

Pre - conference reflection paper

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Contexts of conflict

The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has lasted nearly three decades and is one of the longest-running civil wars in Asia. More commonly known as the Tamil Tigers, the LTTE wants an independent state for the island's Tamil minority. Following a fierce, year-long military offensive, the Sri Lankan government claimed in May 2009 that it had defeated the separatist group but the group may continue to launch guerilla-type attacks on the country.

For a lasting peace, the government will need to find a political solution to the ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils that has plagued the country since its independence. The civil war has killed nearly seventy thousand, and watchdog groups have accused both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military of human rights violations, including abduction, extortion, and the use of child soldiers.

Even by July 2015, 74,000 refugees, mostly Muslim and Tamil minorities still waiting for resettlement in Sri Lanka, many of whom live in host communities. Sri Lankan new President M. Siripala has pledged to continue government efforts to resolve refugee issues.

Rejecting Sri Lanka's plan to set up a truth and reconciliation commission to address grievances from its 26-year civil war, the United Nations has called for a special hybrid court with international prosecutors and judges to investigate and punish perpetrators for what it called "horrific" abuses committed by both sides.

The UN recommendations came in a long-awaited 251-page report into Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war, which ended in 2009 with tens of thousands dead. The UN high commissioner for human rights, Prince Zeid bin Raad al-Husseini, said the report "draws us ever closer to the conclusion" that war crimes and crimes against humanity were committed by both government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels.

Sri Lanka has to now create an environment and to facilitate constructive engagements within the communities and between groups, thus paving the way for rehabilitation efforts to be more effective and to allow for local solutions to emerge and be sustained. We hope a greater freedom and immunity will emerge for the internationals to create larger spaces for the development and growth of peace. Thus to break the vicious cycle of violence which disrupts the delivery of the so called "peace dividend", contributing to more tensions and conflicts which further undermines the ability to deliver development programs.

Strengths

- The civil society willingness to address issues amicably
- The state is prepared to recognize equal rights of minorities
- The strength of the church in the war torn area, in the north
- Political atmosphere with the new president & a new government

Opportunities

- To provide equal opportunities for all ethnic groups for the development in respecting diversity and the promotion to achieve fundamental rights and freedom.
- To convene the leadership of the humanitarian communities, the religious leaders and other key stakeholders to engage and address critical and emerging issues.
- To involve policy makers to work; promote effective policies and a healthy environment to strengthen the work of non-profit humanitarian organizations.
- To increase opportunities coordination amongst and within the government, donors, and humanitarian sectors for effective collaboration.
- To provide a centre of excellence, which collects, collates, analyses, documents, and disseminates information and Identify and communicate the important role and contribution of the non-profit humanitarian sector in Sri Lanka.

The civil war in Sri Lanka, though classified as an ethnic conflict, is thus also one based on sacred identities and religious separations. The mobilization of religion for ethno-nationalistic purposes plays a key role in the war's social and political history. To gain power, the early Sinhalese elite used the historical record of an ancient Buddhist heritage to unite the Sinhalese into a base of electoral support. In its rise to power, the ruling Sinhalese elite tended to ignore the needs of Sri Lanka's minorities, severely damaging its relations with them.

Nonviolence within the Catholic community

Since religion has been so effectively tied to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, it becomes particularly difficult for religious leaders who seek to be close to the ethos of their coreligionists to abandon the norm and speak for such a negotiated peace. As representatives of their group's beliefs, their public personae are subject to both external and internal pressure. There is usually more inducement to adhere to the more popular nationalist agenda, which can make it extremely difficult for religious leaders to openly support a political peace. Buddhist monks, who are the most influential on the political leadership, are also the most subject to such restraint.

On the other hand Catholics are influential parts of Sri Lankan society as Catholics are both Sinhalese and Tamils. Few Catholics have been in key positions, headed the army, the judiciary and are also represented in the government and opposition political parties at high levels.

Catholic Church as an institution has always worked for a political solution to the ethnic conflict that addresses the roots of the conflict, and has also opposed war and violence as a solution.

The Church has played an important role in peace-building and stood by the victims of war. During the war, the Catholic bishops acted as facilitators carrying messages between the Sri Lankan government leaders and leader of the LTTE. In this regard Bishop Rayappu Joseph played a vital role.

Nonviolence, in Catholic eyes, is both a Christian and a human virtue. For Christians, nonviolence takes on special meaning in the suffering of Christ who was “led as a sheep to the slaughter” (Is 53:7; Acts 8:32). The nonviolent witness of Christians contributes to the building up of peace in a way that force cannot, discerning the difference “between the cowardice which gives into evil and the violence which under the illusion of fighting evil, only makes it worse.”

In the Catholic view, nonviolence ought to be implemented in public policies and through public institutions as well as in personal and church practice. Both in pastoral practice and through Vatican diplomacy, the Church insists, in the face of conflict, that “peace is possible. The Church also attempts to nourish a culture of peace in civil society, and encourages the establishment of institutions for the practice of nonviolence in public life.

On the pastoral level, the Catholic theology of peace takes a positive stance. It focuses on resolving the causes of conflict and building the conditions for lasting peace.

It entails four primary components:

- (1) Promotion and protection of human rights
- (2) Advancing integral human development,
- (3) Supporting international law and international organizations, and
- (4) Building solidarity between peoples and the nation.

We need to invest energy in Grassroots peace building initiatives in Sri Lanka with a deeper and wider practice of nonviolence within the Catholic community. Grassroots peace building is often a group initiative where the community works for the community. Peace building for some geographical areas in Sri Lanka is about building solidarity, connection and bridging gaps. Sharing cultural commonalities are common for all three initiatives. Peace building is about how to create your family with joy and happiness in harmony with other cultures and communities.

Another very important area where we need to invest energy is to campaign on reforming the judiciary and the policing system in Sri Lanka by motivating and mobilizing the civil society to establish the Rule of Law.