

THE SUNDAY LEADER

14th September 2008

Govt. precipitating a humanitarian crisis' - Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam

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Q: About how many civilians are likely to be trapped in the LTTE controlled areas due to the current military engagements? The Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC), estimates the figure to be around 238,831 in the entire northeast...

A: Our information is that there are about 500,000 civilians living in LTTE controlled areas purely in the Wannai. Of this figure, over 200,000 civilians are Internally Displaced Persons. Of these IDPs over 130,000 have been displaced several times over since early June due to the aerial bombardment and artillery fire conducted by the GOSL. These IDPs are living under trying conditions. There are some 50,000 individuals living under trees.

Q: Do you accept the notion that the LTTE is losing ground?

A: The fact is that when compared with the situation that prevailed in the northeast in 2002 when the CFA was signed, there is no denying that the government has gained territory and that the LTTE has lost territory.

The real question is whether that is a demonstration of one side's strength and the other side's weakness. I am not a military analyst. To try and understand what is happening now. I look at what happened over the past 30 years. There have been instances when one side lost and another side gained territory in the past too. In the late 1990s the GOSL had gained a lot of territory but that situation changed dramatically by the time the CFA was signed in 2002. I think it is a mistake to look at it as a territory debate.

One should not lose sight of the fact that the LTTE in the eyes of the Tamil people is a national liberation movement. That is what is most important. The Tamil people are more behind the LTTE today than they have ever been in the past.

If persons are assessing the situation based on gained and lost territory, my perception is that such people have not learned from the past and are likely to repeat some of the historical mistakes all over again.

Q: The government has set a year-end deadline for the capture of Kilinochchi and to eradicate terrorism. Is this feasible in your view?

A: In the first place, I don't accept there is a terrorist problem in this island. The Tamil people are fighting for national liberation against an oppressive state. The Tamil National Struggle commenced long before the advent of the LTTE. The truth is that the LTTE is a national liberation movement and is very much alive.

Why the LTTE's presence cannot be discounted is because it is built on popular support.

We have been told many times and by many governments of Sri Lanka that the war will be won and that the LTTE will be defeated. This is also not the first time that deadlines have been given by governments. From the little I know, I am yet to come across an instance when a national liberation movement in any part of the world has been militarily defeated.

Q: Unlike other Tamil political parties, the TNA has not called upon civilians to leave the LTTE held areas despite a worsening situation. Why?

A: It is clear that the government wants the Tamil civilians to leave LTTE controlled areas and to move to the government controlled areas.

The Tamil civilians in the Wanni know what is happening to the Tamils in the east despite over a year having lapsed. The Tamils continue to suffer immensely in the east. The situation is far from the so-called 'liberation' that the government claims. That does not make it easy for the civilians to enter government areas. On the contrary, they fear the fate that befell the Tamils in the east would now be theirs if they crossed over.

The Tamils have never felt a sense of belonging to the Sri Lankan State. The Tamils consider the state as hostile to their interests. As to where the Tamil civilians want to move to avoid the fighting is something that should be left to them to decide.

But I agree with my colleagues, I believe the civilians would not want to enter government held areas. Currently there are Tamils living in government-controlled areas. The whole world knows how hostile the government treats them.

Therefore the Tamil people in LTTE controlled areas will have natural fears about leaving.

I doubt the civilians in the Wanni think that they can trust a government that has been deliberately bombing civilian targets. I doubt the Tamil civilians in the Wanni are ready to trust a government that has been imposing embargoes and denying humanitarian aid to them and has been using food and medicine as a weapon of war.

Q: So your perception is that civilians would not leave LTTE held areas to enter government controlled areas on their own accord?

A: Yes. This is my understanding of the situation.

Q: Is the government likely to guarantee safe passage to the affected civilians?

A: Well the TNA has been meeting the UN and other humanitarian agencies recently. They inform us that the government has indicated that they are willing to agree on a 'humanitarian corridor' to facilitate the movement of the Tamil civilians from LTTE controlled areas to GOSL controlled areas.

The government is obviously giving a very narrow interpretation to the 'humanitarian corridor' concept. Since it is very unlikely that the Tamil civilians in the Wanni will want to leave LTTE controlled areas for the reasons that I mentioned earlier, our view is that the 'humanitarian corridor' concept should be given a more realistic interpretation, whereby the government should permit safe passage to all humanitarian assistance, that is, to all humanitarian workers and the aid they carry to where the affected civilian population is.

Q: Following the air attacks by the LTTE, the government claims that one of the aircraft were intercepted and attacked. What is the ground information you have in this regard?

A: I know only what I hear from the media and that is, that the government claims that an aircraft belonging to the LTTE was brought down, and the LTTE denying it. But really, I think what is more important is to understand, that the fact of the matter is that there cannot be a military solution to the conflict. This struggle is steeped in the deep political aspirations of the Tamil Nation to be a free people.

Everything that is happening should be viewed in this background. The LTTE has the support of the Tamil population. Besides the local civilian support, it enjoys tremendous diaspora support. The truth is that the LTTE has gone from strength to strength.

I find it difficult to believe that they have suddenly lost this strength, just due to the advent of the Mahinda Rajapakse regime.

Q: The LTTE is being accused of using civilians as a human shield. What are your views?

A: The LTTE has a lot to lose by using civilians as human shields. The last thing the LTTE would want is to deliberately put the civilians at risk and thereby jeopardise its own support base. The LTTE will not put the people in harm's way, knowing fully well that the people remain their strength. It is a movement built on the people's strength. It is a people's movement and derives strength from the people.

Why would it want to put civilians at risk and risk its own future? It is ridiculous even to suggest that.

Q: Is it your contention that the LTTE still enjoys massive mass support, despite 30 years of not being able to deliver to the Tamil people?

A: I strongly believe so. There is no disputing that the LTTE is strongly supported by the people.

Q: Do you feel that the current situation merits UN or international intervention? In fact the government has requested both NGOs and INGOs operating in the Wannai to move out.

A: The TNA has always maintained that the international community must come forward to provide humanitarian assistance to the affected people. We make this point to every foreign actor that we meet, whether it be foreign governments or INGOs.

We also tell them that the GOSL is deliberately precipitating a humanitarian crisis for precisely the reason of getting the Tamil civilian population to leave LTTE controlled areas. They did it in the east and now they are doing it in the north. In other words the creation of this humanitarian crisis is a part and parcel of the government's military strategy. This is obvious to everyone.

What we have been telling the international community is that, their not restraining the Government of Sri Lanka when Tamil civilians are being so blatantly targeted will have consequences with regards to their own credibility vis-...-vis the Tamil people. The Tamil people are watching closely as to who is doing what in the international community at this important time for us.

Q: The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) is about to make a visit to India and meet Indian leaders. What's the purpose of this visit?

A: We would like to go to India. India is an important country. The Tamil people have always wanted good and strong ties with our neighbour. The Tamil homeland is a very short distance away from India. The Tamil people have viewed the people of India even more closely. A lot is happening here. We wish to keep India informed of our views.