



## **CPA STATEMENT ON THE RECENT COMMENTS BY GENERAL SARATH FONSEKA IN CANADA'S NATIONAL POST**

*28<sup>th</sup> September 2008, Colombo, Sri Lanka:* The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) is deeply concerned by and strongly disapproves of statements made by the Commander of the Sri Lanka Army, General Sarath Fonseka, in an interview with Stewart Bell of the **National Post** newspaper of Canada, published on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2008.

In this interview, General Fonseka has made some disquieting observations of a highly political nature. Among other things, General Fonseka has stated that,

*"I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese but there are minority communities and we treat them like our people...We being the majority of the country, 75%, we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country...We are also a strong nation ... They can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things."*

These sentiments, which General Fonseka has made public on several other occasions in interactions with local and international media, are cause for alarm in at least two respects. Firstly, the fact that the Commander of the Army feels free to represent his personal opinions and enter into public discussion about policy matters that are constitutionally the proper domain of the political executive, and indeed is allowed to do so repeatedly without any restraint by the political executive. Secondly, the highly contentious and insensitive nature of what is apparently an ideological perspective that is held by General Fonseka about the nature of the Sri Lankan polity, the political anatomy of the conflict in Sri Lanka, and the means of its resolution.

In regard to the first concern, it should be noted that while constitutional practice in Sri Lanka leaves much to be desired from the perspective of both democratic values and postulates of constitutional government, one cardinal principle of democratic government that has at least hitherto been adhered to is that of civilian control over the military. Thus policy-making and the political direction of any governmental programme involving the military are matters for elected officials of the executive, who are, moreover, responsible and accountable to Parliament and the people for both such policy and the conduct of the military within the framework of government policy, the law, and the Constitution. A necessary implication of this principle is that members of the armed forces desist from engaging in political debate through public expression of private opinions. The military is enjoined by legal duty and constitutional obligation to the direction and control of the civilian political executive; it is not their task either to make policy or to express preferences.

We recall that on the one occasion in this country in which the military attempted to overstep its role in 1962, that attempt was brought swiftly, firmly, and decisively under control by a democratically elected and legally constituted government led by the Sri

Lanka Freedom Party, which is also the principal party of the current governing coalition. For General Fonseka to be given the unbridled leeway to volunteer political opinions about the ethnic conflict is therefore not merely a clear violation of a fundamental principle of democratic government; it also suggests that the present government does not apprehend the chilling dangers of allowing military men to venture into the arena of political debate. It is because of the fact that Sri Lanka has succeeded in upholding the principle of civilian control over the military that we have escaped the unfortunate experiences of neighbouring countries such as Pakistan.

Quite apart from this departure from established principles about the proper boundaries of civil-military relations in a democracy are the contumelious political opinions of an ethnic-ideological nature that are evidently held, and abrasively articulated, by General Fonseka. By making politically uninformed statements about which community 'owns' Sri Lanka, General Fonseka demonstrates the discredited majoritarian mindset that views the Tamil and other minority communities with a lack of respect and dignity. It also displays his ignorance and utter insensitivity to the political aspirations of a people the government is claiming to liberate, aspirations based on equality and dignity. They also lend credence to the fundamental argument that military men necessarily do not have the competence to engage in public policy debates, especially about a matter as complex and fundamental in Sri Lankan politics as the resolution of the internal ethnic conflict in the context of ethnic and religious diversity.

General Fonseka's opinions seem also to be inconsistent even with the avowed policy of the present government, expressed most recently this week by the President at the U.N. General Assembly, that the war is against terrorism and the LTTE, and not the Tamil people; that the restoration of democracy and development in the North and East is a priority; and that a political solution must be evolved through the APRC which involves devolution, power-sharing, and a recognition that Sri Lanka belongs to all communities.

For these reasons, we deplore and condemn in the strongest possible terms the abhorrent and unacceptable statements made by General Fonseka; call upon the President to take immediate action to prevent statements of this nature being made in the future; and to ensure that public confidence in the government's commitment to and respect for the proper constitutional boundaries between the civil and military realms is restored.

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The **Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA)** was formed in the firm belief that there is an urgent need to strengthen institution- and capacity-building for good governance and conflict transformation in Sri Lanka and that non-partisan civil society groups have an important and constructive contribution to make to this process. The primary role envisaged for the Centre in the field of public policy is a pro-active and interventionary one, aimed at the dissemination and advocacy of policy alternatives for non-violent conflict resolution and democratic governance. Accordingly, the work of the Centre involves a major research component through which the policy alternatives advocated are identified and developed.

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