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## Pursuing the safety of civilians, not the continuation of terror

Wednesday, 15 April 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 15 April 2009

The decision of the government to declare a ceasefire over the New Year period has met with the type of reaction that suggests how difficult it is to achieve peace when so many influential and noisy international actors are full of destructive preconceptions.

The main purpose of the ceasefire is to allow people to leave, which is what the so called international community has been requesting. Ignoring the fact that several months ago we suggested to these people that they concentrate their energies on ensuring freedom for the Tamils trapped by the LTTE, it was only a few months ago that they suddenly, when the defeat of the LTTE seemed inevitable, registered the plight of the civilians. Even so they did not make any categorical demands, but played into the LTTE's hands by suggesting that there were reasons these people might not want to leave the arms of the Tigers. That claim was belied by the thousands who did walk out, thirty five thousand in February. Then the efforts of the Tigers to stop them became more brutal, the shootings more public, a suicide bomb, land mines. The flood stopped, and once again the so called international community found ways of reasserting a balance, instead of categorically condemning the Tigers and demanding that they free our people. Then in March the people again spoke for themselves, and another exodus commenced, this time of twenty five thousand, some appearing in our midst with the wounds inflicted on them by the Tigers as they tried to flee. These were the lucky ones. They spoke of their loved ones being forced back or killed. But very little of this was noted by the international community. Their silence enabled the LTTE to engage in even more brutal repression, including the building up of a wall to pen in those who sought to cross the lagoon. No talk though of concentration camps from agencies such as Human Rights Watch or newspapers such as the London Times when this happened. Instead we had, from Britain in particular, egged on by amoral MPs, demands for a ceasefire. Though there was a pretence that this was to help the trapped civilians to escape, the aims of the British were as usual shrouded in ambiguity, and those who wanted what they called a permanent ceasefire were able to make the running. In the process the rationale for a pause in fighting was lost. The Sri Lankan forces in any case did not need to be told to pause with regard to shooting at escaping civilians, since at no time has it even been alleged that this has happened. Sixty five thousand civilians have got away to the safety of government controlled territory, many braving LTTE violence to flee, and at no time has there been any suggestion that, even by accident, firing by the Sri Lankan forces has harmed them. Still, if only to make the situation clear, there have been requests by those who understand the situation better than those who echo the demands of terrorists that there should be a definite pause in the fighting. The Indian Foreign Secretary made such a request earlier, and this was echoed by Prof Walter Kalin, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons. The latter indeed, following his visit to Sri Lanka, said "I believe that a series of humanitarian pauses must be initiated immediately to allow civilians to leave and humanitarian actors to provide life-saving relief to the remaining population." Prof Kalin's use of the phrase "a series of humanitarian pauses" makes clear his understanding of the problem the Sri Lankan government faces, in trying to rescue its citizens who are now trapped by terrorists. The purpose of the pause is to free the civilians, but it is possible that the Tigers will use such a pause to entrench their control more deeply, to build up higher walls, to launch a witch hunt against those seeking to escape, to recruit more indiscriminately. It is therefore essential, if such pauses are to continue, to make sure that they achieve their purpose, not the opposite. That is why it makes sense to have a brief pause, to see whether the purpose is achieved. Thus far it has not been, which suggests the Tigers will be intransigent. In such a context, which is essentially a hostage situation, the Americans have shown what should be done, by their dramatic rescue of the ship's captain taken hostage by Somali pirates. But the so called international community will continue to seek excuses for the Tigers, without standing by its original rationale as to the need for a pause, namely that it should be to ensure the release of the civilians. Interestingly the BBC, perhaps not deliberately, indicated some sort of bias in its coverage of the situation, which is of a piece with the British government's ambiguity as to whether it wanted a ceasefire or a humanitarian pause. Without much reference to the Sri Lankan government or supporters of the government, except for a brief interview with the Foreign Minister in Colombo, it sought the views of Tamils demonstrating against the government and also Robert Evans, the rascal who seems to have been instrumental in preventing European MPs from visiting the Eastern Province last year. It did interview Sir John Holmes, but what he said was not repeated satisfactorily, with Evans replacing him. And then, when his remarks were reported, they were twisted in that, whereas he had clearly put the blame on the LTTE for not letting people out, the BBC said that the people might not be willing to leave. In short, the original purpose of the pause will now be ignored, and the so called international community will renew its call for an actual ceasefire, a ceasefire that the Tigers seek desperately in order to renew their strength. Such indulgence would be dangerous. The Tamil people have suffered enough and, while every effort should be made, in accordance with the latest request by a senior UN official, to seek safe egress for the civilians, the Sri Lankan government cannot allow the possibility of terrorism being resurrected. At the same time, firm action against terrorists should be accompanied by political reform that encompasses all Tamil groups that reject terrorism. In this context it is to be hoped that democratic elements in the TNA will finally throw off the yoke that they allowed themselves to be placed under during the ceasefire period. But, whether they come in or not, the government should proceed with a political solution that will enable it not only to destroy terrorism but to get rid too of the possible breeding grounds of terror. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process