
The rational appeal of the Indian Foreign Minister

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There seems to have been some confusion over the most recent statement by the Indian Foreign Minister, with some media outlets claiming that he was calling for a Ceasefire. Such confusion is perhaps understandable, with such a finely worded statement, and it was necessary to point out that that interpretation was inappropriate in the context of the Government's determination, shared with the Indian Government, to eradicate terrorism.

However, it should also be pointed out that a close reading of his statement indicates that what he was asserting was the desirability, not of a Ceasefire, but of the Government bringing about 'a pause in hostilities'. He goes further and says that that pause in hostilities 'must be utilized to facilitate the movement of Tamil population out of war-affected areas to secure locations'. The statement then makes clear the concern of the Indian Foreign Minister for the trapped civilians. He is in no way seeking to provide any sort of lifeline to the LTTE, since he obviously believes that some areas will continue to be affected by war, which is precisely why he wants the civilians out. His concern then parallels that of the Sri Lankan government, which is also anxious for these civilians to be brought to safety, whilst not wanting the LTTE to succeed in its stratagem of preserving themselves through the anxiety of the Sri Lankan government and forces as well as the international community for these civilians whom the LTTE had kept as hostages. It is precisely because Sri Lanka too wants the hostages now kept by the LTTE to get to safety that it has cooperated with the ICRC to rescue a couple of thousands, while recognizing that the ICRC also needs to cooperate with the LTTE for this purpose, in terms of its mandate. It would thus be perfectly in accordance with current Sri Lankan government policy to 'work out safe passage' for these civilians, and the fact that this would involve a pause in hostilities should not be a problem. The problem would be if the LTTE took advantage of a pause in hostilities to do what it has done in the past in such situations, namely try to take military advantage. Such efforts were made by the LTTE not only with regard to Ceasefire Agreements, but also in the case of the last effort made by the Government to ensure safe passage for the civilians, when His Excellency the President called on them at the end of January to come to safety. On that occasion, it may be remembered, the LTTE soon afterwards launched its ferocious attempt to retake Mullaitivu. This was not successful, and in the week that followed 30,000 civilians did manage to make their way out, led by religious leaders and others, before the LTTE was able to clamp down again. Given the success then of that appeal by His Excellency, it would make sense for Government, in accordance with the Indian Foreign Minister's appeal, to make another effort to ensure that the rest of the trapped civilians can come to safety. The question is, can the ICRC, or India, or indeed anyone else, guarantee that a pause in hostilities would not be used by the LTTE to commit further mayhem as it did in early February, or in the past with the Ceasefires, during which it killed Tamil politicians as well as Sri Lankan servicemen? Though of course I cannot as a layman in such matters judge of the damage the LTTE might do in such a situation, the risk seems to me to be worth taking now. But it would be essential for any organizations involved in facilitating the escape ensuring that the LTTE behaved itself during any such pause — as the ICRC seems to have done so far, unlike the SLMM which did not take remedial action about the several violations by the LTTE that it identified. Meanwhile the latter part of the Indian Foreign Minister's appeal is of course unquestionably in line with Sri Lankan government policy. Achieving the goal he prescribes, of empowerment and entrenchment of equality, may be slow, in view of the need to ensure a reasonable consensus and also consult all the Tamil parties who have been silenced in different ways by what seemed the previous overweening power of the LTTE. However, we need to make every effort possible to move on with the process, even bit by bit, to make it clear to the Tamil people of the North, who had been force fed with LTTE propaganda for so long, that they are equal citizens with equal rights in this country. In this regard it would be useful if the previously democratically inclined elements in the Tamil National Alliance began to dissociate themselves firmly from the LTTE and entered into serious discussion with the Government and with other Tamil groups. Though the 2004 election as regarded the North and East was reported as flawed by observers such as those from the European Union, and vitiated still further by the LTTE killing or forcing the resignation of candidates popular in the East (or doing both), not all those now in Parliament as a result of that travesty are indissolubly bound to the LTTE. Parliamentarians such as Mr. Sambandan or Mr. Premachandra or Mr. Senathiraja had a life of their own before the LTTE took them over, and they should now feel free to resurrect their old identities. Though that requires courage, such courage is owed to the people of the North who have suffered so much. And the participation of such individuals in consultations when reconstruction begins will ensure that that reconstruction will take the interests of all inhabitants of the area into account. Certainly it is necessary for Government now to be generous, and to work not only on balanced development for the whole country, but also to take remedial measures with regard to infrastructural development and the development of human resources, to make up for years of neglect. The LTTE may have been responsible for the worst of the neglect in the last couple of decades, but the problems began earlier, and we cannot, in a united country, avoid responsibility for the need to make up for the errors of the past, those of previous governments as well as of the LTTE. It is through making clear such commitment that we will be able to ensure peace. The extraordinary achievements of our forces cannot be risked by a return to the policies of the past that confined development as well as decision making to simply a small segment of our population. We should appreciate then the points made by the Indian Foreign Minister, which certainly do not provide support for the LTTE, but show us how to avoid any resurgence of such terrorism in future. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process