

ISAS Brief

No. 106 – Date: 30 April 2009

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Sri Lanka: What Next?

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Sri Lanka's war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has reached its conclusion. The security forces may still take a few days in the last stage of mopping up of the war zone. The area is heavily mined, some 30,000 to 50,000 civilians are still suspected to be trapped in the war zone and there are last ditch attempts by the remaining Tigers to kill as many Sri Lankan soldiers as they can.

The question of the fate of the LTTE leader, Velupilla Prabhakaran, still remains unanswered. At one stage, the Sri Lankan army sources had conceded the possibility of Prabhakaran having already escaped through the sea route. This is not impossible despite the claims of the Sri Lankan navy of keeping the area under strict surveillance. A couple of days ago, eight innocent Tamils from the war zone, in fact, reached the Tamil Nadu coast in a rubber boat without navigation equipment by dodging the Sri Lankan surveillance. It is possible that even if Prabhakaran is still in the so-called 'No Fire Zone', his son, Charles Anthony, may have escaped with a trusted band of associates to keep the struggle for Eelam alive. If the Sri Lankan army succeeds in getting Prabhakaran dead or alive, the world will soon know. If Prabhakaran has indeed escaped, he may not find it too difficult to get a shelter, if not asylum, outside the Sri Lankan shores.

If Prabhakaran and/or his son have escaped, the myth of the LTTE will remain alive and the organisation may be revived in due time. The support for such a revival may come from two sources. The first source is the Tamil diaspora. Though the LTTE's credibility among the Tamil diaspora has been eroded in the past few years and increasing curbs have been placed on the flow of funds to them, the core of the diaspora's support for the LTTE remains intact. This was evident in the demonstrations in Europe, the United States and several Asian countries, including India, to protest against 'the genocide of the Sri Lankan Tamils' by the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime. These diaspora groups may easily be mobilised to rebuild the LTTE.

The second source of support to the LTTE revival project would depend upon the way Colombo responds to the Tamil question. There are clearly two aspects of the Tamil question in a post-LTTE Sri Lanka. One is of immediate attention and that is to take care of and

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rehabilitate more than 250,000 internally-displaced persons (IDPs) resulting from the last phase of the conflict. There are also millions of other IDPs from the northeast scattered in Sri Lanka as a result of the conflict. President Rajapaksa is seeking assistance of at least US\$1 billion from the international community for this purpose. How much of this assistance will flow in and how it will be used will depend considerably on the sincerity and efficiency of the Rajapaksa administration. Various non-government organisations and international donors will also be involved in this massive exercise of reconstruction and rehabilitation, and this will make the process complicated and diversified. Any lapses, and there are bound to be many, in looking after the IDPs and ensuring their permanent resettlement will be politically exploited by the managers of the LTTE revival project.

The other aspect of the Tamil question is the lasting resolution of the ethnic issue in Sri Lanka. This will be a slow and tardy process. Before addressing this question, President Rajapaksa may like to fortify his political position, in relation to his political opponents in Parliament and otherwise, by taking advantage of his 'military victory'. His approach to the ethnic question may be outlined in the way he runs his campaign for political consolidation. However, there are clearly three alternatives. The first is that he sincerely pushes for a devolution package that is acceptable to the majority of Sri Lankan Tamils. This may be easier said than done in view of the opposition, not only from the Sinhala chauvinist forces in the opposition parties like the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna or the People's Liberation Front and the Hella Urumaya, but also from within his own party. Even the coterie around him may not let him proceed smoothly in this direction. His brother, Gothabaya Rajapaksa, and the Sri Lankan Army Chief have clearly laid the parameters of accommodation to the Tamils. They would not prefer their hard won military victory to be frittered away by 'political generosity' to the Tamils. In their perception, Sri Lanka is a country *of* the Sinhalese and *for* the Sinhalese. The Tamils could live here if they so want peacefully. There are people around this coterie that have for long been planning a demographic restructuring of the Tamil-dominated northeastern parts of Sri Lanka.

The second option is that, under the influence of the Sinhala chauvinist forces, President Rajapaksa fails to carry out any meaningful devolution of powers to the Tamils and plays with just cosmetic concessions. This would be resisted by the international community. Not that the Rajapaksa administration has cared much about the international community, but in the months and years to come, his dependence upon the donors will increase and he may have to listen to them. Countries like China have stood by President Rajapaksa in waging the war and such countries will also extend financial support to his task of reconstruction and rehabilitation. However, that support would not be adequate or even politically viable, particularly so if countries such as India and the United States are alienated and left out.

This will take Colombo to the third option, that is, to only partially accommodate the Tamil demands. A partial accommodation of their rights and aspirations will only build the frustrations of the Sri Lankan Tamils. President Rajapaksa may seek the help of non-LTTE groups, led by Duglas Devananda, Colonel Karuna and Anand Sangari, to push his partial package which may also keep his coterie in good humour. It is, however, doubtful if these Tamil groups will become his allies to only a truncated and half-hearted resolution of the ethnic question. These groups have their strong internecine political rivalries and have found it difficult, thus far, to come on one platform. Anyone who is seen to be getting closer to Colombo will face opposition from the others. This is where Prabhakaran's LTTE-revival project will draw strength from. The possibility of the non-LTTE groups, who have hitherto

been collaborating with Colombo under the fear of the LTTE, now taking up the Tamil question in their mutual competitive political mobilisation also cannot be ruled out.

The challenge of stabilising Sri Lanka after defeating the LTTE is a formidable one. President Rajapaksa can meet this challenge only by sincerely resolving the ethnic question in a just and fair manner to the satisfaction of the Tamil community.

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