

## **The Beginning of the End ?**

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The conclusion of the Geneva talks without any agreement to meet again in the near future indicates that there will be an intensification of tension and hostilities. Arguably, this next round of hostilities could be decisive in that each side will attempt to create and consolidate a balance of power on the ground in their favour and move to negotiations on the basis of that balance of power. At the same time it is likely that neither side will succeed in this and that negotiations will resume on the basis of yet another hurting stalemate and the realization that political interests cannot be pushed much further by military means.

The A9 issue, the issue on which the talks were deadlocked, is an illustrative one. It is not a new issue or a surprise one that was visited upon the government by the LTTE at Geneva. The humanitarian situation in the peninsula is dire and has been for some time. Whilst the GOSL refuses to open the A9 on the grounds that the LTTE uses it for military purposes and for extortion, the LTTE at the same time refuses to guarantee the security of ships flying the ICRC flag taking up humanitarian relief to the peninsula. For them, it seems to be the case of A9 or nothing. Since both sides place their military and strategic interests above the fundamental humanitarian one, civilians will continue to suffer and be treated as pawns and instruments in a devastating power game.

Each side seems to believe that there is some advantage to be gained from continued civilian misery. It would be politic if nothing else for both sides to consider that such scant regard for civilian suffering will have strategic repercussions for their legitimacy and credibility amongst people they both claim to represent and therefore have a basic duty towards. It is and continues to be the case that the civilians of the peninsula get very little relief from being caught between the pretensions of sole representation on one side, sovereignty and territorial integrity on the other.

That the talks in Geneva were conducted primarily for the benefit of the international community and of demonstrating to it a residual commitment, if nothing else, to talking, is now confirmed. As to what the repercussions of this are remains to be seen, given too the frustration voiced by Mr Solheim in his opening remarks. Perhaps the question is now academic, given that talks are unlikely to take place in the near future. Nevertheless it is worth reflecting on the advisability of talks when there is very limited evidence at best, of the seriousness of the two parties to enter into any meaningful engagement on substantive issues. Added to this is the lack of an agenda in advance, allowing space for each side to vent its grievances and trade accusations. Talks that are doomed from the outset should be averted simply because they contribute towards the cumulative cynicism and despair with regard to the prospects of a political settlement. At the same time, when they raise expectations, they increase disappointment when they fail and this disappointment can be registered in economic indices.

However unpatriotic and cheerless it may be deemed by some, there is no escaping the conclusion that the future holds more fighting and with it more death, destruction and displacement. This will have repercussions as well for the implementation and durability of the historic SLFP-UNP MOU. This column made the point that the MOU does not constitute a holistic and coherent strategy for conflict transformation – its focus is on a political settlement at the same time as it excludes the conduct of military operations and war. The latter could have a decisive impact on the shape, substance and likelihood of the acceptance of the former. There is nothing in the MOU that requires this as such, but it would not be a bad idea at all if there was a reconsideration of the alliance with the objective of a coherent conflict transformation strategy in mind. There is the possibility that the disappointment of Geneva could be followed by a disappointment with the alliance's willingness and ability to bring peace and prevent a devastating war. This would be the proverbial “double whammy” with portentous consequences.

It is too early to say who will strike first and when and where. The initiative may well have passed to the LTTE in this respect after the debacle of Muhamalai. However, as this column has opined before, the LTTE will have to go beyond acts of terrorism and guerilla style resistance if they are to create and consolidate a balance of power which at the least, sends home to the government the message that military force is not the answer and that negotiating from strength is not on the cards for it. All this indicates that from the perspective of the LTTE, future hostilities must be decisive. They will do their damnest not to give an inch and hope to get more in terms of territory.

This next time around, the security forces will be defending territory in uncongenial climes. They too will not want to give an inch and in standing their ground hope to continue, if not complete, the “degrading “ of LTTE military capability they embarked upon earlier in the year.

Given the hullabaloo about disaster preparedness it would be farcical if preparations are not made in advance for dealing with the humanitarian crisis that would deepen with intensified hostilities. Local agencies cannot use the excuse of being caught unawares. And whilst one can understand the frustration of the international community with the armed protagonists in this conflict, one hopes that the international community will not turn its back on the people of the north and east when they are at their most vulnerable.

We are moving towards a tense, uncertain and violent years end. And whilst the definitive conclusion of all this is not clear, it is increasingly looking like the beginning of the end.