

Report on Round Table Discussion Perspectives of Post War Reconciliation “Role of the Armed Forces”

Held on 23rd February, 1430 hrs to 1630 hrs at
Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute for International Relations and
Strategic Studies

Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies

Introduction

This is the fourth meeting of a series of discussion on post war reconciliation. The Role of the Armed Forces was the theme given the involvement and interest. The panel members were;

- Professor Rajiva Wijesinghe MP
- Air Chief Marshal Oliver Ranasinghe – Former Commander of the Sri Lanka Air Force
- General Sri Lal Weerasuriya – Former Commander of the Sri Lanka Army
- Mr Javid Yusuf – Attorney at Law (Moderator)
- Brigadier (Retd) LC Perera
- Mr Mahinda Perera

The discussion was attended by representatives from embassies in Sri Lanka (Japan, Russia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Iran, Norway, Netherlands, Indonesia, Bangladesh), members of parliament, donors (World Bank, ADB etc), UN organizations, non-governmental organizations, corporate sector and likeminded individuals.



Views of the Panel

The panelist had diverse views, each quoting their experience and relating to the present context. Views expressed in general were;

- Provision of skills to the affected including service personnel, ex-combatants and families leading to reconciliation.
- Quote from former head of ICRC in Sri Lanka on the commendable services of the armed forces.
- Involvement of the Western Armed Forces in other countries and repercussions.

- LLRC findings and the way forward. Courts of Inquiries convened well before LLRC recommendations.
- Rapid de-mining, provision of shelter, supporting relief, resettlement and rehabilitation by the armed forces in the North and East of Sri Lanka.
- Skill training to the affected population could be provided by armed forces specializing in different fields. Management and academic support through the defence establishments such as the Kotalawela Defence University.
- Lack of efficiency of the Police has extended armed forces involvement with civilians.
- The need for armed forces to partner with civil society but interventions to be civilian led.
- Support cadetting in the North and East and promote recruitment of Tamils and Muslims into the armed forces. If there is a lack of education qualifications, establish academies and enroll to services.
- Absorbing ex-combatants to the police service.
- Military role should be to fill gaps in the civilian administration with promoting civilian led administration.
- Sri Lanka has a basically lost a generation from both sides due to the conflict.
- Armed forces involvement and experience in dealing with previous insurgencies in the South of Sri Lanka. The 1971 uprising being quelled by a 5000 strong Army in a few months.
- Previous armed forces activities related to reconciliation, winning the hearts and minds of the people - eg of Popes visit to Sri Lanka and responses of the children of the North who were alienated from the Sinhala population – their change in attitude and concepts. Assassination of military commanders who took a lead in reconciliation programmes.
- Army does not have any animosity over the Tamil people. It fought individuals against subversion and the conflict was not against any race.
- Aftermath of the 1971 southern insurgency saw the land reforms act being passed, caste systems not being recognized as it were and an overall change did take place.
- The need for armed forces to adhere to law of war, excesses if any to be investigated and deterrent action taken.
- Armed forces involvement in civilian administration to be progressively handed over.
- War does have its co-lateral damages to all those involved and the innocent. The war was never waged against a community or a race but against a lot who took to arms and caused destruction.



- Armed forces need to concentrate on developing their own skills, equipping and ensuring that they are well prepared to deter any recurrence of war. They should ensure the security of the population; provide the necessary freedom to live a normal life. Provide a hope for the future.
- Armed forces should ensure that they are a force which could prevent any resurgence of terrorism and secure a democratically elected government.
- Ideally, in the case of the Sri Lankan conflict co-lateral damage is preventable if the war had been taken to the sea. Being an island, the sea is the supply route for arms and ammunition, proper and timely equipment would ensure that targets are taken at sea. The possibility of having maritime patrolling by sea and air with electronic chips to all registered trawlers to monitor and identify sea movement. Armed forces to concentrate totally in providing security for the population.
- The military is an integral part of economic development in providing the required stability and security for sustainable development.
- Many were the cessation of hostilities and the peace accord agreements. Formerly military failed to equip and train to deter subsequently reverting back to fighting, losing advantage and inability to provide the security for the people of the country.
- Process of reconciliation should not be imposed from outside but a home grown practical process. The process of healing is a necessity.
- Are we in a post-war situation? The war is over, but has the conflict come to an end. The conflict rages. 'War is not over', will continue until the wounds are healed.
- New found freedom in the North is leading to many a social issues and as a result many implications and allegation.
- Government and military efforts in rehabilitating the ex-cadres received international commendation. A practical example of the military taking care of the country's population. Rehabilitating and releasing the very ones who fought against the military. The child-soldiers attachment to military personalities involved in the rehabilitation process.
- Affected Diaspora to be reached out and they to need healing.
- Armed forces are not lobbying for role in the reconciliation process but are and have been in it through out. Examples of trapped civilians who came to non-conflict areas expressing their lack of trust in the civil administration officers and wanting the military to provide them the lead. The right of the armed to be involved in the reconciliation process.
- The Armed forces value peace much more than others. The case where disabled soldiers when interviewed wanted to visit Killinochchi and Mullaitivu and meet up with the disabled ex-LTTE cadres and to support in any which way.



- In an economic perspective to ensure recurrence of conflict, providing sustainable livelihood and solid economic. Current global economy not conducive and people will soon feel the total impact. An economic foundation is necessary prior to reconciliation which could lead to another abyss. In the event of a sustainable economic development, different forces will work to poison minds of sections of populations leading to instability once again.
- Unproductive human capital could burden state resources. Will not contribute towards the GDP.
- The need for military to be brought into the economic mainstream. Nearly 300,000 enlisted personnel with skills available and to be optimized for economic development towards reconciliation.
- Do you still need to sustain a larger force?
- Move skilled personnel into productive economic areas to benefit the country's growth.
- The need for the private sectors involvement in the transformation process of armed personnel.
- Practical obstacles in employing service personnel in the private sector; Strict chain of command, mind change is required, decision making, mistrust and suspicion over others being involved in conflict for long, immense power whilst in uniform, attitudinal changes, soft skill development. The need for re-orientation to fit in well to the private sector is essential.
- Possibility of creating a reserve force for military induction when the need arises.

Following the presentations by the panelists, forum was opened to comments and questions from the audience. Outcome of the sessions is as follows;

- Armed forces in reconciliation should engage political establishments to prevent a recurrence of conflict, the need to demilitarize and strengthen civil administration.
- What are the dividends of war to the masses? Prices of essential food have sky rocketed and people are finding difficult to meet ends. Masses have not reaped economic benefits yet.
- International models to be looked at in cases where countries have come out of war and the process of transition where military has been used effectively and downsized systematically.
- It is not fair by the military personalities to engage in what they are not good at. Military role in civilian administration to fade away progressively whilst strengthening civilian administration.
- Look at a model where military is not involved in the day to day activities of civilian administration but more a reconciliation role where there is an impact to the people during this transitional period.
- Military has been eager to educate themselves in human rights and many courses have been conducted and is being conducted for such personnel. Military has also added conflict sensitivity into its programme.



- Possibility of streamlining conflict sensitivity to curriculum of military and its project.
- Military is insurance for economic development.
- The need for man power in the armed forces to fight terrorism. Conventional war states 1 military personnel to 3 of the enemy. In a guerilla warfare its 1:10. As such the need for the strength. The danger in releasing all at once following the war which can have a much more adverse effect. Enlistment is done on 5 years, 12 years and 20/22 years contract. Volunteers are retained and released as and when required. There is a systematic outflow but the need to provide job security for those who actively took part in the conflict at a risk to their lives.
- The lack of strength was witnessed when troops were required to regain the North in the 1990s. East had to be depleted and there was stability in the east thereafter. Lack of strength in trained troops led to debacles. Military always fought to bring the LTTE to the table. It was in 2005 that the government realized and built the required strength to take on the enemy.
- The possibility of outsourcing military skilled personnel.
- Do service personnel get psychosocial attention as many are injured, disabled and carry the scars of war.

Way Forward

Thoughts of the eminent panelist coupled with the lively discussion from the audience brought in many perspectives on the Role of the Armed Forces' in reconciliation. As a way forward different sectors to be addressed based on the outcome of the discussion to facilitate long term solutions. Interventions being required in the following;

- Support in providing skills and educational qualifications to armed force personnel for transition into civilian life.
- Engaging the private sector in providing opportunities and optimizing skills of armed force personnel.
- Supporting military personnel involved in civilian administration on conflict sensitivity and networking for smooth transition to total civilian administration.
- Healing process for affected military personnel and ex-cadres.
- Linking armed forces welfare arms such as seva vanitha and corporate sectors to provide assistance to affected communities targeting women, children, elders and ex-cadres for a speedy return to sustainable livelihood and normal life.


