

## **The North: Develop now and destroy later?**

***By Satheesan Kumaaran***

While Sri Lankan politicians and the people in the south enthusiastically celebrated the May Day 2008, the people in the North and East still yearned for permanent peace waiting to hear what the Sri Lankan leaders would say about the possibility of the government declaring a new truce with the Tamils. The promises were far from what they had expected and hoped for. The Eastern people were promised that they would receive peace and economic prosperity if they voted for the paramilitary 'TMVP group'. The Northern people were told that they would see great economic development after the elections in the East under the leadership of another paramilitary 'EPDP' leader, Devananda. The destiny of the Northern and Eastern people have been handed over to the paramilitaries and the people have no choice but to face the dire consequences in the months to come, unless and until the LTTE breaks its political and military strategies.

The people in the Sri Lanka's North are sick and tired of hearing empty promises by Sinhala politicians.

### **Let's develop the North now**

When Sri Lankan government leaders were energetic over a few important events that took place during the week leading up to May Day 2008, Sri Lankan President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, promised that he would liberate the North from the LTTE and establish permanent peace in the East.

Rajapaksa made this announcement the same week that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Sri Lanka and signed a deal with his Sri Lankan counterpart to improve a refinery, and hydro-electric and irrigation schemes. Last year, Iran agreed to soft loans and grants of \$ 1.9 billion US for a hydroelectric and irrigation scheme and to upgrade a refinery, as well as to buy Iranian oil. Ahmadinejad was escorted to observe the Iranian funded projects during his two-day official visit to Sri Lanka. He arrived in Colombo on April 28, and Rajapaksa personally welcomed the Iranian delegation at the Bandaranaike International Airport.

Also that week, Rajapaksa's government set up a multi-party "Task Force Committee for Northern Development" comprised of EPDP leader and cabinet Minister for Social Services, Douglas Devenanda (Tamil), Minister for Rehabilitation, Rishad Badiuddin (Muslim), and the President's own brother and advisor, Basil Rajapaksa (Sinhalese). The government said the establishment of this committee would pave the way for the proposed Northern Provincial Council, similar to the Eastern Provincial Council for which people in the East will vote on May 10.

Rajapaksa is waiting to see the results of this May 10 election.

In the lead-up to the election, he has been urging people in the East to vote for his United People's Front Alliance coalition with the former LTTE commander Karuna faction "Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal" now led by Sivanesathurai Chanthirakanthan (alias Pillaiyan). He appealed to the eastern people that their vote for the coalition would bring peace and development, compared to the LTTE opposition.

He also promised the Northern people that he would set up the Northern Task Force Committee with the powers vested in the hands of a once fierce militant group led by Minister Devananda. The President said that Northern people will be liberated as the Eastern people with this Task Force. Northern people will elect their representatives to the Northern Provincial Council, just as the eastern people do to elect their representatives to the newly established Eastern Provincial Council.

Soon after the government's announcement about the setting up of the Northern Provincial Council, the excited Devananda said that the Task Force Committee's functions would be broad based and cover the areas of Jaffna, Vavuniya, Mannar, Kilinochchi and Mullaitheevu. Even the Sinhalese people mistrust Devananda. His antecedents are too well known.

Devananda stated that the formation of the council had been a longstanding demand of his for an interim council of peoples' representatives to run the administration in the Tamil-speaking North and East Sri Lanka. *"While the Eastern Province will have an elected provincial council after the May 10 elections, the Northern Province will have a nominated but representative political council till elections are held,"* he said.

People in the North have no hope but only despair under the leadership of Douglas Devananda, for they fear that the Tamils will be overrun in the North with abductions and disappearances being the norm.

### **Destroy it later – once bitten, twice shy**

The fighting between the LTTE and GoSL armed forces has destroyed many properties and lives of the people in the North. But, each time, as soon as the LTTE engages in peace talks with the Indian and Sri Lankan governments, the people immediately begin to rebuild their residential and commercial establishments. But, until such talks commence, Northern people live under pathetic economic conditions.

The people of the North and East have been bitten on many occasions. Many times they saw a hint of the possibility of peace but were disappointed when the battles resumed and their attempts to rebuild their lives were demolished.

The people in the North want permanent peace to the national question and not piecemeal solutions.

For that to happen, the GoSL needs to embrace the LTTE. The setting up of provincial councils is nothing but a political game.

### **Who will benefit?**

Only the paramilitaries, politicians, and international players like India and the U.S. would benefit in the so-called development of the North and East. As these groups further destabilize the situation in the region, the government in Colombo would blame the LTTE for destroying their own homeland.

The establishment of provincial councils is only an attempt for the politicians in Colombo to buy more time so that the Tamil Eelam struggle will weaken. In the meantime, the government could seek monetary aid under the guise of rebuilding the Tamil areas regardless of any ethnic battles.

The international community such as India and the U.S. would also benefit from the establishment of these councils. It would serve as an example to Indians, who will be going to polling stations next year to elect their representatives for Lok Sabha (Lower House). New Delhi does not want to antagonize regional political parties such as DMK, PMK, MDMK and VCK as well as the national political parties such as the CPI and BJP, because these parties are waiting to claim that the Congress party did not have good foreign policy towards immediate neighbouring countries. The regional political parties want immediate peace in Sri Lanka, and believe this can be done – even if in appearance only – through the setting up of the provincial council. This will definitely boost New Delhi.

As for the U.S., the U.S. does not want any heavy fighting taking place in Sri Lanka between the GoSL and LTTE. They want temporary peace for various reasons. Democrat presidential candidate, Hilary Clinton, remarked few months ago to the effect that she would not paint the freedom fighters of the LTTE with the same brush as the Al Qaeda.

### **High-powered visits to the North?**

The LTTE-controlled areas are ten times larger than the areas controlled by the GoSL in the North, and begs the question whether the President's Task Force Committee for Northern Development could visit the areas controlled by the LTTE. It is also worth wondering how the LTTE would welcome these high-powered men. Would they roll out the red carpet or direct the Tamil Eelam judicial department to regard these three men as trespassers into the *de jure* State of 'Tamil Eelam' and deal with them accordingly.

If this is, instead, an effort by the Sri Lankan president to capture all LTTE-controlled areas in the North, will the LTTE launch surprise military operations into the Jaffna peninsula which is now under the control of the Sri Lankan armed forces? In the past, once the GoSL took control of LTTE areas, the LTTE would take control of the GoSL areas because there would be insufficient government forces left behind to maintain stability. The LTTE fighters will have two choices if Rajapaksa's claims materialize: One, the LTTE fighters will commit suicide; or, two, they will have to leave the country and set up military bases in southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu or Kerala. The question is whether India would allow this to happen?

Whatever plans are devised for wiping out the LTTE from Sri Lanka they will not be fruitful. The LTTE and the GoSL will maintain the balance of military power by capturing each other's controlled areas. The plans to develop North and East without granting the autonomy demanded by the LTTE will be another unsuccessful attempt at peace, and it will, instead inflict heavy economic and political damage to the Tamils in particular and all Sri Lankans in general.

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