

More Muttur ?

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The cold blooded slaying of fifteen Sri Lankan workers in a French NGO is a horrific atrocity that brings home the real interests that are at stake in the hostilities surrounding the Mavil Aru anicut closure and the methods that are being employed in the service of those interests. Most importantly the brutal slaying focuses attention once more on human rights violations and atrocities, as indeed the fighting in Muttur does on this and the respect for minimum humanitarian norms.

Mavil Aru came to be about Muttur: water gave way to territory and a humanitarian issue became one of strategic interest. It is quite possible that the LTTE did not close the anicut in the hope and belief that by doing so they could make a bid for Muttur. However once the GOSL responded in the way it did, the opportunity presented itself and they attempted to capitalize on it with every intention of securing the area for strategic advantage vis-a vis Trincomalee, irrespective of the impact on the civilian population. In this respect, GOSL action may well have bounced the LTTE into hostilities which they had every intention of launching at a later date and perhaps in another place.

On the GOSL side, the decision to respond with military force and in effect enlarge the theatre of hostilities was probably determined by the political imperative of pre-empting the JVP-JHU axis of berating the Rajapakse administration for temerity in the face of a humanitarian crisis and rank LTTE bloody mindedness. Once the decision to go macho was made, no doubt other objectives loomed into sight and the focus of attention was conflated into weakening LTTE military capability as opposed to opening the anicut. It is still unclear as to whether the latter has gained precedence as an objective of the GOSL over the objectives of being macho, seen to being so and of weakening LTTE military capability. There is a school of thought and one that is certainly not without influence, that insists that it should be Sampur next. The anicut has become the point of entry into expanded hostilities to, in military parlance, “degrade” LTTE military capability.

The humanitarian and human rights dimension as a consequence is now distorted into a shoddy script of accusation and counter accusation. As to who behaved better is of no comfort to the thousands of civilians who are deprived of water and livelihoods, those who fled and those who were prevented from doing so and those who were killed and those who lost family and friends. It is enough to say that both behaved badly because they did and begin from that point onwards to impress upon them that if the only currency of intercourse with each other that they can marshal is that of military force, they must conduct it within the restraints that constitute minimum international human rights and humanitarian norms.

The shrill breast beating patriots may contend that all is fair in love and war and that the obsession with minimum international human rights and humanitarian norms is the province of lily livered liberals and peaceniks. The more bile ridden of them may contend that this is a standard ruse of the peace community to protect LTTE interests under cover of principle. Whatever their position, there can be no escaping from the insistence from civil society, however defined, that the misery and privation wrought on civilians through a no holds barred power struggle between the GOSL and the LTTE is unacceptable and will seriously compromise a future peace, in turn, however defined. And if it is the case that only political self interest makes sense to them at this point, it should be pointed out to them that a no holds barred power struggle with no consideration for non-combatants jeopardizes those interests.

There is an APC and a committee of experts ostensibly to come up with a framework for a political settlement of the conflict. They have no definite deadline and there is no clear indication that this mountain will move and produce anything more than a mouse, if that. By the end of this month the central mechanism of the CFA, the SLMM will have been effectively gutted by the LTTE insistence that EU nationals cannot serve on it. There are no queues of volunteers to make up the numbers and if they are from beyond Scandinavia, the CFA will have to be amended accordingly. By the end of November, Mr Prabhakaran will make his annual speech. On the basis of what he said last year he will probably announce that the LTTE will be taking things into its own hands to advance self determination for the Tamils of the northeast. Along the way the merger issue will have to be decided or deferred by the Supreme Court and/or the president. And there is every sign that the JVP, formally in or out of government, will be setting the orientation and direction of it anyway.

The potential for conflict transformation through negotiation in all of this, escapes this columnist. It looks like negotiations are sadly into the future and on the basis of a balance of power, forged by battle and hard line interests. In this situation, human rights and humanitarian norms are of overarching importance.

Civil society and the international community will have to pool efforts to ensure this. The international community is at one level, in **need** of a role in the Sri Lankan conflict transformation process, even if the role it has played in the past and the situation that has arisen does not enthuse it, in the **search** for one. Human rights and humanitarian concerns are a point of entry for them. This is an immediate need and addressing it will reinforce the message with regard to the future one of a negotiated political and constitutional federal settlement.

Is the fate of the people in the northeast, more Muttur's?