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MoU: A Door TO Peace?

The fifth 'peace process' was flagged off in Vavuniya when the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for a cease-fire between the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was handed over to the facilitator, Norwegian Government, on 22 February 2002. The previous four abortive 'peace processes' were the 1985 Thimpu Talks (primarily a confrontation between President Jayawardene and the LTTE), followed by the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord (to which the LTTE was not a signatory), the 1990 discussions between President Premadasa and the LTTE and the 1995 exchanges between President Kumaratunga and the LTTE. Each time the Sinhalese President was credited with the desire for peace while the intentions of the LTTE and its Leader Prabhakaran were viewed at best with suspicion.

However, each time the President in power refused to consider an alternate federal model of government, based on linguistic states. Since Tamils will retain the military capability developed by the LTTE after a political settlement is reached, the model must be a confederal one. This confederal alternative is the indispensable basis for negotiations with the LTTE; and it alone could possibly usher in permanent peace.

The current 'peace process' has so far been limited to political posturing between the Sinhalese Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and the LTTE. It has been enthusiastically welcomed by the governments of United States of America, Canada and Britain. The western fraction of the international community, led by the facilitator, is purveying the fiction that Wickremesinghe could achieve a negotiated settlement to the armed conflict between the Sinhalese Sri Lankan State and the Tamil LTTE. Can Wickremesinghe cobble together what the United States Ambassador so glibly put during his visit to Jaffna last year, as "a mutually satisfactory, contemporary political system to accommodate the island's diversity" (The Island, 9/Mar/01)?

We, The Action Group of Tamils (TAGOT), think not. In our view, there is no scope for a sustainable political settlement at present for the following reasons.

National psychology: Two generations of Sinhalese politicians (barring a few toothless Leftists), every Sinhalese political party and the vast majority of Sinhalese people have over the past half century resolutely rejected the Tamil demand for a federal alternative. Conceding it now, and a confederal one at that, is tantamount to a historical defeat for Sinhalese nationalism. No Sinhalese leader of any hue - either current or on the political horizon - contemplates being the architect of such national humiliation. Wickremesinghe and his Sinhalese party, the United National Party (UNP), too are firmly opposed to a federal alternative.

Political imperative: The centralisation of power has been the political logic since the early 1970s. The 1971 Insurrection of the Sinhalese Jathika Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) laid bare the class contradictions and caste antagonisms within Sinhalese society. It also exposed the vulnerability of the ruling Sinhalese upper class. Following the Insurrection, the then United Front (UF) Government initiated action to transform the largely ceremonial armed forces into a professional war machine. The emergence of the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups in the mid-1970s underlined the national contradiction between the Tamil and Sinhalese nations. The ruling Sinhalese upper class centralised power further through the 1977 Executive Presidency to contain the political challenge from Sinhalese workers and peasants; simultaneously, it rapidly Sinhalese the armed forces, bureaucracy and the judiciary to meet the military challenge posed principally by the LTTE. The federal alternative, and inherent devolution of power, dilutes power in the Centre. It goes contrary to the necessary and inescapable logic of centralisation of Sinhalese power. In other words, there is virtually no political space whatsoever for a federal alternative; even less for a confederal one.

If the confederal alternative is to see the light of day, then Wickremesinghe must take two important actions. First, he must commit himself, his UNP and his United National Front (UNF) Coalition Government (in which the UNP is the predominant member) explicitly and unambiguously to do away with the current unitary State as the starting point for negotiations with the LTTE. Federalism in everything but name is a load of garbage. Second, he, his party and his government must launch a sustained campaign to make the confederal alternative palatable to the Sinhalese people. Wickremesinghe has done neither, and TAGOT is convinced he will not do them in the foreseeable future.

The LTTE and the Tamil people will **not** accept a settlement that is less than the confederal alternative. The Sinhalese government obstinately **refuses** to consider even a minimal federal constitution. What on earth, then, is the purpose of the so-called ‘peace process’?

We must not allow the ballyhoo over the ‘peace caravan’ and the nonsense called ‘interim administration’ to detract us from the larger scheme of Sinhalese machinations. TAGOT has continuously been in touch with Sinhalese journalists, analysts and activists and members of the diplomatic community. Our discussions with them and readings between the lines lead us to conclude as follows:

1. The international community pragmatically accepts that Wickremesinghe cannot and will not introduce a confederal or federal alternative. Indeed, it does not seek such reform because to do so would ‘reward LTTE’s terrorism’. In the post-September 11th political climate, positions have hardened further.
2. The international community and the GSL recognise that the LTTE and the Tamil people will not accept anything less than a confederal alternative.
3. So, the international community and the GSL are aware that it is impossible to bring the armed conflict to an end through a just political settlement.

4. The GSL, with the active support of the international community, is scheming to end the armed conflict by emasculating the armed strength of the opposing party - the LTTE.

The main purpose of the so-called 'peace process', therefore, is to eliminate the LTTE's military capability. The then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had helpfully explained this strategy in 1985. The Indian Government hosted the Thimpu Talks and a few weeks before they began, at a press conference he outlined the plan of action. The Talks would lead to an agreement on political reform by the end of 1985. The Indian Government would support the Sri Lankan Government to implement that agreement and, if requested by Jayawardene, would provide military assistance, he said, "to mop up residual terrorism". Of course, 'residual terrorism' meant the LTTE.

Since then, every government cunningly cultivated the 'peace process' for two purposes. First, to legitimise its military aggression by donning the political fig leaf of 'negotiations'; true to form, Wickremesinghe is touting 'asymmetric' decentralisation. Second, to militarily weaken the LTTE by undermining its mass political base among Tamils through the ploy of portraying the organisation as an opponent of political reform and an enemy of peace. The ultimate aim and sole ambition are to neutralise LTTE's military capability.

The military ambitions of the Sri Lankan State is rooted also in the dynamics of power, which dictates that a competing centre of power, especially military power, must be crushed ruthlessly. Successive Sinhalese governments single-mindedly sought that military objective in the Tamil-majority North-East Province (NEP).

TAGOT has no hesitation in declaring that the so-called "peace process" has been and will continue to be an integral, political component of the GSL's politico-military strategy to defeat the LTTE-led Tamil struggle. This fact is amply demonstrated by the continuous and escalating military aggression against Tamils in the NEP from mid-1970s onwards. The Sinhalese aggression led to the 1995 Occupation of Jaffna, the cultural heartland of Tamils.

However, the frontal military attack and duplicitous tactics to drive a political wedge between the LTTE and the Tamil people failed miserably. The LTTE could not be defeated militarily; nor could the Tamil people be duped. As the United States Ambassador grudgingly conceded in Jaffna, "we accept the leaders of the Tigers will be involved in the negotiations. This is because of the LTTE's military standing."

Predictably, plots are being hatched to impair LTTE's 'military standing'. Wickremesinghe mouthed shibboleth about 'negotiations' and 'peace' during his visit to Jaffna on 14 March. At the same time, he deliberately remains silent on a confederal or federal alternative. He knows from experience that, given time, the chauvinists and media would unleash propaganda to shift the attention from the utterly irrelevant 'asymmetric' decentralisation toward the premature disarming of the LTTE.

Cleverly crafted news reports mourn that while the LTTE rejected the so-called 'democratic mainstream', the MoU requires the disarming of non-LTTE Tamil groups. 'The former Tamil militant groups' weeped [[The Hindu](#); 7/Mar/02], "gave up the armed struggle... to join the

country's democratic political mainstream... [But] the cease-fire agreement... has given on a platter to the Tigers what they tried so hard to do all these years with guns and suicide bombers: get rid of all their political rivals". Other anti-Tamil forces soon entered the fray. The United States Government press release alleged "the LTTE are engaged in activities that could jeopardise the recent indefinite cease-fire accord" and regretted that "continued smuggling of weapons by the LTTE could undermine the trust needed to move from cessation of hostilities to a lasting peace" [The Island, 12/Mar/02].

It is not difficult to discern the future. Attention is being adroitly shifted away from what, if any, Wickremesinghe has to offer; simultaneously, possession of arms by the LTTE is being raised as the main, if not the sole, obstacle to taking negotiations forward.

Those who followed the 'peace process' in Northern Ireland would no doubt see the insidious pattern. The talks were to craft a political settlement for ending the armed conflict. But they were soon twisted around by the British Government to put the cart before the horse; it demanded the Irish Republican Army (IRA) should first disarm as a pre-condition for the political settlement and to "save the peace process".

We, in TAGOT, are convinced that in Sri Lanka a similar Machiavellian process is underway. Soon we expect to hear hysterical demands for disarming the LTTE from both the Sri Lankan and foreign governments as well as from other anti-LTTE forces. The demands will be made in the name of 'peace' and 'Tamil human rights' (what else?), and GSL will launch military action against Tamils supposedly to 'salvage the peace process' and 'liberate Tamils'.

Kumaratunga is not in the mood to allow Wickremesinghe to achieve any degree of success on the military front against Tamils and so become the 21st century incarnation of the legendary Sinhalese warrior Duttu Gemunu. That would politically entrench his UNP and drive Kumaratunga's Sinhalese-nationalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) into political wilderness. So, she is laying the political basis to undermine Wickremesinghe's politico-military strategy in the name of what else but 'peace' and 'Sinhalese rights' to 'unite the country'!

Also Kumaratunga is fighting for her own and her dynasty's political survival. If the Constitution is not amended soon, at the end of her current second term of office as President she will go into political oblivion. It is in her interest to ensure that Wickremesinghe's anti-Tamil strategy fails and his UNF Government loses credibility. Then at the end of the first year of the Parliament's life, she could dissolve his government in the hope of bringing her SLFP back to power to amend the Constitution to give her dynasty a fresh lease of life.

In TAGOT's assessment, the international community fully supports GSL's plan to bury the LTTE-led Tamil struggle. The main stages of that plan are as follows:

1. Neutralise/crush LTTE's military capability.
2. Accelerate Sinhalese colonisation of Tamil lands outside the Jaffna peninsula in the NEP to obliterate Tamil national territorial integrity.

3. Isolate the Jaffna peninsula, the well spring of Tamil struggle, and control the exit and entry of Tamils. Plans were made for this about two decades ago by the then UNP Government. The Kilinochchi District was carved out of the Jaffna District. The purpose is clear from the contour of Kilinochchi's district boundary, which was drawn in a convoluted manner to include the Elephant Pass and its environs into the new district. Control of Elephant Pass was deliberately taken out the Jaffna Kachcheri. The obvious aim was to Sinhalise the new district so that control of Elephant Pass would be in the hands of Sinhalese officers at the Kilinochchi Kachcheri. The sprawling Elephant Pass garrison, over-run by the LTTE, was part of the strategy. The GSL is still pursuing these plans.

Collaborationist Tamil politicians have gone and will go along with these diabolical machinations.

The similarity with Palestine is obvious. The Norwegian sponsored Oslo Agreement has ensured the virtual defeat of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). The Agreement has pitted Chairman Arafat against his own Movement, allowed Israelis to continue colonising Palestinian land and herd Palestinians into ghettos, the entrances and exits to which are controlled by the Israeli armed forces. To hold on to the crumbs of office as Head of Palestinian Administration, Arafat has made concession after concession to Israel; and today he is contemptuously dismissed in the Arab world as "the strip-tease artist of Tel Aviv".

Oslo no doubt expects to achieve similar "success" with the LTTE.

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