
Dealing with terror firmly but decently

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The Peace Secretariat believes it is important to share with the world the manner in which the Sri Lankan government dealt with the problem of terrorism. This may be particularly useful to countries that think that they know, or perhaps know that they think, that the entire world is very disappointed that in their efforts to deal with what they see as terrorism they have caused such untold suffering. Such countries should realize that there is a way to limit suffering, and should also be encouraged to set an example of best practice. These examples should be followed not only by poor countries with limited resources, but even by rich countries whose size or resource base makes it difficult for them to understand the principle of proportionality.

The following principles are strongly recommended –

1. Distinguish between terrorists and civilians. This is not always easy, but remember that there are several reasons for civilians supporting or seeming to support terrorists. The most obvious is terror itself, i.e. civilians are bludgeoned into support. Remember this and do not allow yourself to be provoked. Do not allow troops to think that civilians in general support terrorists and are therefore fair game.
2. Another reason is resentment. Terrorists are adept at persuading the civilians amongst whom they operate that government forces will engage in disproportionate counter-terrorist operations that pay no attention to civilian suffering. Often they will attempt to provoke such operations, and will claim when their own operations lead to civilian casualties that government forces were responsible. It is therefore important, on practical as well as moral grounds, not to use heavy weaponry that will inevitably cause civilian casualties in any confined space. You must absolutely avoid chemical or other weapons of indiscriminate destruction that are clearly not part of the weaponry of the targeted terrorists. Remember that terrorists, who have seen such weapons used by others, will make allegations that are difficult to refute in a context in which evidence is not looked at if it conflicts with prejudice.
3. Resentment can also arise from perceptions of unfairness, i.e. the causes that initially gave rise to terrorism. Measures must be taken to address those causes, and in particular to show that the civilians on behalf of whom terrorists claim to act can find relief by other means. For this purpose, it is necessary to promote democratic pluralist forces amongst the target civilian population, and ensure sufficient influence to effect necessary reforms. If your constitution seems to privilege the dominant section of the population, it may be necessary to change your constitution. An electoral system that allows undue influence to forces opposed to democratic pluralism must be altered if all citizens are to feel committed to the state. The weight of all citizens must be equal, and electorates that privilege majorities or that are gerrymandered to discriminate against minorities, and voting systems and machines that militate against minorities must be avoided.
4. Steps must also be taken to allow civilians to escape from the control of terrorists. Since terrorists thrive on operating from within civilian populations, often counter-terrorist measures can lead to suffering for such populations, which terrorists will exacerbate so as to garner more civilian support. If therefore counter-terrorism operations are taking place in a confined space, provide opportunities for the civilians to get away.
5. It may not always be easy to find areas of refuge but, particularly where land questions are a cause of resentment, it is worthwhile returning land that has been taken over in contravention of international norms. Under no circumstances should others be settled in areas from which civilians have fled for refuge because of hostilities. If such settlements have taken place, instead of them being dismantled, the facilities should be vacated and then offered to civilians from amongst the original inhabitants of the land who succeed in escaping from terrorists. Compensation should be provided to settlers who have occupied land unfairly, since they have often been the victims of expansionist politicians who have shown little concern for national security. Such compensation will be minimal in comparison with the savings on defence expenditure which often rises in proportion to the success with which terrorists win the sympathy of civilians. Compensation in the form of jingoism should be avoided.
6. Be sensitive to world opinion. Do not assume, simply because a few powerful countries support you, that the world as a whole is not disappointed at the suffering you might cause in combating terror. Countries that single-mindedly pursue their own goals at the expense of others may prevent criticism on any significant scale, but do not let this blind you to the resentment building up amongst the more vulnerable sections of the international community at suffering inflicted on the powerless.
7. Do not allow yourself to be dragooned into unwise actions by politicians from distant countries who have no appreciation of the human elements in problems in distant lands. In particular, be wary of solutions that impose polarization and dogma on situations that require discriminating sympathy.
8. Do not engage in othering, and in racial or religious stereotyping.
9. Be sensitive to your neighbours, to those who might suffer from the excesses of terrorists, to reminders about the need to adhere to high principles from those who do not automatically assume that you must be violating them.
10. Deal with human beings, not with abstract constructs.

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