **States, Nations, Sovereignty - Sri Lanka, India and The Tamil Eelam Movement** (Sage Publications, India pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1994).

5. Hobbes, Thomas - **Leviathan** (England, 1651).

6. West, Julian. "Civilians Bear the Brunt of War on Tamils" in **The Independent** (14 February 1991, London).

7. Huxley, Aldous Leonard. **The Olive Tree,** (England, 1937).

8. West, Julian. "Monk's Fan the flames of Sri Lanka's Bloody War" in **The Independent** (16 February 1991, London).

9. Nietzsche, Frederick Wilhelm. (**The Antichrist,** from London, 1888).

10. Ed. Seevaratham, N. **The Tamil National Question and the Indo - Sri Lanka Accord** (Konark publishers, New Delhi, 1989).

11. Nissan, Elizabeth. **Sri Lanka : A Bitter Harvest** (Minority Rights group, London, 1996).

12. Russel Jane, **Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Constitution.** 1931 - 1947 (Tisara Prakasakaya Ltd. Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, 1982) ; Jayawardena, Kumari. **Ethnic and Class Conflicts in Sri Lanka,** (Centre for Social Analysis, Colombo, 1986).

13. Kearney, Robbert N. "Language and the Rise of Tamil separation in Sri Lanka", **Asian Survey,** vol. 18no . 5. (May, 1978) pp. 521 - 534. Vittachi, Tarzie, **Emergency 58 : The story of The Ceylon Race Riots,** (Andre Deutzch, London, 1958) ; Farmer B.H, **Ceylon:** "A Divided Nation" (Oxford university press, London,1967).

14. (Ed.) Bastian, Sunil. **Devolution and Development in Sri Lanka** (International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, konark Publishers, pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1984).

15. Mandela, Nelson. **Long Walk to Freedom - The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela** (Little, Brown and Company, Britain 1994).

16. Misra, S.S. **Ethnic Conflict and Security, Crisis in Sri Lanka,** (Kalinga Publications, Delhi, 1995).

17. International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, **Sri Lanka The Devolution Debate** (Colombo, 1996).

* ———— *