
Sri Lanka: what needs to be done

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There is a humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka's North, involving tens of thousands of Tamil civilians uprooted from their homes or held hostage in an embattled sliver of coastal land that barely comprises seven square km. There is an existential crisis for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which once upon a time was one of the world's most resourceful and deadly separatist politico-military organisations. Much of the current political rhetoric in Tamil Nadu in the secessionist cause of 'Tamil Eelam' can be dismissed as hot air generated by competitive election campaigning gone over the top. India's foreign policy has consistently ruled out any truck with the 'Eelam' cause. Instead, it advocates a political solution based on devolution of power along federal lines to the Sri Lankan Tamils in their areas of historical habitation. The idea of a separate Tamil state in the northeast of the island was always a pipe dream. But today the project seems as alive as an Egyptian mummy.

It is true that there is considerable international pressure on the government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa to order a cessation of hostilities — against an organisation that has been banned or designated as terrorist by more than 30 countries, including India, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Some European governments, especially Britain's Labour regime, have resorted to a muscular form of diplomacy. Their focus right now is on the demand that Colombo give aid agencies and international observers access to the No Fire Zone. Good sense seems to have finally prevailed among the big powers who have decided not to stand in the way of Sri Lanka getting a \$1.9 billion standby line of credit from the International Monetary Fund to help weather the impact of the global financial crisis and to look after the basic needs of the internally displaced. The Sri Lankan government, which announced on April 27 that it had instructed the security forces not to use heavy calibre guns, combat aircraft, and aerial weapons, has rejected the calls for a ceasefire, with President Rajapaksa declaring he 'did not need lectures from western representatives.' Never mind the double standards of those who have shown scant respect and concern for civilian lives and welfare in the wars of occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan. The immediate practical need is for effective humanitarian pressure on the LTTE to release an unknown number of civilians it holds as a human shield in a hopeless last-ditch stand. The related demand, made by the United Nations Security Council and all sensible people, is that the LTTE must lay down arms and surrender. The modalities should not be difficult to work out considering that the alternatives are elimination of the remaining LTTE cadres or amnesty and rehabilitation, which President Rajapaksa has promised for most of them, barring of course Velupillai Prabhakaran and other hard-core leaders of the terrorist organisation. Courtesy: Hindu.com