
International Intervention in Sri Lanka

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By Asoka Bandarage Dr. Asoka Bandarage teaches in the Georgetown Public Policy Institute specializing in comparative politics, South Asia, and conflict analysis and resolution. She is author of *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka, Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy* (Routledge, 2009).

The dominant international perspective on the Sri Lankan separatist conflict sees it as a primordial ethnic struggle between the Sinhala majority as oppressor and Tamil minority as victim. Even those governments such as India, the United States, Canada, the UK and the EU that have banned the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) as a terrorist organization still subscribe to this limited interpretation of the Sri Lankan conflict. This is clearly evident in the interpretation of the current military confrontation between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. There are some 50,000 helpless Tamil civilians still trapped in the less than four square mile No Fire Zone in northeastern Sri Lanka. There is no doubt that there is a humanitarian crisis and that the provisions for and protection of the internally displaced people need urgent improvement. However, the dominant perspective is preventing many in the international community from seeing beyond the ethnic divide to recognize that the LTTE has created the conditions for the humanitarian crisis. The LTTE is forcibly holding the civilians from leaving the NFZ, even firing at those who are trying to escape. The escape of over 200,000 civilians from the clutches of the LTTE to areas held by the Sri Lankan government over the last two weeks shows that the Tamil people are not with the LTTE. Yet, influenced by the Tamil Diaspora, the international community—politicians, media, NGOs—continues to interpret the situation from the narrow ethnic perspective as a case of Sinhala government ‘genocide’ against the Tamil minority. Western governments and aid groups are calling on the Sri Lankan government to stop the offensive, fearing that further action will aggravate the humanitarian crisis. The US, UK and the EU have issued statements calling for an immediate ceasefire. The Co-Chairs of the Tokyo Conference on Reconstruction and Development on Sri Lanka—Japan, the EU, U.S. and Norway—have gone further, asking the Sri Lankan government to offer amnesty to the LTTE leaders. The US has asked the Sri Lankan government to allow the LTTE to surrender to a third party, which has serious implications for Sri Lanka’s sovereignty. International intervention overlooks the dangers inherent in appeasing the LTTE, which has a long record of using ceasefires to build itself militarily. Even recently, the LTTE used pauses in military activity by the Sri Lankan government to recruit child soldiers, force civilians to carry arms, build fortifications, attack a naval vessel, and carry out a suicide attack. A ceasefire as called for by the international community at this stage could lead to the perpetuation of LTTE terrorism, war, and the suffering of the Sri Lankan people. To understand the current crisis, it is necessary to move beyond the dominant bipolar ethnic interpretation and take a multipolar approach exploring the complex interplay of local, regional and international factors. Democratization of politics and enfranchisement of the Sinhala majority threatened the political and economic privileges that the Tamil elite, especially the Jaffna Vellala caste, had enjoyed during the British colonial period. In promoting separatism in the post-independence era, this elite spearheaded the Sinhala vs. Tamil ethnic interpretation undermining the common social problems faced by communities across ethnic divides. Moreover, the model of ethnic dualism they adopted overlooks significant differences and inequalities within ethnic groups. We are now seeing how this inequity is being played out. Instead of calling on the LTTE to let the civilians go, the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in the affluent west, along with South Indian Tamil politicians, are protecting the LTTE leadership. The bipolar model also sees the Sri Lankan conflict as a domestic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka, when in fact it has been a regional South Asian conflict from the beginning. After the quest for a Dravidian language-speaking Dravidasthan in southern India and the struggle against ‘Hindi imperialism’ was lost in the mid-1960s, the search for a separate Tamil state shifted from India to neighboring Sri Lanka, a smaller and weaker state. From the beginning the Eelam movement was nurtured and supported by Tamil Nadu politicians. They pressured the central government and the Congress Party dependent on their coalition political support to intervene on behalf of the Tamil separatist cause in Sri Lanka. Today, some of Tamil Nadu parties and politicians are carrying on a major campaign to stop the Sri Lankan government’s military offensive against the Tamil Tigers equating the LTTE with Tamil civilians. Some, like Jaylalitha, the leader of the AIADMK (All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), are openly calling for India to intervene and create a separate state of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka. The narrow ethnic perspective and a separate Tamil Eelam state in Sri Lanka are vigorously promulgated in demonstrations by the large and influential Tamil Diaspora, who constitute the LTTE’s base of financial and ideological support. They have called for a ceasefire and international intervention in Sri Lanka, but not the release of the Tamil civilians by the LTTE. The civilians have become the last weapon in the military confrontation with the Sri Lankan government, just as the poor Tamils from the low castes have constituted the bulk of the LTTE cadres over the decades. A number of analysts, such as Peter Chalk, Rohan Guneratna and publications such as *Jane’s Intelligence*, have documented how the LTTE-Diaspora network with its vast financial resources has been able to infiltrate media, academia, NGOs, politicians and the policymaking establishments globally and win sympathy by equating its cause with that of the Sri Lankan Tamil population. In this regard, it is useful to consider how the expanding global civil society, the ‘third sector,’—the non-state, non-corporate sector—operates. When a group with grievances feels blocked by a state, it is able to create alliances with external actors, NGOs, states and international organizations to bring pressure on the local state to meet its needs. This ‘boomerang pattern’ has worked well in many cases internationally to bring pressure on authoritarian states to meet their human rights obligations and needs of disadvantaged communities. But there are contradictions in the operation of this transnational activist model. New research and evidence show that the groups that are most successful in utilizing international networking are not necessarily those with the most legitimate grievances. Works such as *The Marketing of Rebellion* by Clifford Bob (Cambridge, 2005) show that it is the groups that are most savvy and financially powerful, those who have access to the

English language, the Internet and international contacts, that are able to use the transnational alliances to their benefit. The LTTE and the Tamil Diaspora has been highly successful in gaining the sympathy of peace groups, liberal human rights groups and well known activists by pushing the narrow ethnic analysis and equating its cause with Tamil freedom despite the LTTE's horrific record violating Tamil rights. In contrast, successive Sri Lankan governments have failed to counter this propaganda. The Sri Lankan government is losing the ideological battle while it is winning the military battle. This has tremendous implications for ending the Sri Lankan conflict. Even though the LTTE has lost the war, territory and people, international community intervention at this critical juncture could prevent a successful end to the conflict and judicious terms and modalities of surrender for the LTTE. If the Sri Lankan government is forced into giving amnesty to the LTTE leadership and safe passage to a friendly country, it is quite likely that they would revert to separatism and terrorism. The LTTE has vowed that it will never allow peace in Sri Lanka. The LTTE is considered the prototype of twenty first century global terrorism. It popularized suicide bombing, forcible recruitment of child soldiers, and extensive use of women cadres. It was the first terrorist organization to acquire air capability and it created a vast multinational financial empire and ideological network. It assassinated two world leaders (President Premadasa of Sri Lanka and Rajiv Gandhi of India), the only terrorist organization to do so. It is well to remember the 1987 Indian intervention in Sri Lanka which stopped the Sri Lankan military offensive at the verge of its victory against the LTTE. This led to one of the worst periods of violence and anarchy in the country and in the long term it strengthened the LTTE militarily. Sri Lanka cannot go through yet another cycle of terrorism, war and violence. The people have suffered enough. The international community has a moral responsibility to look beyond the narrow ethnic interpretation of the Sri Lankan situation and help end terrorist threat that the LTTE poses not just to Sri Lanka but the South Asian region and the world at large. Courtesy: fpri.org