Sri Lanka: A victory that vexes our western friends

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by Kalana Senaratne In this undated handout photo released by the Sri Lanka army, Wednesday, May 20, 2009, confiscated weapons from Tamil Tiger rebels lay down on the ground in Mullattivu, Sri Lanka. Aid groups and the U.N. appealed to be allowed to survey the aftermath of the final battle of Sri Lanka’s civil war and pushed for unfettered access to some 280,000 Tamils displaced from the former combat zone. (AP)

If defeating the LTTE is a miracle, Sri Lanka, today, is the small miracle of the Indian Ocean. It has achieved a resounding victory; unprecedented in history, unparalleled in the world. Sri Lanka shines and shines almost alone, as a state that has comprehensively defeated a terror outfit which was dubbed "the most brutal terrorist organization in the world," by the FBI. We have defeated the LTTE, we have won; ‘we’, as in Sri Lankans, Sri Lanka. Why then would such a victory vex, irritate, annoy, the west? The west is, after all, our friend. But unfortunately, the west is not a place where miracles take place, today. While Asia, after long years of slumber, is rising and developing at a startling pace, reminding us that the world is one which is increasingly becoming a ‘post-American world’ as Fareed Zakaria puts it, or a world that is witnessing an ‘irresistible shift of global power to the East’ as Kishore Mahbubani would put it, the west, to its great discomfort, is a place where much that can go wrong has gone wrong. This global shift in power, this global economic crisis, this much vaunted global fight against terror – all these and much more do not make the west happy, contended. Hence, a west which is to a great extent desperate, annoyed, irritated, vexed. Let us, for the moment, consider the US and the UK (as constituting the ‘west’); one a super-power, the other its ally. What has gone wrong for them, what has gone right for us, in our respective fights against terrorism? Fundamentally, the problem revolved around what was at stake. For us, there was much - sovereignty, territorial integrity, the lives of innocent civilians, the future of a people, a generation, development, liberation. When a country fights for such things, the best in us is brought to the fore. There is unity, unlike never before, determination, courage, commitment and sacrifice. Such countries win wars, crush terrorism, emerge triumphant. But take the west. What is at stake for them in Afghanistan today, or Iraq? Is it not pride and prestige? Is it not the will to dominate? Is it not about stamping hegemony? Or shame, which prevents them from pulling out? When such matters are at stake, determination, courage, commitment, wane easily and fast. That is when elaborate plans of a troop pull-out are drawn, when such issues become pivotal in elections. That is when invasions are launched without the support of their own closest friends in Europe, illegally, unethically, like in the case of the Iraqi invasion. Reason enough for the west to be vexed. Consider the issue of leadership; something we had, something they didn’t. Why was our leadership successful? Principally, it was because those who gave leadership understood the enemy, knew it inside out, had witnessed terrorism, had fought the terrorists, had seen the kind of havoc it unleashes on people, and had even survived suicide attacks. This, in turn, makes leadership more focused. Clear plans are drawn, executed to near perfection. But could the same be said about the US, the UK, and their leaders? How well do they know their enemy? For them, terrorism was what happened on our backyard, not theirs. For them, the world shook on 9/11. For us, the world was crumbling by that time; we were crying for help. Hence, by the time our Opposition leader (visiting Europe) phoned the President and congratulated him on the remarkable victory, the Republican Mike Huckabee had already admitted (in ‘American Priorities in the War on Terror’, Foreign Affairs) that the US leadership, i.e. Bush, the Republicans, let bin Laden escape to Tora Bora region and thereafter stopped going after their principal enemy. An admission, a confession, that it was a mess. That’s the contrast. Furthermore, for Sri Lanka, the protection of innocent civilians was a sine quo non. However imperfect the effort may have been, we strove for perfection; by trying to ensure a ‘zero-tolerance’ policy on civilian casualties, by carrying out a massive hostage rescue operation during the final phase of the conflict, by caring for IDPs and those wounded by LTTE shooting, by supplying food, water, medicine, etc. through government channels, through the Commissioner General of Essential Services, with assistance from ICRC and other organization, at all possible times, in the way we could. We were mindful of our responsibility to protect our people. For us, all those civilians were our own people; Sri Lankans. Without resorting to massive indiscriminate bombings, wherever possible, we ensured low key advances of security forces, the use of highly trained units which confronted the enemy deep in its territory, a strategic use of naval/air assets. All this, amidst continued attacks on armed personnel and civilians, amidst suicide attacks within welfare camps, amidst the most barbaric acts ever committed. So much so, that when our injured sergeant KG Priyantha Pathirana was captured by the LTTE, tortured and his head displayed at the Illupadichenai junction, LTTE cadres who sustained serious injuries, such as young ‘Priya’ of Mulankavil, were being rescued by the Army, airlifted to the Anuradhapura General Hospital, and later transferred to Colombo for life saving treatment. But for the US, the UK, who are the people in Afghanistan? Who are those innocent men, women and children in Iraq? Simply ‘Afghans’, ‘Iraqis’; not Americans, not British. Not being of their kind, not being their citizens, the simplest thing that could be done is to say ‘sorry’, when they are inundated with reports of civilian casualties, resulting from indiscriminate aerial attacks, in Afghanistan, or in Iraq. For those who are killed are not their own, nothing to be too alarmed about. How else, otherwise, could one explain the killing of over 500 civilians, a 21 per cent increase in civilian casualties, just in 2008, resulting from US and NATO attacks in Afghanistan? How else could one claim, as Barnett Rubin, the Special Representative of the UNSG did, that there is less electricity in Kabul than there was 5 years ago? Why then should British diplomats such as Rory Stewart leave the Foreign Service and commence humanitarian work, and write about ‘How to Save Afghanistan’ (Time, 17 July, ‘08), stressing the need to have greater focus on effective aid and investment for development assistance and sharper focus on counterterrorism (and not necessarily through more troops), that will get the US and the rest out of the muddle. Why would Francesc Vendrall, a Spanish diplomat, have to state that the Afghan situation is in worse shape than in 2001? Yet, the US and the UK are our friends, and we are but a small nation. Whether our powerful friends understand these

things, I do not know. Amidst all this, there are other reasons which could annoy the west, or some. They often reminded us that negotiating with terrorists was the only option. We, being Sri Lankans, were humble; we couldn’t question why negotiating with Taliban, or Al Qaeda, was not an option for them. They reminded us, constantly, that fighting the LTTE would not take us anywhere, that the LTTE was ‘invincible’, strong, difficult to defeat. It tried to intervene in some measure, to stop our fight. It failed. The west was held back; that too was a shock, diplomatically. Today, the defeat of the LTTE has penetrated and shattered all myths. It further shocks, chokes, throttles our friends. Perhaps a sense of disbelief, a sense of shame, has crept into them? But they need to remember that they are our friends. They should not be ashamed, after all. I know, they are not. They might be feeling terribly uneasy about the way in which the pro-LTTE diaspora is behaving in their backyard. This is of great concern to us, for our people, Sri Lankan expatriates, are being harmed, attacked, in the west; in countries such as the US, the UK, Canada, Netherlands, France, Germany, Norway, Switzerland etc. Our diplomatic missions are being attacked, stoned; temples are set on fire. Public transport comes to a standstill, we often hear. Things are getting out of hand. An assurance, a commitment, is needed that terrorists would not be allowed to operate in that fashion on your soil. A feeling of fear, grave worry, sadness – feelings that you have and express so very often – overwhelm us. Could something be done, we ask? It is a friend’s plea. We have stopped fighting, which is what the west wanted us to do. We have comprehensively defeated the LTTE, the west would be glad to hear. Much of the remnants, the leftovers, are there with you. Perhaps, something could be done. Don’t blame us that we didn’t warn you, of the destructiveness of the LTTE. Any assistance, if required, would be forthcoming. After all, we are friends and that’s what friends are for. Courtesy: Island.lk