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PEACE-BUILDING IN SRI LANKA: THE ROLE FOR NGOS

Abstract

In the contemporary world, the Non-government Organizations (NGOs) have a potential role in mitigating large scale suffering in the affected regions, preventing violent conflicts, working in war zones, supporting reconstruction programmes, negotiations and settlements. And in the process, there have been many successful stories of NGOs around the world and at the same time in many situations NGOs have also become part of the problem by either generating or escalating conflict. In this context, this article deals with the NGOs (dealing with peace work, human rights and democratic restructuring) in the ethnically polarized protracted conflict of Sri Lanka. It analyses the possible role of NGOs in peace-building exercise and the activities they carry out for building peace like addressing the ethnic divides, shaping the public opinion, political mobilization, and reconstruction and development activities. It also examines the major obstacles the NGOs often confront towards building peace such as ethnic polarization, inadequate NGOs activities, violent atmosphere, strong anti-peace lobby and so on. Finally, it analyses the impact of the present scenario in Sri Lanka on the NGOs quest for establishing peace.

Today, there are far too many cooks in this peace soup...most of whom have failed to enter our Sri Lankan Universities, qualified aboard and arrived here to head heavily funded NGOs who dance to the tune of their government or sponsors. These people under the cover of civil

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society do not represent the people – only a miniscule anglicized Colombo society.¹

The world today is becoming a more dangerous place owing to the intensification of a number of armed conflicts around the globe. Similarly, the rise of terrorism marked by the 9/11 attacks led to the unilateral approach of pre-emptive strike and regime change as manifested in the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. It has led to incremental rise in terror attacks around the world in reaction to the US-led coalition launching the “War on Terror”. These developments have added a new dimension and aggravated communalism, fundamentalism, and gender violence, and in the process, several regions have become more prone to violence.² These violent developments have led to large-scale destruction of property, loss of innocent lives, refugees and displacement of vulnerable people. In this context, providing humanitarian assistance and building peace in the affected regions has become a major challenge to the respective states and also for the international community. It is in this context that the role of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) as a subordinate to government becomes essential for performing the humanitarian assistance programmes and peace building in conflict zones as well as in post-conflict situations.

The role of NGOs in conflict resolution and peace building³ has gained importance in the development and policy discourse due to various reasons. These are:

- i. When the State and the rebels are unwilling to cooperate directly with each other in addressing the grievances of civilians, the NGOs can play a vital role in providing neutral

¹ “Peace Talks: Wanted Negotiators, Not Appeasers”, *The Island*, (4 November 2003), p.8.

² Successive terrorist attacks on the civilians around the world – the Bali bombing in 2002, Madrid bombing in March 2004, and the serial bomb attacks in London in July 2005, Mumbai serial train attack in July 2006 and so on.

³ Peace-building here means any activity undertaken for the purpose of preventing, alleviating or resolving conflicts. These may include counselling, gender sensitization, health programmes, and political mediation between the conflicting parties. Jonathan Goodhand and David Hume, “From Wars to Complex Political Emergencies: Understating Conflict and Peace-building in the New World Disorder”, *Third World Quarterly*, (Vol.20, No.1, 1999), pp.13-26.

- facilitation/mediation, humanitarian assistance, poverty alleviation and the protection of human rights;
- ii. The NGOs are perceived to be less constrained by narrow mandates, which help it to act as an interface between the government and people, and also with the rebels either to initiate peace talks or sustain peace building measures;
 - iii. The NGOs are brought forth as a suitable partner for implementing developmental policies and programmes when governments fail in the face of confrontation with rebels and also when governments have proved to be corrupt and inefficient. Subsequently, NGOs are considered to be more efficient and suitable for peace building as they are less visible, less expensive and more flexible;⁴
 - iv. Furthermore, the interaction with NGOs have increased due to protracted conflicts around the world, like, Gulf War (1991), Somalia crisis (1993), Rwanda genocide (1994), Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the ongoing crises in Central and Western Africa, Palestine, Afghanistan, Sudan and Iraq.⁵
 - v. Another important factor, for understandable reasons, the international organizations, such as, the United Nations (UN), World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Trade Organization (WTO) feel comfortable in working with the NGOs in conflict-prone areas. Motivated by the conviction that the NGOs act as a bridge between society and polity in establishing peace, influential world bodies as mentioned above are persistently working towards strengthening their ties with

⁴ According to the World Bank, it is estimated that more than 15 per cent of all development aid is channelled through non-state actors today. Camilla Orjuela, "Dilemmas of Civil Society Aid: Donors, NGOs and the Quest for Peace in Sri Lanka", *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, (Vol.1, No.1, January 2005), available at www.pdsajournal.com/journal2005vIn102Camilla.pdf.

⁵ Willaim M Reilly, "UN: Civil Society Helps Peace Building" *Washington Times*, 22 June 2004, available at www.washingtontimes.com/upibreaking/20040622-073436-5912r.htm and UN Security Council "Open Debate on the Role of Civil Society in Post-Conflict Building" June 2004, available at www.un.int/brazil/speech/005d-4ms-csnu-roleofcivilsociety-2606.html; Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan (eds.), *Civil Society in the State of Africa*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1994).

NGOs around the world through myriads of channels of communication.⁶

Thus, the NGOs have a potential role in mitigating large scale suffering in the affected regions, preventing violent conflicts, working in war zones, supporting reconstruction programmes, negotiations and settlements. And in the process of building peace there have been many successful stories of NGOs around the world, like in Liberia, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Somalia, Bosnia, and so on. Ironically, in many situations NGOs have also become part of the problem by either generating or escalating conflict. For instance, in Afghanistan, many NGOs have become stooges of warlords and elites who steal or misdirect aid for their own purposes. In the case of the genocide in Rwanda, NGOs were involved in propagating ideology of hatred along with the State. In Sierra Leone, some NGOs are part of the problem as they are involved in the illegal diamond business and supplying guns to the rebels.⁷ Hence, NGOs could be part of the problem as well as the solution, and in this context, Sri Lanka is no different.

NGOs in Sri Lanka

NGOs are the most used and abused sector of the Sri Lankan society. The NGOs in Sri Lanka have a limited role to play due to the protracted and violent nature of the conflict since the 1980s and the ethnic polarization between the Sinhalese and Tamils, which provides narrow space for NGOs working towards peace building exercise. Despite these drawbacks, NGOs have, to a certain extent, registered their effective role in peace building measures. Before we proceed further, it is important to trace the historical background and the growth of NGOs in Sri Lanka.

The first generation of NGOs came up during the British period. Most of them were Church-based NGOs with welfare and charity as

⁶ For more details, see, John Keane, *Global Civil Society?*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Leon Gordenker and Thomas G Weiss, "Devolving Responsibilities: A Framework for Analyzing NGOs and Services", *Third World Quarterly*, (Vol.18, No.3, 1997), pp.443-455.

⁷ Henry F Carey, "NGO Dilemmas in Peace Processes", *International Peacekeeping*, (Spring 2003, Vol.10, Issue-1), pp.173-175; Said Adejumobi, "The Civil Society in Conflict Management and Peace Building in Africa", *DPMN Bulletin*, (July 2001), available at www.dpmf.org/civil-society-Said-july-2001.html.

motives involved in dealing with social issues, such as the Baptist Mission (1802), YMCA (Young Men's Christian Associations), YWCA (Young Women's Christian Associations) and Salvation Army.⁸ Later on, similar NGOs emerged among the Buddhist community, like *Maha Bodi* Society (1891) and Young Men's Buddhist Association (1898) and even among the Muslim communities like the Muslim Education Society (1890).⁹ The main guiding factors for the emergence of NGOs from the Sinhala-Buddhist community were the anti-Christian and later on anti-Tamil sentiments. As a result of which from time to time various Sinhala-Buddhist NGOs have organized rallies and demonstrations opposing any kind of conflict resolution, perceived to be compromising the so-called national [Sinhala] interest.

After independence, due to the low intensity of riots there were fewer NGOs involved in peace works and majority of them focused on socio-economic issues. However, with the liberalization of economy in 1977, there was an increase in the development aid from the foreign donors, which led to the growth of new NGOs. Furthermore, there was drastic increase in the foreign aid particularly for relief and rehabilitation programmes after the outbreak of civil war in 1983. Thus, many NGOs began to focus towards peace activities. In the 1990s, the civil war reached its peak resulting in large scale killing of civilians, devastation of property and violations of human rights committed by both the Sri Lankan armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This development also brought about a sea change in the policy of the donor countries regarding the distribution of aid. First of all, increasingly more aid was being allocated for the purpose of mitigating the humanitarian consequences of ongoing civil war. Secondly, one fifth of the total foreign aid came to be channelled through NGOs. This specifically implies to the donors, like, Canada, Norway, Finland. In this regard, the NGOs, which focused on human rights and peace building measures, came to be the main beneficiaries.¹⁰

⁸ Camilla Orjuela, "Civil Society in Civil War: The Case of Sri Lanka" *Civil Wars*, (Vol.7, No.2, Summer 2005), p.123.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Nira Wickramasinghe, *Civil Society in Sri Lanka: New Circle of Power*, (New Delhi: Sage, 2001), p.168; Sunil Basian, "The Failure of State Formation, Identity Conflict and Civil Society Responses- The Case of Sri Lanka", *Centre for Conflict Resolution Working Paper*, No.2, (Bradford: Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, 1999).

Subsequently, in 1994, President Chandrika Kumaratunga came to power on the peace plank. Thus, the term 'peace' became the buzzword and made vast impact on the growth of NGOs as well as on the peace movement.¹¹ This led to an increase in peace aid from Sweden, Norway and other nations, which channelled their aid specifically through NGOs focusing on peace building programmes like educational and language reforms, devolution of power and campaign for "national integration".¹² At the same time, this period also saw the growth of many research organizations like, the National Peace Council (NPC) in 1995, which involved themselves in conducting various workshops/seminars etc. on conflict management and peace-building. Since then, the NGOs and the donor community have emerged as a "new circle of power" in Sri Lanka.¹³

Many NGOs came to focus exclusively on issues pertaining to conflict and peace, primarily, due to the pressure exerted by bigger donor agencies and countries, such as, ADB, WB, the US, the United Kingdom, Japan and the European Union (EU). These donors have been frequently threatening to withdraw aid if the government failed to control the human rights violations and also if it resumed the war.¹⁴ Subsequently, the LTTE has also come under close scrutiny by the donors, who often warned the LTTE to stop recruiting children, preparations for war and come to the negotiation table otherwise aid to the north-eastern region would be suspended. Apart from this, Norwegian facilitators have been

¹¹ On International Human Rights Day in December 1994, thousands of peace and human rights activists representing more than 40 NGOs organized a peace rally in Colombo, followed by street plays, music, speeches on peace and human rights. Camilla Orjuela, "Building Peace in Sri Lanka: A Role for Civil Society?", *Journal of Peace Research*, (Vol.40, No.2, 2003), p.199.

¹² This foreign aid plays a vital role in the normalization process i.e., rebuilding and resettlement in the north and east. Camilla Orjuela, *op.cit.*, p.5.

¹³ The new circles of power include the international financial organizations, humanitarian relief organizations and the Northern NGOs. The donor community includes the World Bank, Norway, US, Japan, Canada and others. For more details see Nira Wickramasinghe, *op.cit.*, p.11.

¹⁴ According to Sri Lankan Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama, the country would lose aid if talks are not resumed. The aid pledges by donors include \$300 million in debt relief and another \$250 million to help shore up foreign reserves. See, "Lanka must win peace or lose aid: foreign donors", 18 May 2005, available at www.news.indiainfo.com/2005/05/18/1805lanka-aid.html

regularly consulting the NGOs regarding the ongoing peace process, indicating the significance that the latter have gained in recent years.¹⁵

Modus Operandi

The NGOs have been successively carrying out various peace activities in various parts of the Island and to an extent have succeeded in achieving their objectives. There are different types of NGOs working at different levels and organizing various kinds of activities for building peace. Some of their routine activities include organizing peace marches, rallies, demonstrations and other manifestations for peace. This is done to bring about awareness for peace among the common people through highlighting the consequences of protracted war. They also seek to persuade the main political parties/leaders to work towards de-escalation either through peace negotiations or by initiating political reforms for the betterment of the vulnerable sections of the society. Ironically, these activities are carried out mainly in parts of Colombo, Jaffna, and Vavuniya, and unfortunately, these rallies do not draw a large crowd as is the case with political rallies.¹⁶

There are some NGOs involved in conducting research programmes and spreading information among the common people, politicians and the international community about the cost of war. They are also involved in exploring possible solutions. Such NGOs include the Centre for Policy Alternative, Centre for Women's Research, Free Media Movement, Law and Society Trust, Marga Institute, NPC, International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) and so on. Many NGOs also provide platform for debate and discussion on non-violent means of conflict resolution like the Quaker

¹⁵ Jehan Perera, "The Peace Within: President Takes to Third Track or Peace Process", *Himal South Asian*, (29 July 2002), p.3.

¹⁶ Some of the notable peace rallies: the Jaffna peace rally on 31 October 1997, by the Christian Youth in Vavuniya, available at www.christiantoday.com/news/asia-pacific/peace.rally/154.html accessed 7 September 2004; around 84 civil society groups carried out a peace march in Vavuniya on 11 April 2005, available at www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2005/4/1545.html

Peace and Services, *Thirupthiya*, *Ahimsa*, Oxfam and so on.¹⁷ They have been successfully conducting workshops around the Island in building consensus over conflict resolution. Subsequently, they are drawing the attention of the international community to exert pressure on the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and LTTE to negotiate and end the conflict as early as possible. All these activities are carried out through media, organizing workshops, seminars, conferences, vigils and mediation campaigns in support of the peace process.

A few other NGOs are involved in building peace through dissemination of peace education to the local communities; building trust and better understanding among ethnic groups; raising awareness of the roots of the conflicts and emphasizing the need for resolution; campaigning to vote for peace during the successive elections, like in the 1994 and 2001 elections; and also in persuading the people to abstain from supporting or mobilizing for violent activities. For these purposes, they seek the assistance of school teachers, academicians, community and religious leaders. Some of the other means adopted by NGOs is to bring together different ethnic groups – Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, and encouraging/facilitating local communities to visit each others' areas which have been devastated by the war, so that they could see for themselves and understand the trauma and scourge during and after the conflict. For instance, Inter-religious Peace Foundation, *Sarvodaya* Movement and some of the Christian organizations based in Jaffna arrange trips for Sinhalese to visit the northeast war zone and hence provide them an opportunity to interact with other communities. In this regard, in November 2001, the Jaffna-based Centre for Performing Arts invited Sinhalese artists to perform and provided space for groups to meet and overcome their misunderstandings.¹⁸ Apart from this, NGOs assist in reconstruction and rehabilitation work undertaken by the government and the international humanitarian agencies, in implementation of programmes in social sector, even organizing

¹⁷ Dileepa Witharana, "Community Peace Work in Sri Lanka: A Critical Appraisal", *Working Paper*, No.12, (Bradford: Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, 2002).

¹⁸ Camilla Orjuela, *op.cit.*, p.12 and p.203.

elections as well as election monitoring.¹⁹ These activities to a certain extent have an impact on the ongoing peace process in the country.

In addition, the NGOs' track record of responding to immediate crisis has been significant and better than the GOSL and the LTTE. This was evident during the *tsunami* that struck the Island on 26 December 2004. This tragedy devastated the coastal island stretching over 1,000 km which is about 70 per cent of the coastline, between Galle in the south and Trincomalee in northeast. As a result, around two lakhs families were displaced, 40,000 dead, 5,000 missing, 15,000 injured and many were in need of medical attention.²⁰ In this situation, the NGOs responded immediately by providing basic needs like food, clothing and shelter, organizing rescue operations, finding the survivors and the dead. Unfortunately, the GOSL and the LTTE's response to the disaster was lukewarm, as the GOSL administration was not able to co-ordinate and carry out immediate relief works and the latter responded with military approach by depending upon its cadres to carry out the humanitarian works. In the circumstances, around 80 to 90 per cent of the foreign funds were channelled through NGOs. At the same time, the NGOs also had easily tapped individual voluntarism and the private philanthropy of fellow citizens.²¹ *Silumina*, the Sunday newspaper, stated that, "NGOs have taken US\$9 billion out of the US\$10 billion foreign aid".²² Thus, the overall response of the NGOs towards *tsunami* affected people was adequate though with some drawbacks.

Major Obstacles

Although the role of NGOs in peace-building has become necessary, the activities carried out by them are, however, not enough for ensuring

¹⁹ Jayadeva Uyangoda, "Ethnic Conflict, the Sri Lankan State and the *Tsunami*", *Forced Migration Review*, (July 2005), pp.30-32.

²⁰ Around 900 to 1,000 children lost their parents, and 150,000 lost their homes, 200 educational institutions and 100 health facilities were destroyed or severely damaged. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, "Impression from the Devastation", *Himal South Asian*, (Sept-Oct 2005), p.94.

²¹ Jayadeva Uyangoda, "Ethnic Conflict, the State and the *Tsunami* Disaster in Sri Lanka", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, (Vol. 6, No. 3, September 2005), pp. 341-344.

²² S. Nanthikesan, "Post *Tsunami* Posturing", available at www.lines-magazine.org/Art_Feb05/nimanthi.htm

and sustaining peace. This is mainly because of their limitations. In Western nations, NGOs have emerged as a result of long struggles and are, thus, firmly rooted in the society. In case of Sri Lanka, most of the NGOs emerged on an anti-colonial, and later on, anti-Tamil platform and a few also due to foreign funds. Subsequently, it is a challenging task for such NGOs to work in a society that is deeply divided on ethnic lines and where there is territory demarcated as cleared and un-cleared areas. As a result, the NGOs have a limited role.²³ Moreover, some of the leading NGOs are backed by the political parties, who use these groups as weapons against the rival parties.²⁴ Subsequently, several prominent political party members are either conveners or hold some important positions in some NGOs. In addition, there is intense competition among the NGOs, usually over matters of influence, funding and resources, leading to lack of co-ordination. There remain, however, many local organizations linked either to the Church, or, in some instances, to the Buddhist and Hindu temples, which do not voice political concerns and, thus, able to carry out humanitarian work effectively. Thus, with these limitations, building peace remained constantly a difficult undertaking for the NGOs.

Furthermore, there are many obstacles, which act as hindrances in the NGOs quest for peace in this long-drawn conflict. Some of the obstacles are discussed below.

Ethnic Polarization

The cordial relationship among the various ethnic groups is a key factor influencing and shaping the political solution to any conflict. However, this factor is missing in case of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka as the relationship among the Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims are characterised by a high degree of animosity, fear, suspicion, mistrust and an uncompromising attitude towards a possible peaceful settlement. According to Howard Wriggins, the Tamils characterized the Sinhalese as proud, bold, lazy and selfish. The Sinhalese characterized Tamils as

²³ Cleared areas are considered to be areas under the control of the Sri Lankan armed forces and have no presence of militants. The uncleared areas are those under the military control of the LTTE. Also there are areas which are considered as disputed territory.

²⁴ Neil Devotta, "Civil Society and Non-Government Organization in Sri Lanka: Peacemakers or Parasites?", *Civil War*, (Vol.7, No.2, Summer 2005), p.174.

poor, cruel, dissident, arrogant, clever, self-centred and simple-living.²⁵ Subsequently, the relations between the Tamils and Muslims are also not cordial. The prevailing animosity is due to the desire of LTTE to make the eastern parts of the Island purely Tamil dominated and also for achieving its own long-term gains. As a result, from time to time the LTTE forced the Muslim community living in the north to leave the area, often within 48 hours.²⁶ As of now, the relations between the two communities stand improved due to economic interdependence. However, a great deal of suspicion still prevails between the two communities. Even the relations between the Muslims and the Sinhalese in the northeast continue to deteriorate. Thus, given the deep distrust among various ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, it is difficult for NGOs to function in an efficient manner.

Furthermore, the ethnic polarization has also played a role in dividing NGOs along ethnic lines. Some NGOs work only for the welfare of a particular community. For example, in the northeast, LTTE backed Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) controls local NGOs through which all international aid is channelled. At the same time, majority of NGOs are Tamil-led dealing primarily with meeting the needs of the Tamil population, and ignoring the grievances of the Muslims and Sinhalese. Apart from this, most of the peace NGOs (except few NGOs backed by Church)²⁷ working in northeast cannot undertake any peace-building measures without the backing/approval of the LTTE. Any anti-LTTE programme would be ruthlessly opposed by

²⁵ Howard W. Wriggins, *Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp.232-234.

²⁶ For instance, in 1990, the LTTE killed around 140 Muslim worshippers at a mosque in Kattankudy, and in October same year around 90,000 Muslim residents were evicted by the LTTE from the north, who now live in Puttalam, Anuradhapura and Kurunegala areas. In spite of the atrocities, the Muslim community is known for taking a neutral position in this protracted conflict. Cathrine Brun, "Local Citizens or Internally Displaced Persons: Dilemmas of Long Term Displacement in Sri Lanka", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, (Vol.16, No.4, 2003), pp.376-397.

²⁷ According to Camilla Orjuela, Church has gained credibility for its long-term commitment to working with the people during the war, providing relief and even investigating and informing the international community about the human rights abuses, even issues related to child recruitment by LTTE. Camilla Orjuela, *op.cit.*, p.130.

the LTTE. Thus, in areas under the control of the LTTE, sustained independent protest and public dissent has become impossible. As a result, there is always a threat to NGOs working in the northeast. On the other hand, it is no different in the south as many NGOs are largely mono-ethnic (Sinhala) and contacts with the northeast are considerably restricted. This is a common phenomenon among the local NGOs working in peace building process. Even some of the members of the NPC are divided and have exhibited their pro-LTTE or pro-GOSL stand. For example, a prominent activist for the NPC wrote an article in the Tamil Weekly of the *MIRJE* justifying the attacks carried out by LTTE on Dalada Maligawa, sacred to the Buddhist. Similarly, the Sinhala members too have often expressed anti-Tamil sentiments from time to time.²⁸ Thus, ethnic polarization has hindered the meaningful role of NGOs in building peace in the Island.

NGOs Activities: Not Sufficient

While the activities undertaken by the NGOs are vital for the peace-building process, it remains inadequate. This is mainly due to shortcomings of the peace NGOs, as most of their activities and even the donor agencies are Colombo-centred and are often circumscribed to contacts with the English-speaking elite. In the process, they depend upon the voluntary groups belonging to different communities, which are non-English speaking people, to maintain contacts with different parts of the country. This leads to lack of co-ordination in implementing the programmes successfully. Against this backdrop, it is also difficult for peace NGOs to mobilize masses for any peace rally, peace march and demonstrations.²⁹ The participation of people in the rallies organized by the NGOs is limited compared to the rallies and demonstrations organized by the political parties. For instance, the peace rally organized by People's Peace Front, backed by 60 NGOs in December 2000, drew less than 1000 participants.³⁰ Similarly, around 84 NGOs carried out a peace march in Vavuniya on 11 April 2005 and could mobilize only around 1000 people.

²⁸ UTHR (J), *Peace Activism, Suicidal Political and Civil Society*, Briefing No.4, 4 December 2001. Available at www.uthr.org/briefings/briefing4.htm

²⁹ Camilla Orjuela, *op.cit.*, p.5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.12, and pp.200-201.

Ironically, the rallies supported/backed by LTTE have been successful in attracting large crowds. For example, on 17 January 2001 a civil society group known as *Pongu Tamil* (Tamil Uprising) comprising of teachers and students had successfully organized a massive rally in protest against the disappearances, mass graves and abuses carried out by the Sri Lankan Army (SLA). Despite, the stiff opposition and warning from the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) against organizing rallies, around 4,000-5,000 students, teachers and religious leaders participated in the rally.³¹ One of the LTTE leaders even described the rally organised by the *Pongu Tamil* as “a milestone in the history of Tamils”. Thus, the rally was successful as it was backed by LTTE. However, if it was against LTTE then mobilization by NGOs would have been minimal due to fear of LTTE. On the other hand, the successive rallies organized by the political parties and religious outfits either against the peace or in favour of peace attracted more crowds. It is due to the support they enjoy among certain segments of Sri Lankan populace. The NGOs cannot replicate this even despite providing food and transportations to the participants.³²

Performance of NGOs: Mixed Results

Many peace NGOs, both local and international, are playing a vital role in mitigating the impacts of conflict on the most vulnerable sections of society in different parts of the world. At the same time, to a certain extent, many NGOs are driven by “briefcase temptation” than working for the social cause. As a result, people’s trust in NGOs working for peace often falters. In case of Sri Lanka, it is not much different as the common people have mixed perceptions about the working of NGOs. The general perception is that NGOs “are earning dollars and pounds by selling peace” and that peace has become a business for the NGOs due to

³¹ This organization was started by the University of Jaffna in January 2001. See Camilla Orjuela, *op.cit.*, p.9 and p. 132.

³² Some of the rallies organized by the political parties and religious outfits attract around 10,000 people, like the pro-peace rally organized by the UNP government in Colombo on 9 September 2002, “Big pro-peace rally in Sri Lanka”, 9 September 2002, available at www.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/2041d/south_asia/2246757.html. Even the rallies organized by the Tamils on 2 April 2001 for peace and self-determinations at UN and Toronto attracted more than 10,000 people. “10,000 Tamils rally at UN”, 2 April 2001, available at www.tamilnet.com/art.html

the inflow of foreign funds.³³ Also, there are allegations of various NGOs being corrupt, misusing public funds, disappearing with the villager's savings due to which some NGOs are often taken to court. Thus, the NGOs in Sri Lanka are seen with suspicion and, in the process, NGOs lose the people's confidence which renders them useless. Thus, the prevailing perception is that many NGOs implements short-term programmes and are oriented towards funding requirements rather than addressing the real needs of the vulnerable.

Apart from this, there are many Sinhala-Buddhist groups backed by some of the prominent Buddhist clergies who are very critical of NGOs working in war zones and conducting peace works. Their main allegations are that the NGOs do not have the legitimacy, are manipulated by the foreign interests, and in the process the government losses its legitimacy by allowing foreign-funded NGOs to work in war zone and border areas. Allowing NGOs to carry out politically-sensitive peace work is considered by them as nothing but privatization of foreign policy. The NGOs working particularly in North-eastern parts are alleged to be part of a Western conspiracy sympathetic towards the LTTE.³⁴ Some of the allegations are motivated simply by anti-Christian and anti-Tamil feelings. However, these critics fail to see the other side of the coin. There are many reputed international NGOs such as Oxfam and Save the Children Fund which through the local NGOs reach out to and meet the basic needs of innocent victims, which the State and rebels fail to take care. Subsequently, these NGOs are able to carry out the relief work and peace building measures effectively due to funding from foreign sources, which the GOSL is unable to provide. It is in this light that the NGOs are brought in as suitable partners for implementing development programmes and in the process gain legitimacy and enjoy the support of needy people.

Anti-peace Lobby: Maximalist Position

While the NGOs are working towards ensuring peace but, there are groups working against the peace process with the support of more people than NGOs enjoy. These include the Sinhala-Buddhist political parties and organizations like the *Mahajana Eksath Peramuna* (MEP),

³³ Dileepa Witharana, *op.cit.*, p.18 and Jonathan Goodhand and Nick Lewer, *op.cit.*, p.4 and pp.79-82.

³⁴ Neil Devotta, *op.cit.*, p.25 and pp.175-176.

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU), National Bhikkhu Front (NBF), and other Sinhala nationalists.³⁵ These groups are dissatisfied with the present United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government. As viewed by them, UPFA government is pursuing the peace process in a similar fashion – the so-called pro-LTTE and anti-Sinhala manner – similar to the previous UNP-led Government. They have been opposing the 2002 peace process on various grounds that it is anti-patriotic. The peace talks have always been confined only to GOSL and the LTTE, and that it did not involve other parties and groups from the Sinhala and the minority communities. They oppose Norwegian facilitation calling it *Sudi Koti* (White Tiger). They accuse them of being excessively sympathetic and partial towards the LTTE activities.

All these arguments are partially true, as was evident during the cease-fire. The LTTE, on various instances, violated the norms of cease-fire and the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) failed to condemn or prevent LTTE from doing so and instead paid lip services to prevent the peace process from breaking down. According to SLMM, from February 2002 to July 2006, the number of violations committed by the GOSL and the LTTE is around 277 and 3944 respectively.³⁶ This vital factor acts as an impetus for the anti-peace lobby to mobilize mass support.

In addition, the anti-peace lobby vehemently opposes the legitimization of the LTTE by the GOSL as a sole representative of the Tamil community. They contend that the view and freedom of other Tamil political parties and various civil rights groups are curtailed by the LTTE. Subsequently, most of the Sinhala-Buddhist outfits and political parties are opposed to the idea of an *Eelam* (Tamil homeland) that would lead to an eventual division of the Island. These groups consider

³⁵ Even the 22 elected MPs of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) are but a mouthpiece of the LTTE. They oppose peace processes that compromise the Tamil interest [Eelam] or do not benefit the LTTE's short and long term goals.

³⁶ Major share of the violations carried out by the LTTE includes the child recruitment, constituting 47 per cent of total violations, followed by abduction of adults (16%), harassment (6.54%), and so on. The violation by GOSL includes harassment (30%), hostile acts against the civilian population (6.27%), abduction of adults (5.54%) and so on, available at www.peaceinsrilanka.org/peace2005/insidepage/AtaGlance/Ceasefire_Feb-July2006.asp and V.S. Sambandan, "Sri Lanka Ceasefire fragile", *The Hindu*, (22 February 2005), p.13.

themselves to be the only force which could stop the creation of *Eelam*. They also reject federalism on the ground that it is totally inappropriate as Sri Lanka has always been a unitary state. As an alternative to *Eelam*, they advocate administrative structures and powers to be decentralized within a unitary state, which the LTTE has rejected outright. In the circumstances, it is difficult for NGOs to work towards peace-building measures as the anti-peace lobby enjoys more mass support than the NGOs. As a result, the commitment to and efforts at achieving peace by the NGOs in Sri Lanka remains a difficult undertaking.

Violent Atmosphere

The NGOs require conducive atmosphere to carry out peace-building exercise. Such an atmosphere has been constantly lacking in Sri Lanka. As a consequence, since the 2002 ceasefire agreement (CFA), there has not been much headway in the peace process. On the contrary, there has been certain degree of intensification of violence in the country. For instance, the perpetuating fighting between the SLA, Sri Lankan Sea Forces (SLSF) and LTTE over the capture of strategic areas has intensified. The process has led to the displacement of the hundreds of thousand of innocent people. The “Water War” in July 2006 began with the LTTE closing the reservoir in Mavil Ani and the naval base in Trincomalee. This led to the clash between the SLSF and the LTTE over the control of reservoir used for the irrigation projects. This resulted in two weeks of violent battle leading to displacement of around 170,000 people.³⁷ Subsequently, the frequent clashes between the Sea Tigers of LTTE and the SLSF over the control of sea areas has also resulted in the killing of innocent people and even some of the people working with NGOs.

In addition, the infighting within LTTE, which for the first time disputed LTTE’s claim as the sole representative of the Tamils, was seriously challenged politically and militarily from within its ranks by the most efficient military commander in eastern province, V. Muralitharan (Col. Karuna), in April 2004.³⁸ Col. Karuna went one step

³⁷ Muralidhar Reddy, “Unfolding Tragedy”, *Frontline*, (9 September 2006), p.32.

³⁸ Col. Karuna stated that the main reason for his revolt against the LTTE hegemony was the discrimination adopted by the LTTE leadership against the Tamils of eastern province. V.S. Sambandan, “The Stalemate in Sri Lanka”, *Frontline*, (31 December 2004), pp.52-54.

ahead and launched a new political party, *Tamileela Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal* in October 2004 and even made his maiden “Hero’s Day Speech” on 27 November 2004.³⁹ However, one cannot rule out the possibility of a particular role played by the GOSL in the emergence of Col. Karuna. Since then, heavy fighting have been taking place between the two groups for political dominance in the east. As a result, the LTTE has lost 72 cadres, the highest number since it signed the cease-fire in 2002. It is estimated that around 150 cadres from both sides of the divide have been killed. In the process, many cadres were killed and many people were displaced, as in July 2004 when around 15 people were killed in Batticaloa region as a result of retaliation by the LTTE in response to pro-Karuna attacks on LTTE members and civilian sympathizers.⁴⁰

Apart from this, since the 2002 CFA, the LTTE has been attacking the Tamil groups who have fought against the LTTE alongside the government forces, like Eelam People’s Democratic Party (EPDP), Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and People’s Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW), attacks against rival Tamil paramilitary groups had increased in May and June 2003, as a result of which around 51 people associated with the Tamil groups were reportedly killed or missing.⁴¹ Subsequently, the EPDP in July 2004 claimed that around 125 of its members were killed by the LTTE since the 2002 CFA. According to SLMM, this undeclared war has claimed the lives of more than 4,000 people and displaced more than 2 million people (as of February 2007).⁴²

Against this background of violent atmosphere, the NGOs are unable to carry out any humanitarian activities or peace building exercise, as always there are chances of sudden eruption of military clashes. Such clashes always lead to killing and displacement of innocent people and

³⁹ In the Hero’s day speech, Col. Karuna attacked the leadership of Prabhakaran as “unfit to lead the Tamils... and responsible for large scale killings of Tamils. Subsequently, questioned the LTTE as sole representative of Tamils and describes India as a better suited to resolve the conflict and to help the Tamils. V.S. Sambandan, “Another Heroes’ Day Speech”, *Frontline*, (31 December, 2004), p.54.

⁴⁰ Kristine Hoglund, “Violence and the Peace Process in Sri Lanka”, *Civil Wars*, (Vol.7, No.2, Summer 2005), p.163.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.165.

⁴² B. Muralidhar Reddy, “Undeclared War”, *Frontline*, (18 May 2007), p.4.

ultimately stall the peace process. Thus, overcoming the above stated obstacles are the immediate concerns of the NGOs. Without overcoming these obstacles, the NGOs could hardly participate in the peace process meaningfully. The GOSL should, therefore, provide more space for NGOs so as to enabling them to contribute to the peace process meaningfully.

The Road Ahead

For the NGOs there is a bumpy road ahead and, in the present scenario, the NGOs are faced with many challenges and opportunities. Some of the main challenges are: the NGOs' activities are badly affected due to lack of funds, as the international assistance pledged for the conflict and *tsunami* relief operations has been slow to arrive due to the prevailing political uncertainty and the failure of the conflicting parties to resume peace talks. More importantly, the ongoing undeclared war remains a major obstacle for many NGOs to sustain their peace activities. Unfortunately, this war is showing no sign of ending, as the GOSL is bent upon weakening the LTTE militarily and then come to the negotiation table. In response, the LTTE is very reluctant to resume talks. The LTTE has even gone one step ahead by resorting to air raids that were carried out on 3 May 2007 by dropping four bombs, three of which exploded in the Aeronautical Engineering Wing of the air base, killing three airmen and injuring 16 others. This is a desperate act designed to display military strength of the LTTE. Hence, in these prolonging military confrontations, the innocent people are becoming the prime victims, while the NGO's peace activities are being affected severely.

Nevertheless, these circumstances can also be used as opportunity by the NGOs to work towards restoring peace in the Island. The local NGOs could cut across ethnic/party lines and mobilize the public for exerting pressure on the GOSL and LTTE to end the war and resume peace talks. The local as well as international NGOs may carry out a regress campaign to draw the attention of the International community, which has been lukewarm in committing itself to resolving the conflict and to take necessary steps to persuade the conflicting parties to work together towards creating conducive atmosphere for early resumption of peace talks. Moreover, the NGOs could also work towards winning the confidence of the public by addressing the basic needs of the people, which the GOSL and LTTE have failed to do. In the process, the NGOs

could also make the Sri Lankan civil society more vibrant. If the development of events in Sri Lanka does not move towards a direction as outlined above, the country could very much back to square one. Innocent people may continue to suffer as before. The role of NGOs in the peace process is likely to shrink further and the much desired peace could very well remain as elusive as ever.