



Australia concerned about Sri Lanka

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Australia has warned Sri Lanka it was taking a backwards step by withdrawing from its ceasefire with the Tamil Tigers.

Sri Lanka this week announced it was pulling out of the deal brokered in 2002 amid growing violence which it claimed rendered the agreement redundant.

Associated Press reported that Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake had proposed the annulment of the nearly six-year-old truce to his cabinet and it was approved unanimously.

Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said he was concerned by the decision.

"This is a step backwards which Australia

fears could lead to further escalation of violence, including against civilians," he said in a statement.

"I appeal to all parties to the conflict to protect the human rights of all Sri Lankans."

Mr Smith said military action against the rebel group was not the best course of action.

"Sri Lanka's conflict cannot be resolved militarily," he said.

"Only a negotiated settlement can bring lasting peace.

"I urge all involved parties to submit to democratic processes and the rule of law and to work towards a political solution that meets the aspirations of all Sri Lankans."

years, to the point that all of them are finding it near impossible to function freely and safely. It is well known that the Government is making it very difficult and unsafe for the INGOs to work. Many INGOs that used to work in the Northeast, no longer function. There have been targeted killing of other actors. The space for independent actors to work in the Northeast has been successfully curtailed to the extent the Government would consider them ineffectual. Getting the SLMM out was the icing on the cake, if you like.

The strong need to keep witnesses out, and have its version of events go uncontested, are also reasons why the Government would never agree to have a UN Monitoring Mission to have a presence on the island. When the Government is about to violate every conceivable human right of the Tamils in pursuing a military solution, and is relying increasingly on its military agenda to garner support from amongst the Sinhala people for its political survival, it would be only logical for it to ensure that there are no independent witnesses of its crimes; and for it to ensure it has a monopoly on the information that comes out of the Northeast to project it in a positive light vis-à-vis its electorate.

TamilNet: The effect of the Government's actions on the INGOs for example, has also worsened the humanitarian situation facing the people in the Northeast. What steps has the TNA taken in this regard?

Gajendrakumar: Well, the TNA for some time now has been warning the International Community that the humanitarian crisis faced in the Northeast is not a byproduct of the military actions of the Government, but that it is in fact a part and parcel of the Governments military strategy itself. Our warnings have been proved correct by the way the Government carried out military operations in the East, where humanitarian aid agencies were prevented from reaching the affected people. The result was the colossal human suffering that innocent civilians had to face. All those people are continuing to suffer even today. The Government's intended future operations in the North will be no different from what happened in the East and will make the humanitarian situation many times worse.

It is in this backdrop that some Countries have been applying pressure on Tamil Diaspora humanitarian initiatives. This is very unfortunate. At a time when the International Community through its own INGOs are unable to deliver to the suffering Tamil people, the fact that Tamil Diaspora humanitarian institutions are also being prevented from helping their own suffering people, we find is particularly cruel. Whatever the intentions of these Countries might be, there can be no doubt that their actions are only helping the Sri Lankan Government in its war efforts, and it is the innocent Tamil civilians who are made to suffer. We would therefore continue to appeal to these Countries to at least allow space for the Tamil Diaspora to provide the much needed humanitarian assistance to their own people.

TamilNet: You have talked about the Government's intentions regarding the Northeast. Mr. Maheswaran was assassinated in a Kovil in Colombo, in the South. Mr. Mano Ganeshan has complained of threats to his life. These are

actors based outside the Northeast. What are your views on these developments?

Gajendrakumar: I think there are a number of reasons that would have had a cumulative effect in driving Governments actions on Tamils in the South.

Firstly, both Mr. Maheswaran and Mr. Mano Ganeshan are Tamils. As far as Sri Lankan Governments are concerned, Tamils are an easily expendable lot.

Secondly, both Maheswaran and Mano Ganeshan have been critics of the Government. As stated earlier, the Government will work hard at silencing its critics. Them being Tamil, makes the Governments job that much easier.

Thirdly, I also think that there is a larger project of the Government at play here. When the Government intensifies its military project, it will want to make sure that the South is kept stable. For this, the Government will see every Tamil as a potential threat. To eliminate this threat, the Tamils will either have to be removed from the South, or at the very least, be terrorized to the extent that they are neutralized. The forced eviction of Tamils from Colombo a few months ago, along with continuous rounding up and arrests of Tamils, is for this reason. Targeting prominent Tamils who have been elected in the South also serves this purpose – if high profile Tamils can be got rid of so easily, the message to the ordinary Tamil people living in the South is very loud and clear indeed.

Fourthly, I also think the Rajapakse regime would be keeping an eye on the possibility of having to face an election. His is a coalition Government that is not completely stable. The recent drama during the budget would have driven home this point. If elections are to be held, Rajapakse will want to ensure that his opponent's chances are reduced. Since he is certain that the Tamils in Colombo will not vote for him, he needs to ensure that their votes will not benefit his opponents. By Targeting opposition Tamil MPs based in Colombo who work with his opponents, he will make a prospective Tamil candidate at future elections think twice before putting his or her name forward. The sense of impunity that is created by such targeting, he will hope, will also keep the Tamil voter from getting out and voting, which will only be to his Government's benefit.

TamilNet: So under these circumstances, where do the Tamils stand?

Gajendrakumar: Fundamentally what the Tamils are facing is nothing new. However, since the Rajapakse regime came to office, the anti-Tamil actions of the Sri Lankan State have been unparalleled. All of this has been happening in the full glare of the International Community. Unfortunately, other than for statements that have been issued from time to time, the International Community has been ineffective in restraining the Sri Lankan State. Under these circumstances the Tamil people would believe that the only way the Sri Lankan Government could be brought to its senses is through enforced reversals on the battlefield. But the TNA will continue to engage with the International Community in the hope of trying to convince it to take meaningful steps against the Sri Lankan State that would convince the latter to abandon its current single-minded pursuit of a military solution to the conflict.

Colombo removing witnesses to impending carnage- Gajendrakumar

Colombo abrogated the CFA to remove the presence of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) which was instrumental in exposing rights violations by all sides. "Government will want to rid the Northeast of any witnesses of the carnage that it intends to unveil on the Tamil people in the name of safeguarding the Sovereignty of the State," said Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam in an interview to TamilNet this week. He added that anti-Tamil actions by Rajapakse Government are taking place under the full glare of the International Community which is able to only make verbal condemnations, but remains largely ineffective to reign in on Colombo on the rights abuses

Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam is a Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian for Jaffna district, and is a Member of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee of Constitutional Affairs.

Full text of Gajendrakumar's interview with TamilNet follows:

TamilNet: Last week the Government served notice of its formal withdrawal from the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA). SLMM has informed that it will be terminating its mission from the 16th of January. What do you see as the reasons for this decision by the Government particularly when it was well known that the CFA remained merely on paper?

Gajendrakumar: Despite the ineffectiveness of the CFA, the presence of SLMM has been a major factor in containing Rights abuses in the NorthEast. The SLMM continued to come out with its reports on a regular basis. Of late, the SLMM has been exposing the Government's activities in the East. In my view, the Government had to disable the SLMM before it starts intensifying its military project. The Government will

want to rid the Northeast of any witnesses



of the carnage that it intends to unveil on the Tamil people in the name of safeguarding the Sovereignty of the State. It wants to have a free hand. It will also want to create the ground conditions where only its versions of events come out of the Northeast.

There is also an image factor. The CFA and the SLMM are seen as creations of the Western Nations. By taking steps to negate these, particularly amidst the Sinhala Nationalist frenzy the South finds itself in, Rajapakse and his Government will come across as standing up to the West and will project an image of strength. Naturally, the Government will see these as scoring strong points from its constituency.

TamilNet: But if the intention is to rid the Northeast of witnesses, and have a monopoly on the information, surely the SLMM is not the only source?

Gajendrakumar: I agree. The SLMM was only one such potential source. There are many INGOs, Media Institutions, Civil Society activists, religious leaders, intellectuals and political actors who could serve similar purpose. But it is also true that these actors have also been systematically targeted over the last two