

By Rev. Dr. S. J. Emmanuel

A view from Jaffna

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It is very encouraging to see that professionals, intellectuals and eminent citizens of this country are at last coming out of their political silence and in groups voicing their own views about the ethnic conflict and its resolution. Leaving national issues entirely in the hands of politicians, however selfless a few of them may have been, the conflict has caused much disaster to the whole country.

During those very valuable and decisive post-independence decades, the country has been led into blind alleys and to the brink of disaster by many self-seeking politicians. The spectacle of death and destruction in the country during the last few years should open the eyes of the other leaders of this country - in the field of religion, society, culture, education, etc. - to be vigilant participants in the debates about national issues and throw in their valuable contributions in the building of unity and peace in this country.

Had our leaders in these fields expressed their opinions and reactions fearlessly and early enough to what was enacted and staged in this country forty years ago, Sri Lanka would have become a model in Asia for a life of unity among multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups.

Living in Jaffna, I do not have access to all that is published these days in the Colombo Press. By some luck I had a chance to read some of them. There was one I read with greater interest because, unlike other group-letters, it was signed by a multi-ethnic group - An appeal for a new social contract (*Sunday Observer* of July 15, 1995). Though I may be late in reacting to these, still as a Jaffna citizen, I consider it important and useful to give some of my comments.

I appreciate the views clearly articulated by an eminent and multi-ethnic group living in and around the "multi-ethnic city of Colombo". Though it will help in dispelling doubts and clarifying some basic issues raised by some extremists and chauvinists, it articulates only the vision and sentiments mostly of the educated elites of the capital. But definitely it falls far short of the aspirations of the vast majority of the ordinary Sinhalese and Tamils living in the South and the North of this country.

Let me briefly point out some of the misconceptions and drawbacks of this appeal as seen from the North. If these are

not pointed out, I am afraid such appeals can weaken or damage the genuine aspirations of the majority of the Tamils living in the North and East and make their aspirations appear as unreasonable and extremist.

Under an undefined term "nationalists", the group appears to include a variety of people with divergent views on both sides of the divide and still make sweeping remarks which are applicable only to extremists. They forget the fact that there is a large constituency of moderates on both sides of the divide, who will not share the group's views because they are largely based on the life-style, experience and interests of "Colombo-based English educated elitist multi-ethnic group". The aspirations and problems of the vast majority living outside the city are quite different.

The group tends to fight shy of nationalism as if it were a narrow communalism. The majority of Sinhalese and Tamils will definitely cherish their race and nationality without slipping into narrow racism or nationalism or evaporating into a hollow cosmopolitanism or universalism as expressed by this Colombo-based group.

Hostile

Let's have our feet firm on the ground and our heads high enough to accommodate all those living in the city as well as those living in the country. Far too long, the country has been paying a high price for the power-politics, ambitions and comforts of those living at the centre. It is high time those at the centre grew to be more altruistic and thoughtful of the peripheries too.

Nationality is not conferred on a people just by their number or from the beginning of history. It is a stage in the historical growth of a people. It is the maturation of a collective consciousness as one people with a common language, culture, land and other heritages. The Sinhalese are justly proud of becoming a true nation after independence from colonialism. And they have a right to build themselves up still more as a nation, but certainly not at the expense of other ethnic groups in this country.

The Tamils of Sri Lanka, being a minority in this country, have taken a longer time to attain this collective consciousness as a nation, and it is bound to stay. This maturing to

nationalism, is not simply based on some nostalgic memories of a kingdom and land, but more on the collective experience of the last forty years. It was a collective suffering of death and destruction in the hands of a hostile government that catalysed the maturation to nationhood.

Hence the permanent and peaceful solution to the ethnic crisis in this country is not to continue in an artificial political framework of one nation-state, but to mutually recognize the national status of various communities and find a political framework to live in a united Sri Lanka of many nations. Instead of clinging on to an artificial and colonial one nation-state system, and losing loves for "an integrity, sovereignty and unity" which were never built up, let us create a more realistic political framework that will accommodate all of us as good neighbours and citizens of one country.

Forgetting the long history of suffering in the North and East, the group speaks only, and that too rather superficially, of a history of discrimination and dares to undervalue, or even ridicule as chauvinist's bluff and myopic or masochistic, issues like the right of self-determination and of homeland. These two terms - self-determination and traditional homeland - are often misquoted and misinterpreted on the Sinhala side.

Because of the lack of any prolonged history of suffering that the people of the North and East have gone through, the Tamils and Muslims of Colombo can base their demands merely on some secondary discriminations with regard to their promotions to the highest rungs of the ladder. But the discriminations suffered by those living in the North and East go much further than the little discomfort experienced by the elite of Colombo.

Just reflect a little what the Tamils living in the North and East have gone through, not just for a short period, but for four decades, fifteen years of war and the last five years without the basic human needs and subject to shelling and bombing from all sides. Even today, the fact that we survive the army shelling of the peninsula - day and night - is a continuous miracle which none in the south or in Colombo will understand.

Besides the fact that the "State has consistently, in-

stitutionally and deliberately discriminated against the Tamils", the four decades of death and destruction suffered by those living in the North and East have pushed them to the corner, to seek refuge in their right of self-determination and the right for a secure homeland.

Hence the group's dismissal of the demand of the Tamils of North and East, as based on frivolous concept of "self-determination" and "traditional homeland" and calling such demands "irrelevant, archaic and redundant" is really myopic and masochistic, not the other way about.

Homeland

Is the right of self-determination of the Tamils intended to go against the rights of the Sinhalese? Is it truly an unreasonable demand of the minority to snatch away from the majority an unproportionately greater part of the country? Nothing is further from the truth.

The Tamils of the North and East are pushed into a corner by the sad events of four decades. Asserting the right of self-determination was not there in the forties or fifties. No was the claim for a traditional homeland.

The Tamils of the North and East are disappointed and disillusioned by the discriminatory and anti-Tamil politics of the democratically elected Sinhala majority governments. The democracy based on the will of the majority has been directed against the rights of the minorities and what is the guarantee even in the future, that the referendum and parliamentary majority, will give justice to the minorities.

Even the proposed constitutional reform is to be determined by the will of the majority Sinhalese. Thus the will of the majority is used to decide inviolable sacred rights of a people. Hence the Tamils cry out, "leave us alone to decide our fate as a people. We have no more faith in any election where the majority Sinhala will be used to decide what should be done with the Tamils."

Similarly, the Tamil demand for a homeland, is not just based on some nostalgic or archaic facts of history. (Prof. K. M. Silva and others like Gamini Iriyagolla may split hairs and argue about the existence of past kingdoms and their

territories. That is not the sole basis for the demand of the Tamils). The demand is based on a congruence of many factors, including our past history as a kingdom. But the strongest reason for the demand springs from the recent history of suffering, death and destruction in the hands of the majority Sinhala and its governments.

Every Tamil, living or dead, in the North and East of this country, as well as the many thousands who have fled from these areas and waiting to return, have suffered and were humiliated in one way or another for being a Tamil. This is their position today vis-a-vis the State and its Forces.

Failure

The demand for a homeland is not against the rights of the Sinhalese, nor were they to do damage to their rights or to snatch away unjustly what rightly belongs to them. The arid zones of the North and East were still open to the Sinhalese who freely settled in these areas as did many Tamils in Colombo or in the South.

But the State-aided colonization of the traditionally Tamil areas with a sinister motive of driving away the Tamils or making them everywhere as helpless minorities led to real fears of the Tamils. The overall discrimination of the Tamils on racial basis coupled with this pushing away of Tamils, increased in the Tamil consciousness the need for a secure region where they will exercise their self-determination and by their hard labour build freely their flat dry zone as their dear homeland.

The Tamils have tried sincerely and democratically for many decades to live under a democratic and a unitary State. It has been a dismal failure. The result has been a long history of deception by the Government, betrayal by their own leaders, oppression, suffering, death and destruction in the hands of State Forces etc. These continue even today at this eleventh hour. Past experiences have made it evident to them:

Better live as peaceful and united neighbours in one country rather than as "one nation-state" without a moment of self-respect, security and peace.