
'Fight against LTTE and move towards political solution should go hand in hand'

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B. Muralidhar Reddy The demand for truce is a bogey raised every time the LTTE is militarily weakened, says Sri Lanka's Social Welfare Minister, Douglas Devananda.

Douglas Devananda, Social Welfare Minister in the Mahinda Rajapaksa government and leader of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), has clear views on the current military and political situation in Sri Lanka and the humanitarian crisis triggered by the ongoing war between the Sri Lankan Army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Here are excerpts from an interview he gave The Hindu.

What is your assessment of the current military situation and what is the significance of the capture of Ponneryn by the forces? Thanks to the relentless offensive by the military and the determined leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the Tigers are cornered like never before. Since the current phase of the war in July 2006, the LTTE has lost control of the east and a substantial territory in the north. Its supply lines have dried up and the organisation has its back to the wall. The LTTE is designated as a terrorist outfit in 30 countries, including India, and is woefully short of manpower and ammunition. People have deserted the Tigers and are desperate to get out of the captivity of Prabhakaran. It is no longer a question of if, but when, Kilinochchi, the so-called administrative headquarters of the Tigers, would fall into the lap of the military. At the moment, the Tiger cadres are confined to the thick jungles of Mullaithivu and leaders like Prabhakaran are operating from deeply dug bunkers.

Against this backdrop, the fall of Ponneryn is very significant. It is the last important strategic sea base of the Tigers on the western coast of the Indian Ocean. With the control over Ponneryn for the first time in two decades, a land route to the Jaffna peninsula has opened up. Till now it was accessible only by sea after the military shut down the A9 highway in August 2006 on grounds of security as it runs through areas under the occupation of the LTTE. The gain of Ponneryn, a strategic land that runs parallel to the neck of the northern Jaffna Peninsula across a narrow lagoon, will enable the military to strike at Kilinochchi from three sides. Besides, the sea supply routes of the LTTE from Tamil Nadu would be sealed. Such is the importance attached by the LTTE to Ponneryn that when Madam Chandrika initiated talks in the 1990s, one of the main preconditions put by the Tigers was that the military should move away from Ponneryn. The LTTE walked out of the talks when she sought a time-frame for the withdrawal of forces. What has happened? Ever since, there has only been destruction and the victims are ordinary citizens of the Jaffna peninsula. The people of the peninsula would now have the benefit of a land-link to the rest of the island and the fisherfolk could freely pursue their chores. There are concerns in India about the humanitarian crisis triggered by the war and it was reflected in the recent resolution adopted by the Tamil Nadu Assembly seeking a ceasefire. How do you view it? The humanitarian crisis and a ceasefire are two separate aspects. The concern about the plight of innocent citizens caught in the war zone is legitimate and we understand it. As a representative of the people of the north in Parliament I share their anguish. At the same time, let me hasten to add that there is a huge communication gap about the ground situation in the north of Sri Lanka in Tamil Nadu. Pro-LTTE elements have been engaged in propaganda that there is genocide of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. It is totally baseless. There is no genocide here. Yes, before the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka agreement, the situation was different. Today, only about 250,000 people are living in the areas under Prabhakaran's control and that too because they are forcibly kept as a human shield. It is a fact that 54 per cent of the Tamils in Sri Lanka live outside the north and the east. There is little doubt that the citizens of the north are faced with enormous hardships due to the conflict, but the real question is who is responsible for the situation. It is instructive to remember that it was the LTTE that started the current war. So many opportunities in the quest for a solution to the ethnic conflict were lost only because the LTTE was never interested in a negotiated settlement. The 1987 Indo-Lanka accord was a golden opportunity lost because of the attitude of the LTTE. As for the demand for ceasefire, it is a bogey raised every time the LTTE is militarily weakened. The record is there for anyone to see. The LTTE has cynically used ceasefire and talks to strengthen itself militarily — to rest, rearm and recommence fighting. In my speech on the floor of Parliament on November 17, I asserted that till Prabhakaran is alive he won't allow anyone to solve this problem. According to him, every Sri Lankan President who tried to solve this issue starting from Premadasa to President Rajapaksa is wrong. Then who is correct? Prabhakaran's real problem is that he cannot survive in a democratic environment. He needs a piece of dreamland called Eelam that he can rule as a dictator. The truth is that after the Indo-Sri Lanka agreement, every leader in office has attempted to solve this issue. What was the approach of the LTTE to these efforts? It walked out of talks every single time on some excuse or the other. Three decades of war and destruction have brought nothing but misery to the people of Sri Lanka in general and Tamils in particular. We have to put an end to the politics of militancy and move towards a negotiated political settlement. The LTTE is part of the problem and not a solution and hence dealt with squarely. Ceasefire with the LTTE, as history shows, should not be mistaken for peace. It is postponement of war and prolongation of the sufferings of innocent citizens. President Rajapaksa makes a distinction between the LTTE and the Tamil people, concedes the need for a genuine political solution to address the legitimate grievances of minorities. There are concerns in some quarters that the Rajapaksa government's emphasis is on military victories and little has been done to move towards a political solution. It would be unfair to suggest that the government has not moved at all on the political front. One might have differences over the pace of movement but there is certainly progress. Even as he

attempted to engage the LTTE at the negotiating table within months of taking over as President in November 2005, Mr. Rajapaksa constituted an All Parties Representative Committee (APRC) to advise him on building consensus for a political solution. I realise the APRC is not a fully representative body with the mainstream opposition parties subsequently disassociating themselves from it. However, it is on the recommendations of the interim report of the APRC that the government held an election in the Eastern province and the people elected their leaders. Questions have also been raised on the fairness of the election and it is normal as in any democratic process. What is important is that we start wherever possible. Had President Rajapaksa also waited, nothing could have taken place. He has set up a Task Force for the Northern Province to look at development. I believe that this process will end with a political solution on the table. India is supportive of the approach. The Rajapaksa government is committed to a full and faithful implementation of the 13th Amendment on devolution of powers to the provinces. In fact, my party has put forward a pragmatic proposal for the resolution of the ethnic question in three stages. Stage one involves the implementation of the 13th Amendment. It is already part of the Constitution and does not require parliamentary sanction. India is in favour of its implementation. We can take that as a good start. At the second stage, we can add whatever possible powers to the provinces. At the third stage, we need to mobilise the Sinhalese and the Tamil people on the larger issues of constitutional changes. We have to convince the people that with greater devolution of power the communities can come closer. Talking of the east, recent weeks have seen an upsurge of violence. At least 20 persons, mostly cadres of the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikkal (TVMP), have been killed by unidentified persons. Do you think the province is slipping back to disorder? Yes, it is a very sad and ugly situation. But I do not think it is sliding back to the situation that prevailed before the LTTE was ousted from the province. I think the tensions in the east have more to do with the differences among individual leaders. I do not want to comment on the internal affairs of another party. At the same time, we should be concerned about the developments and correct the situation. People who have elected the leaders expect them to rise above partisan considerations and address their issues of day to day lives. All I can say is that the President is aware of the situation in the east and hopefully the irritants would be sorted out sooner than later. There is also legitimate expectation on the part of the Eastern province, like other provinces in the island nation, for greater devolution of powers particularly pertaining to the police and land development. It is not a major issue and can be done. In a recent interview to The Hindu, Mr. Rajapaksa talked of his four D's approach — de-militarization, democratisation, development and devolution in that order. How do you look at it? I have been in regular touch with the President. There is no rigidity in the four D's approach. It is true that the immediate concern is to neutralise the military threat posed by the LTTE, but that does not mean political issues would be relegated to the background. I personally believe, and in my conversations, the President has concurred with me, on the need for a simultaneous progress on the fight against the LTTE and the move towards political solution.

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