

Sri Lanka: A Nation Moves On

Written by Salma Yusuf

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SALMA YUSUF, JAN 3 2012

As Sri Lanka emerges from the throes of a three-decade conflict, the opportunities and hope for a new tomorrow spring in the hearts and minds of all its peoples. The kaleidoscope of aspects to be addressed in order to bring the nation back on its feet is far from few. While political and economic considerations are generally accorded priority status for nations in transition the oft-neglected dimension is the need for healing and reconciliation at both individual and nation levels. While reconciliation ought not to be considered a substitute for arriving at political solutions it is meant to complement the efforts to herald in lasting and sustainable stability and peace for a country. It is to be considered but one tool in the arsenal for marshalling a country to positive and new beginnings.

Accordingly, a concerted and coherent effort with all actors and stakeholders coming forward to encourage local ownership of a process of reconciliation with support from external actors becomes paramount to achieving the dividends of prosperity and stability.

Acknowledgement of the need for such a collaborative effort was reflected in the recently concluded inaugural National Conference on Reconciliation convened by the Lakshman Kadirgamar Centre for International and Strategic Studies in Colombo held on 24 November 2011 entitled ' Reconciliation: The Way Forward for Post-Conflict Sri Lanka.' The role and contribution of the state and government, the private sector, civil society, media, youth, artistes, intellectuals and academics were manifest in the diverse perspectives tabled for consideration. While a top-down approach has its merits, sustainability is ensured when a bottom-up driven process that takes cognizance of the needs and aspirations of all a nations' inhabitants are reflected in the policies and programmes that are implemented. The overall aim of the conference was to create space for dialogue on rebuilding relationships between communities and people in the post-war context.

Organized and Natural Reconciliation

The conference commenced with Professor Rohan Gunaratna, Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Singapore observing that since the end of the armed struggle in May 2009, both organized and natural processes of reconciliation are taking place in Sri Lanka. When 280,000 civilians fled from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) infiltrated No Fire Zone to the government safe areas emergency services and humanitarian assistance was immediately forthcoming by the military, police and villagers from the south demonstrated that the organic process of natural reconciliation had begun. He went on to opine that the path to moderation, tolerance and coexistence must be paved as prerequisites for any endeavour to usher in a new chapter for the country based on reconciliation amongst all communities. Professor Gunaratna observed said that the war fighters have completed their task of creating security and it was time for the peacemakers to step in and take over the task of dealing with the 'softer' but equally crucial task of fostering the relational dimension of rebuilding communal harmony.

Furthermore, Professor Gunaratna emphasized the need for an organized process of reconciliation to ensure that there will not be a relapse or resurgence of past animosities that led to hostilities. There exists widespread agreement in the country that there is a need for reconciliation between and among communities. Accordingly, he laid down a four-pronged reconciliation process for Sri Lanka. The first, second and third he stated had already been completed with the rehabilitation of 11,500 terrorists, the reintegration of 280,000 displaced and the reconstruction of the north

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and east particularly the Wannu. He invited the various sectors present to initiate programmes on reconciliation highlighting their role in realizing the fourth aspect, namely, the building of relationships between and within communities.

Forging a Common National Identity

The keynote speech was presented by the Secretary of the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. He traced the key developments of the conflict beginning with the assassination of Alfred Duraiappa, the Mayor of Jaffna in 1975 through to the ending of the military campaign that ended in May 2009. The Secretary of Defence remarked that the defeat of terrorism in the country has allowed peace to return, freedom and democracy to be restored and the economy to thrive making Sri Lanka one of the most secure and stable countries in the world.

He noted that the country has been through a difficult and devastating period in its history and called on the need to cultivate and capitalize on the crucial aspect that unites all its peoples – the common identity of being Sri Lankan. It is time to celebrate similarities and preserve the differences that in turn contribute to strengthening the national identity of being Sri Lankan. It makes me ponder on how the different cultures, religions and ethnicities collude into a 'melting pot' and is what in fact makes us all Sri Lankan.

The notion of Sri Lankan is then not an identity separate from each of the differences. Rather, it is an identity that has resulted from the combination and cohabitation of the various identities. If each citizen sees that being Sri Lankan does not necessitate the need to give up their own identity or multiple identities but rather that the notion of being Sri Lankan subsumes all such identities, we will then reconcile our differences instantly. For what affects the individual and separate identities will in turn affect the common identity of all.

The Defence Secretary stressed the need for equality in opportunities for all Sri Lankans and the need to prevent any discrimination. To achieve peace and prosperity, he stressed the need for reconciliation. 'We must first and foremost be Sri Lankan' were his opening and closing sentiments.

Engagement with the International Community

While the mood is upbeat and the ebb of enthusiasm is high, the challenges that remain to be addressed must not be overlooked to ensure a realistic assessment of what is at hand. The Minister of External Affairs, Professor G L Pieris highlighted the importance of full commitment to implementing the National Trilingual Policy, the absence of which is considered as having catalyzed the conflict. He informed the gathering that the President of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa is to initiate programmes with the Indian government administration to promote the policy and furthermore has dedicated the year 2012 to be characterized as the year of trilingual unity. The former President of India, Dr Abdul Kalam will be visiting Sri Lanka in January on the invitation of the Sri Lankan Government to kick-off the timely initiatives. On the relationship between the government of Sri Lanka and the international community, the Minister of External Affairs expressed candidly on behalf of the government the intention to engage and work in cooperation with the international community, among others, on the aspect of the diaspora, in a spirit of openness, trust and reciprocal benefit.

An Organic Transitional Justice Mechanism

The legal dimension applicable to a post-war nation in transition such as the one in Sri Lanka was engaged by the Senior Advisor to the Cabinet on Legal Affairs and former Attorney General, Mohan Pieris in his remarks to the distinguished gathering. He noted that the Lessons Learnt & Reconciliation Commission was a home-grown transitional justice mechanism that was conceived subsequent to much deliberation and discussion. The setting up of a mechanism to advise on measures to achieve national healing, cohesion and unity was accorded utmost importance right from the time the government undertook the task of facilitating the resettlement of over 300,000 persons displaced in the final months of the conflict and restoring infrastructure and public services in the North and Eastern Provinces of the country. He highlighted the need for locally tailored responses to conflict and human rights abuses if peace and stability are to be sustainable. As was apparent the recurrent theme that resonated throughout

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the day's proceedings was encapsulated in the words of the Senior Advisor to the Cabinet on Legal Affairs, Mohan Pieries when he said ' we will not look over our shoulders but will relentlessly pursue a policy of national reconciliation of one people, one Sri Lankan and one Sri Lankan nationality.'

Between Vengeance and Forgiveness

The approach to healing and reconciliation as echoed by scholars such as Martha Minow has been that of adopting a path of moderation. As such she asserts the wisdom in adopting an approach that is 'Between Vengeance and Forgiveness...' as the path to achieving lasting healing and reconciliation. As any model for healing and reconciliation based on revenge would only foster more evil and hatred descending into a spiral of further divisiveness, any model purely based on a blank check of forgiveness is believed to promote further impunity coupled with invalidating feelings of loss and suffering and having the reverse of restoring dignity on victims.

Healing the wounds of deprivation

In addressing the gathering the Presidential Advisor on Reconciliation, Professor Rajiva Wijesinha remarked that the distinction between restorative and retributive justice must be viewed on the understanding that 'reconciliation does require healing, but the wounds that must be healed are those of deprivation rather than resentment.' The Presidential Advisor went on to sum up steps that the government has taken so far with regard to living conditions in the area worst affected by the conflict: almost all displaced in the last year of the war are now resettled; almost all cadres held in custody have been rehabilitated and returned to their homes and only a few hundred of them will be charged; infrastructure development in the extremely deprived and primitive setting of the Vanni has been improved with the setting up of modern facilities such as schools and hospitals; banks have been established in all areas and commerce is flourishing more than ever before. However, he noted that areas which require attention are better training for public servants and elected officials so as to ensure that projects are planned and managed efficiently reaping maximum benefits. Moreover, there remains a need for a more coherent education system with particular attention to developing competent administrators and creative teaching styles in subjects that matter the most.

Public-private partnerships for Reconciliation

Mr Harin Malwatte, the Secretary General of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce speaking on the role of the business community on reconciliation, explored the potential dividends of public-private sector partnerships in contributing to economic growth and development in the north and the east. Theodore Gunasekera, the General Manager of Brandix East highlighted how private sector participation may foster economic development. The investment of Tristar and Brandix, leaders in the garment industry, are seen as models for possible replication by like-minded private sector enterprises in contributing to reconciliation in the country. Worthy of mention and note are substantial investments that have been made toward programmes that were implemented for reintegration of LTTE cadres and displaced by corporations such as Virtusa, David Peiris, Easwaran Brothers, Holcim, and Dilmah Tea.

A Role for the Military

The military perspective on reconciliation was tabled by Major General Mahinda Hathurusinghe, the Security Forces Commander who discussed the Existing and Emerging Reconciliation Initiatives in the North. It was highlighted that the military had actively been involved in several sectors of intervention that contribute towards reconciliation namely that of demining, resettlement, building of roads and essential infrastructure and the start up of income-generation projects from fisheries to home gardening. Among the speakers was Ms Imelda Sukumar, the Government Agent Jaffna who discussed a range of initiatives to foster reconciliation between the north and the south so as to promote the objectives of moderation, toleration and coexistence. Greater contact and collaboration between the people of the north and the south as tantamount to achieving success at such initiatives was pointed out.

Civil-society activism

Speaking on the role of civil-society organizations, the Executive Director of Sarvodaya, Dr Vinya Ariyaratne,

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emphasized the opportunities that lie inherent in an approach of people-based reconciliation and the need for social dialogue on reconciliation. Such an approach can flourish only in a favourable environment which is promoted by the highest levels of the government. He highlighted the fact that the Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala communities have traditionally lived in peace and harmony and hence at the societal level there exists much goodwill between the communities. He went further to say that the petty political interests at the level of governance is what had exploited ethnic differences and resulted in a conflict that has cost the country much. Professor Amal Jayawardana, the Executive Director of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies highlighted the need for greater civil society participation in reconciliation. The role of youth in bringing about reconciliation between the communities was shared through experiences and successes of initiatives that engaged youth from various parts and sectors of the island by Mr Prashan De Visser, Executive Director of Sri Lanka Unites.

Arts as Therapy

The importance and need for psychosocial healing for meaningful and durable reconciliation was tabled by Ms. Manori Unambuwe, the Co-Founder of Psychosocial Centers in North East who emphasized the need to sustain and continue support for those affected by the conflict including children who are the future of the nation. The little-known use of performance arts for healing and reconciliation through catharsis and related therapeutic models was related by Ms Anoja Weerasinghe of Abhina who shared her experience of using song, dance, art and forum theatre to engage both LTTE cadres and affected citizens.

Media as a Potential Connector

Mr Prashanthlal de Alwis, a Board Member of the Kadirgamar Institute deliberated further on the prospect and potential for new, creative and imaginative modes towards achieving reconciliation. Dr Noel Nadesan, the former Editor of Uthayam presented on the responsibility of media in reconciliation. Media, carrying the powerful ability to either damage or improve relationships through presentation of ideas, images and reinforcing of stereotypes, was called upon to be sensitized to the nuances of a nation in post-war transition.

Diaspora Participation

The all-important aspect of diaspora relations in moving the country forward was explored by Mr. Arun Thambimuttu, whose parents were assassinated by the LTTE. He called upon the diaspora to travel to the north and the east and to participate in the development process. A related aspect of ideology and values was addressed Mr. Nandana Wijesinghe, Director, Presidential Secretariat who illustrated the importance of initiatives such as the Sisudiriya in the restoration of traditional knowledge and virtues of harmony that are an integral part of the Tamil culture but were unfortunately displaced by LTTE's extremist vocabulary that occupied the forefront in most values discourse in the conflict period.

Final Thoughts

It was a day for reflection, hope and resolve, to acknowledge challenges and opportunities as the island nation of Sri Lanka turns a page in its history. The knowledge, understanding and most importantly the realization that each and every one of us has a role to play in writing the future of the land – a land that yearns for peace, stability and prosperity; a land where diversity in culture, tradition, landscape and resources will not be a source of division and misgiving but rather a platform for richness, strength and celebration.

A Review of Sri Lanka's First National Reconciliation Conference titled

'Reconciliation: The Way Forward for Post-Conflict Sri Lanka.'

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