

# The era of ethnic entrepreneurs is over



Almost six months have passed since the death of the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, but has the Government of Sri Lanka formulated a strategy to deal meaningfully with both the Sri Lankan society and the International community? The Nation met the renowned Counter Terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna to get his views on what should be done locally and internationally to tackle the issues that would decide the future of Sri Lanka

**By Rathindra Kuruwita**

**Q: It has been almost six months since the defeat of the LTTE. How do you view the government's post Prabhakaran strategy? What do you propose the government should do?**

**A:** Until May 2009, the strategy of the Sri Lankan Government was to neutralise the LTTE, the world's most ruthless terrorist group. Although five months have passed since the LTTE organisation in Sri Lanka was dismantled, government is still grappling with the legacy left behind by Prabhakaran, the man who focussed on destroying Sri Lanka. Government has failed to understand the post-Prabhakaran realities and build new ideas, structures and develop the trained manpower to meet the post Prabhakaran realities. The range of challenges Sri Lanka is facing can no longer be fought with guns, tanks, ships and aircrafts, but with laptops, diplomacy and media skills.

Professor Rohan Gunaratna is the head of the International Centre on Political Violence and Terrorism Research and Professor of Security Studies at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is a member of the Advisory Council of the International Institute for Counter Terrorism in Israel. He was a former Senior Fellow at the United States Military Academy's Combating Terrorism

In the post-Prabhakaran landscape, Sri Lankan government's strategy should engage:

- (a) The national and international media as media shapes public opinion.
- (b) The general population especially the Tamils as human terrain is a key factor.
- (c) The civil society organisations as both governments and general population increasingly trust them and rely on them to solve global challenges.
- (d) The international community to channel resources to rebuild a country recovering from 30 years of violence.

To engage these actors, any nation-state needs to create new platforms, institutions and train (or select naturally motivated) personnel. A robust post-Prabhakaran national and an international strategy is yet to be formulated and implemented.

**Q: The government was often praised for its single mindedness during the war. But will this help govern a democratic state?**

**A:** We are limited today only by our personalities and our imagination. It was both the determination and the single-minded approach by the current government that enabled the country to end the violent campaign spearheaded by the LTTE in Sri Lanka. The architect of that campaign was Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, a master strategist, that put a military A team together. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa handpicked three brilliant leaders- General Sarath Fonseka, Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda and Air Marshall Roshan Gunatillake to achieve what others failed to do for a quarter century. The government should politically and economically consolidate the military gains by ushering in an era of economic development of the entire country, especially the Northeast. Although some puppets of Prabhakaran are still trying to lobby a handful Western politicians driven by constituency pressures, Sri Lanka must reach out to the West and the East and embark on a highly ambitious "Marshall Plan" to bring the country to its previous status as the most developed country in South Asia. We should no longer subscribe to the South Asian model of democracy that nearly destroyed Sri Lanka by allowing the people to do what they want, but subscribe to a Singapore style guided democracy that will ensure prosperity for all of its citizens. Compared to the rest of South Asia, Sri Lanka's socio-economic indicators from literacy to resources are comparable to East Asia. If government applies the same determination and single-minded approach it had to fight the LTTE to develop the country in the next one or two decades, we can transform Sri Lanka to a first world country. As security is no longer the single biggest challenge, government must make that leap now to make Sri Lanka the most prosperous nation in South Asia. Towards it, the President must put an economic A team together, develop a plan, implement it, and monitor progress until Sri Lanka reaches its target.

Centre and at Tufts University's Fletcher School for Law and Diplomacy. He serves on the editorial boards of Terrorism and Political Violence and Conflict and Terrorism Studies, the two leading terrorism journals in the world. As a litigation Consultant for the U.S. Department of Justice, he testified in the Jose Padilla case.

**Q: Also the result of the Southern provincial council elections shows the government can no longer win votes only by harping on the war victories, and that the time has come for a broader socio-economic plan?**

**A:** In the past 25 years, political parties lost and won elections in Sri Lanka by taking positions on the question of security. Although security still remains a priority issue, it will no longer be the most important issue. Every week, like a prayer, President Rajapaksa chaired the National Security Council with the Secretary Defence, the service commanders and the intelligence chiefs. Now the President should chair an economic council and a foreign affairs council. The need of the hour is to move, push and if necessary kick start the socio-economic initiatives and programmes to transform Sri Lanka. In parallel, the need of the hour is to work with a few governments taken for a ride by a few sweet talking LTTE activists masquerading as Tamil community leaders and human rights activists in Canada, Washington D.C., New York, London, Oslo, Brussels and in Canberra. Government can accomplish this feat by firing a few officials and ministers who have no talent and orientation, and replacing them now with the best minds full of energy that can understand and respond proactively to the challenges we are facing. As the Head of State, the President must act now, handpick the right leaders to accomplish these twin tasks, or risk appreciable and incremental losses both domestic and foreign.

**Q: We have always built our national identity resorting to the idea of an 'enemy,' and after the defeat of the LTTE the government is looking for new enemies?**

**A:** Sri Lanka must rebuild a new national identity. The old national identity based on ethnic groups has failed to create a healthy nation, and instead produced Prabhakarans and Wijeweras. This is the hard reality and we must recognise it. Sri Lanka belongs to all: to Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Veddas, Kaffirs and others who inhabit our country. Instead of building a Sri Lankan national identity that transcends these ethnic and religious differences, Sinhala and Tamil politicians played ethnic and religious politics to remain in power and come into power. The era of ethnic entrepreneurs is over. No self respecting politician should today fight for the rights of any linguistic or religious group, but fight for all. Today, the challenge is to build a strong common Sri Lankan national identity. It cannot emerge naturally: it must be constructed by getting Sinhalese to learn Tamil, Tamils to learn Sinhalese, abandoning the idea of separate Sinhala and Tamil schools, and creating exchange programmes for Tamils children in the North to study in the South and Sinhala children to study in the East. Otherwise, the Sinhalese and the Tamils will grow up suspecting and hating their Sri Lankan brothers and sisters and continue to see the world in black and white. Building bridges between ethnic and religious communities should be spearheaded by the military and led by the war heroes who have the credibility to embark on an unprecedented program at an unprecedented scale to unite Sri Lanka. Permanent unity will come through engagement, friendship, and economic prosperity.

**Q: The United States State Department report detailing possible**

**violations of the laws of war in Sri Lanka during the first half of 2009, is adding to pressure for an independent, international investigation into alleged atrocities committed by government forces and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) separatists. The government rejected the report as unsubstantiated. But wouldn't this be another blow to Sri Lanka's image?**

**A:** The US has been a reliable friend of Sri Lanka and an invaluable partner. The US assisted Sri Lanka to build its special forces, provided crucial intelligence and helped with counter terrorism investigations globally. In recent times, due to sustained LTTE lobbying and the failure of the Sri Lankan foreign ministry to do their best, the US State Department got carried away and made some inaccurate statements even at the UN which it had to retract. As such, the Sri Lankan Government should take a sympathetic position to the US State Department and should take its assessments in that light.

The LTTE has always seen the US State Department as an easy target. The LTTE was so bold that it attempted to bribe a US Department official with 1 million dollars! Fortunately, the FBI detected and disrupted the operation. Masquerading as human rights activists, LTTE activists in delegations repeatedly fed susceptible and vulnerable State Department officials with misinformation. As such, the US reports should be carefully examined if they contain LTTE's propaganda. If so, the Sri Lankan government should request the US to initiate an investigation as LTTE misinformation may have gone into the US government system as credible information. Like the US invaded Iraq based on flawed information, Sri Lanka must continue to engage the US and not allow LTTE misinformation to influence US policy. As one of Asia's oldest democracies, the Sri Lankan government should engage the US rather than take the easy route to embrace Russia, China, or Iran, new found friends with which we have very little in common. Sri Lanka has a great opportunity to re-engage the US State Department after Ambassador Patricia Butenis, a competent diplomat who has already won the admiration of many Sri Lankans, was appointed to Colombo. The US-Sri Lanka historical relationship has already started to improve!

**Q: And last week Philip Alston, UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions told media that the Sri Lankan government has a credibility problem, when asked about the Sri Lankan government's domestic probe to investigate the US State Department's allegations?**

**A:** When it comes to allegations of human rights violations, Sri Lanka does not suffer from a credibility problem anymore than the U.S. Having visited Iraq, Afghanistan and northeast Sri Lanka, I can assure you that neither the US nor Sri Lankan forces deliberately targeted civilians. However, in all those conflict zones, there were civilian deaths and injuries. The US, a country fighting two tough insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, must be careful of accusing Sri Lanka or any other country. When an accuser points one finger at an accused, there are nine fingers pointing at the accuser. As terrorists use human shields (Mumbai, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the

no fire zone in Sri Lanka), there will always be civilian fatalities and injuries.

When passing judgment, it must never be the letter of the law but the spirit of the law. As a government, Sri Lanka is not guilty of war crimes although there could be individuals that engaged in violations the same way US personnel committed atrocities in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and a dozen other Black Sites. Although terrorists are the biggest human rights violators, terrorist front, cover and sympathetic organisations always campaign on human rights issues. Certain individuals in the UN and State Department both communicated with LTTE activists, received LTTE delegations, and quoted LTTE statistics without verifying. The most serious charge is that LTTE contributed funds to the campaign of Mrs. Clinton and LTTE hired lobbyists participated at events organised by the UN. As personal and institutional interests may be at play, the allegations by the US and UN will need to be investigated before a judgement is reached.

**Q: Getting back to the US State Department's report, it was submitted in accordance with the 2009 Supplemental Appropriations Act, and the Act also instructed the US Government to cut off financial support to Sri Lanka, except for basic humanitarian aid, until the island's government respected the rights of IDPs. Do you also feel that the handling of the IDP issue will be a great disadvantage to us?**

**A:** The IDP challenge is a very complex issue. It must not be forgotten that it was the LTTE that uprooted 300,000 civilians from their villages and forcibly held them as a human shield to protect the LTTE leadership. When the IDPs were freed from the LTTE grips by the Sri Lankan forces, the IDPs loved them. The IDPs anger against the LTTE was so deep, that when some IDPs recognised LTTE leaders and cadres, they surrounded them and beat them. The Sri Lankan soldiers had to rescue the LTTE members and leaders and transport them to separate rehabilitation centres.

As LTTE leaders and members had infiltrated the fleeing civilians, the Sri Lankan Government did the right thing by confining and screening the people escaping from the no-fire-zone. The government could not risk another LTTE re-infiltration back to society. Almost all the LTTE leaders and members have been identified by the Tamils in the IDP centres and relocated to rehabilitation centres. Today, government is releasing 2000 IDPs each day. It is a remarkable feat that must be admired and supported not criticised and condemned. The management of IDPs has been handled admirably with tremendous compassion. On some days, Sri Lankan soldiers shared the funds they have for their rations with the IDPs.

I have discussed the issue with the highest level of government including with the Competent Authority of IDPs, Major General Kamal Gunaratna. A wise officer, General Gunaratna has the interests of the IDPs in his heart. Government has started to resettle the IDPs in areas where the LTTE arms, ammunition and explosives caches have been uncovered and in areas that have been cleared of LTTE mines. The international community is now realizing this after its representatives visited the IDP centres. Those

genuinely concerned about IDPs should have faith in the judgment of the Sri Lankan government. In the same spirit that the LTTE was dismantled, government will ensure that IDPs appropriately screened are resettled. Both are essential for the long term security of Sri Lanka.

The LTTE leaders and members detained in rehabilitation centres have been exceptionally well treated. The Justice Minister Milinda Moragoda and Commissioner General of Rehabilitation Daya Ratnayake have developed an outstanding multifaceted programme to bring them back from leading a life of extreme violence to mainstream society. The rehabilitation programme involves spiritual rehabilitation, psychological rehabilitation, educational, vocational and occupational rehabilitation, social and family rehabilitation. The children (under 18) are already studying for their exams. The adults will be trained and given a job. Both the Sri Lankan private sector and international donors have contributed to this unique programme.

**Q: It has been revealed that Raj Rajaratnam has given at least US\$5-million to the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO.) Do you think that this is a major blow for the remaining elements of the pro- LTTE movement?**

**A:** As we are living in a globalised world, the government of Sri Lanka working in cooperation and collaboration with foreign Governments should persist in dismantling the LTTE offices and cells irrespective of location. Although the LTTE threat in Sri Lanka has ended, the LTTE still maintains an infrastructure overseas. By working with foreign governments, the LTTE propaganda and fundraising infrastructure must be dismantled. The intention of LTTE International is to continue to harm the Sri Lanka's image. By disseminating propaganda and raising funds, these LTTE activists in the diaspora seek to revive terror by politicising, radicalising and militarising the Sri Lankan Tamils and preventing their return to normalcy.

Sri Lanka must take the following four steps to dismantle the LTTE overseas:

First, Sri Lanka must pass a law that makes it an offence to advocate, support or participate in the LTTE activity overseas. Recent research indicates that a dozen LTTE activists operating in the US, Canada, Europe and Australia travelled to Sri Lanka on holiday. After waving terrorist flags in world capitals and extorting funds from hardworking Tamils overseas without any guilt or shame, some are planning even to visit Sri Lanka this December too. Those who engage in terrorist propaganda and fundraising should be charged, tried, prosecuted, fined and imprisoned. This law must act as a future deterrent and a model to be emulated by other countries with diaspora supported terrorist campaigns.

Second, as the LTTE is a proscribed terrorist group that has killed, maimed, and injured civilians, Sri Lanka should request for the extradition of LTTE activists, both leaders and supporters operating overseas seeking to disrupt the peace and the road to prosperity. Unless this is done in the coming months, the opportunity may be lost as some countries are being lobbied by

the LTTE to remove the proscription. A few British, US and Canadian politicians with Tamil constituencies are being lobbied by LTTE activists operating through community organisations to do so. Current LTTE international strategy led by V. Rudrakumaran is to get the LTTE internationally accepted and legalised, create a government in exile, and spark the violence in Sri Lanka. Norwegian Government has unfortunately allowed its soil to be used by the LTTE to create this new LTTE structure.

Third, the centre of gravity of the LTTE threat has now shifted from Sri Lanka to overseas. Good national security practice is to without delay, build the organisations to observe, interlock and dismantle all LTTE front, cover and sympathetic groups. Unfortunately the Counter Terrorism Division of the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry has only one staff officer. To support overseas operations, this crucial Division of the Ministry should be staffed by lawyers, financial specialists, military, law enforcement, intelligence and information officers. The purpose of Sri Lanka's foreign policy is to advance Sri Lanka's national security interests. Although Sri Lanka won the fight against the world's most ruthless terrorist group at home, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs failed miserably to counter and neutralise the vicious LTTE propaganda. It is not too late to rebuild this much needed ministry's capability to fight in the next battlefield- the international arena or suffer LTTE-initiated sanctions including economic losses. The Sri Lankan foreign ministry through its missions overseas should work closely with foreign governments to ensure that the LTTE does not survive and its activities under the guise of human rights and humanitarian concerns come to an end.

Fourth, Sri Lanka should create opportunities for Tamils living overseas, especially those misguided in the past by the LTTE, to invest in projects in the Northeast. Government should provide them immunity from prosecution for past support for terrorism and welcome them with respect. Those LTTE activists that crafted and repeated messages of hate and donated funds to kill, maim and injure and make a million living Tamils and others suffer, should be given a chance to abandon their extremist ideologies of separatism and violence and work to rebuild their country.

Many have already done this, while some suffer from deep shame and guilt, and others will become repentant and remorseful, over time. The dynamic and hardworking Senior Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa, who is spearheading the efforts to develop the North and the East with international assistance has welcomed Sri Lanka diaspora especially participation and investment. Other visionary leaders such as Milinda Moragoda, the Justice Minister, had even agreed to a donation by Raj Rajaratnam, the US billionaire, when the FBI arrested him for insider trading. Even if V. Rudrakumaran, the de facto head of the LTTE, wants to work with the government to improve the lives of the Tamils in the northeast, he should be invited and treated with respect. As diplomacy is the art of winning over opponents and those on the fence, working with the Presidential Secretariat, the Defence Ministry, the Justice Ministry and the development ministries, the foreign ministry should spearhead this bold initiative.

**Q: There have been many reports of a conflict between General Fonseka and the government. What are your views on this matter and how would that impact the government's conduct in the near future?**

**A:** Human relationships are very complex. In relationships between people, there are always misunderstandings. Unfortunately politicians both in government and the opposition have exploited this misunderstanding for their personal and party political advantages. Some have over-reacted. Even the media reporting has not helped!

If the dispute persists between General Sarath Fonseka and the government, neither party will be the winners. Both will be losers and the country and its people will suffer. The only way to resolve this misunderstanding is through dialogue. Both Secretary of Defence Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and General Sarath Fonseka are committed to the security and stability of Sri Lanka. Having watched the suffering of thousands of troops injured and killed defending Sri Lanka, they will not do anything to harm Sri Lanka. They have to resolve this dispute as there are both internal and external forces waiting to see Sri Lanka fail. United we stand, divided we fail!