

Ex-IRA man warns Sri Lanka's rivals

"One thing is certain," insists Martin McGuinness in his office at Belfast's Stormont Castle. "The resolution of the conflict in Sri Lanka can only happen at the negotiating table. Nowhere else.

"Both the government and the Tamil Tigers believe that they can have more victories over each other possibly in advance of peace negotiations. I have to say, I think both the government and the Tamil Tigers are foolish if they believe that."

Mr McGuinness' words carry authority. He is a former IRA fighter (some believe a one-time senior IRA commander), who led his movement through a complex peace process, and is now deputy first minister in a power-sharing devolved government in Northern Ireland.

He has made the transition that few achieve - from insurgent leader to a key figure in a democratic political system.

'No conclusive victories'

The peace process in Northern Ireland has delivered an end to shootings and bombings which had claimed more than 3,000 lives.

The IRA first decided to observe a ceasefire and then to decommission its weapons; a power-sharing system later brought together politicians who had for decades been bitter enemies.

It took almost 20 years to achieve, and divisions between Northern Ireland's Protestant majority and the community that Martin McGuinness represents, the Roman Catholic minority, remain deep.

But Northern Ireland's move away from decades of civil strife has attracted international attention.

Mr McGuinness has travelled the world talking about conflict resolution and how to achieve reconciliation.

He has visited Sri Lanka on a number of occasions, visiting both the capital Colombo and the rebel-held territory, and has talked to both sides in the island's bitter and long-running separatist conflict.

"What I have said to both the government and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka," he told me, "is that the conflict should be brought to an end.

"There should be a meaningful process of peace negotiations and they should give up any notion whatsoever that they are going to have spectacular, conclusive military victories over each other.

"Yes, they will have spectacular military victories. But they will not be conclusive," Mr McGuinness said.

Mutual respect

Mr McGuinness' intervention comes amid an upsurge in violence in Sri Lanka.

An uneasy ceasefire that staggered on for several years is now clearly over, and the Sri Lankan army has recently suggested that the Tamil Tigers are facing military defeat.

Many analysts believe, however, that the separatists - one of the world's most tenacious armed groups - are unlikely to be vanquished on the battlefield.

The Northern Ireland politician, who has served time in jail for paramilitary offences and is also an elected British MP (though he has never taken his seat at Westminster), argues that around the world, achieving an end to conflict requires leaders who have the foresight to engage in dialogue with their enemies.

I asked him what words of advice he offers those who seek to emulate Northern Ireland's example - from profound civil conflict to peace.

"The first thing I tell them," he responded, "is we can't solve their problems - the only people who can solve their problems are themselves.

"The most important ingredient in any peace process, or conflict resolution process, is leadership. The willingness of leaders to be courageous, and to recognise that the only way to resolve conflict is by sitting down, respecting one another in dialogue and discussion," he said.

The Northern Ireland example also, many would argue, underlines the need to compromise.

The IRA was fighting for a united Ireland. The peace process has greatly increased the political power of the Catholic minority and has established all-Ireland institutions, but the region remains part of Britain.

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