The Human Rights Watch Syndrome

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Some people really seem to delight in recounting our problems. Instead of appreciating progress, they bash us over the head with still to be obtained goals. And at considerable length. The situation is never improving in their eyes. We are either already bad or getting a lot worse, and no practical suggestions are offered to help us recover. Rhetorical flourishes are the only things we are given by these characters. They love nothing better than wallowing in a bit of good old misery. Human Rights Watch demonstrates this syndrome perfectly in its latest press release on the situation in the Eastern Province. To summarise, life is bad and blame lies with the Government.
The Eastern Province isn’t a utopia. There have been a number of killings and abductions in recent days, and these are clearly issues on which law enforcement agencies need to work harder until such crimes are totally wiped out from society. Nobody should have to face threats of violence as they go about their everyday business. But it isn't always easy. A significant extent of the area in question was under the control of a terrorist group for several years. Human Rights Watch doesn’t find anything positive to say about the liberation of the Eastern Province. It rather mocks the achievement, in fact. Reading its statement, we might almost think Human Rights Watch didn't know there had ever been such a problem. The LTTE wouldn't allow dissent. Democracy had absolutely no place in territory over which that organisation held sway. Abductions were how it filled its vacancies. Even with children. And killings were commonplace. Let's not forget it so quickly. Indeed, we can't. For the LTTE is still around. The Eastern Province has been set free, but there are still a fair number of individuals who are committed to working for the LTTE. They are responsible for some of the abductions and killings. What's more, the suspicion that these elements are at large and attempting to infiltrate the organisation of their former comrades is fuelling the problem. Killings and abductions within that organisation and between them and the LTTE take place as a result. It is an unhappy situation, but one that has not been engineered by anybody other than the participants themselves. The Government supports the TMVP. Human Rights Watch appears to regard this as an appalling development, for they believe that the party is responsible for many of the killings and abductions. Whatever the truth of those allegations, trying to help the party move into the political mainstream has to be the correct option now. Only a few years ago, the TMVP were part of the LTTE. They fought against the Government. Blew up innocent people in buses. Assassinated politicians. The LTTE haven't seen the error of their ways as yet, but the TMVP have. They want to change. But transformation of such an organization isn't a simple matter. Leaders cannot just decide to do it. The TMVP has a difficult task on its hands and the Government is determined to help them see it through to the end. Human Rights Watch urges steps to be taken to improve the human rights situation. It's a good idea, but let's think about how that is going to be achieved. Just saying it isn't any use. The Eastern Province needs development. We have to provide jobs for those who have known only fighting as a means of survival. Former cadres need training. They and other Tamil speaking people will have to be brought into the law enforcement agencies, with proper oversight. Infrastructure has to be rebuilt after years of neglect due to the fighting. Health and education services need to be brought up to scratch again. Business has to return and invest in the area. And the list goes on. This is exactly what is happening now. The Government has been engaging with international agencies to find money to fund projects in all these sectors, and progress is quickly being made. The collaboration at the highest levels between members of the different communities in the Eastern Province has been very encouraging. They are elected representatives too. But it isn't enough. The Eastern Province can never be the environment that we all hope for while there is still a threat from the LTTE. Human Rights Watch sometimes appears to be rather pleased that this is the case. That we still have a bitter conflict going on in this country, even though this is now some distance away from the Eastern Province. But we can't be. The LTTE has to be convinced to follow the path set down by those who are now on the road to the political mainstream. The Eastern Province may not be a utopia, but it is in a far better situation than most places in the Vanni. The Government has chosen a practical approach. Improvements are being made, and on an urgent footing. We do still have a way to go. But there is no greater priority than putting an end to the conflict that has dogged our country for so long to create a peaceful and prosperous society. We don't always spend time explaining our efforts to the world. But things are happening. Let us keep in mind what has already been overcome and look forward to building on this as we move forward.

Communications Division Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process

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