

Sri Lanka's Vindictive Peace

A year after the final battle against the Tamil Tigers ended, the war is far from over.

Foreign Policy

BY SOMA ILANGO VAN | MAY 17, 2010

Last May, Sri Lankan soldiers captured the final piece of land held by the separatist Tamil Tigers, killing hundreds of rebel fighters, including the group's leader, and definitively ending a 26-year civil war that claimed as many as 100,000 lives.

On May 19, the first anniversary of the war's end, however, there is little to celebrate. As many as 93,000 Tamils remain in detention camps and transit centers, while 11,700 more (of which 550 are children) are being held as ex-combatants without charges, denied access to an attorney or their families. Conditions in the camps and prisons are appalling, with human rights groups documenting cases of torture and rape, in addition to poor housing, health, sanitation, and education facilities.

This is not what peace is supposed to look like. And the centers and camps are only the most visible symptom of the Sri Lankan government's apparent disinterest in genuine reconciliation. Far from ending the root conflict, the end of fighting has left the island as ethnically divided as ever, undermining the prospects for a durable peace and regional stability. In many ways, Sri Lanka has simply traded the horror of war for conflict of another, more tedious, continuous sort: a two-tiered society in which Tamils are kept at the bottom.

The evidence is everywhere. Outside the detention and transit centers, there has been little significant reconstruction or development in the Tamil regions of the country. Citizens believe that vital aid to rebuild war-torn communities is being siphoned by the government for its own budget priorities, including investment in tourist projects in the former warzone. More than 1.5 million landmines contaminate the north of the country. Few job programs have been launched, and infrastructure has been neglected, leaving many Tamils unable to return to communities where homes, schools, hospitals, businesses, and churches were destroyed. Land seized during the conflict has not been returned, and fishing rights have not been restored.

More ominously, President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government has made no headway in advancing the essential freedoms and political reforms necessary for true reconciliation, like political power-sharing and decentralization. Such changes could help eradicate the Tamil

disenfranchisement that inspired the insurgency in the first place, for example by giving the Tamil-dominated north a stronger voice in the country's government.

But instead of launching those sorts of conciliatory programs, as Rajapaksa promised he would do in his successful reelection campaign in January, the government has done exactly the opposite. After the election, Rajapaksa's administration arrested his opponent and accused him of plotting a coup. The government continues to intimidate the press and restrict freedom of movement and speech. It is discouraging Tamils from returning to their homelands and instead pushing the resettlement of majority Sinhalese in the north and east. In short, the policy smacks of an official campaign to engineer the island's demographics and diminish the Tamil culture. Instead of ending discrimination, the government's actions too often institutionalize it.

What Rajapaksa doesn't seem to realize is that the quest for Tamil equality and dignity did not end with the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, as the rebel group was formally known. The government and the Tamils will only fully and finally resolve their differences when equality is promoted for all citizens, and when hope and prosperity are open to everyone. That opportunity is open to Rajapaksa today, but he shows few signs of taking it, or of amending the decades-long policies of marginalizing Tamils.

Take the Rajapaksa government's intention to establish a Commission on Lessons Learned and Reconciliation, for example. This will only be worthwhile if it is independent, impartial, fully funded, and empowered to investigate war crimes. And the chances of that, in such a climate, are slim. It must have a mandate to uncover the truth and hold people accountable, or it risks being a whitewash commission.

In the meantime, it is urgent that the international community not write off Sri Lanka as a closed book. Its message instead to Rajapaksa must be clear: The time to act is now; he must rise above the ethnic divide and move to transform Sri Lanka, with power-sharing a key component. The United States and other democracies, along with international agencies and NGOs, can promote this by tying assistance to political progress and investing in much-needed infrastructure projects in predominantly Tamil areas.

The local population must also be involved in these efforts. That will help develop a skilled labor force and encourage Tamils to see the government as their ally in reconstruction and good government. The Tamil diaspora can contribute its energy, expertise, and resources to this effort, if just conditions are created on the island.

But as long as tens of thousands of Tamils are detained and hundreds of thousands more are neglected, there will only be rancor, not reconciliation. Many will believe that the government has gone from a shooting war against the rebels to a war of attrition against Tamil society at large. The world community needs to step up and seize the moment, showing people everywhere that wars are won by the peace they create, not by the battles that end them.

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