The Role Of Ex-Combatants In Reconciliation

By Shakya Lahiru Pathmalal

The path towards rehabilitation

It is estimated that nearly 11,000 former LTTE cadres that either gave themselves up or were captured by the Sri Lankan Army at the end of the war in May 2009.

According to Major General Chandana Rajaguru the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation that 10,000 of these former LTTE cadres have been rehabilitated and released. Whilst there have been some legitimate criticisms that have been leveled against the rehabilitation process, many commentators would argue that overall the process has been a success. The government has repeatedly stated both in domestic and international area that rehabilitation of ex-combatants is an integral part in the overall reconciliation process. This article will explore some encouraging consequences that are a result of rehabilitation and look into ways in which the system can be strengthened.

In liberalized terminology, GoSL terms ex-combatants as beneficiaries. They have gone through a conventionally perceived positive rehabilitation process – a combination of vocational training and de radicalization including spiritual learning and meditation. It is a reality that many if not all of these ex combatants have committed grave crimes against the military forces as well as civilian populations during the war, It is also a reality that their rehabilitation and release have had a positive impact on their lives. In heartening evidence provided by the fact that a few of ex-combatants have gone on to enter medical school in the University System, many have completed some sort of vocational training while others have entered into marriage with their former cadres in an attempt to start afresh new life.

Academics and policy makers such as Dr. Rohan Gunaratna defending the government’s stance

on releasing many ex-combatants with a violent past, has publicly stated that it is a real need to forgive crimes committed by ex-combatants, and that forgiveness will play a crucial role in moving the reconciliation process forward. There can be little doubt that this is true, and forgiveness is indeed a corner stone of reconciliation.

In light of heartening evidence, it is clear that a more sufficient and concerted effort is made towards the rehabilitation of ex-combatants. Many issues that are interconnected to their rehabilitation and release do not receive due attention due to the sensitivity. Hon. Sumathiran (MP) has alleged while some hardcore LTTE cadres have been released there are many more Tamils who languish in detaining facilities as in Boosa for year’s lesser crimes with no recourse. Whilst rehabilitation and release are important parts of ex-combatants being restored back into their community, the greatest challenge they face is during reintegration back into their communities. There are accounts from people on the ground of the ex-combatants who have returned to their former villages only to realize that they are no longer welcomed home. This is of course no surprise since many Tamils suffered due to LTTE activities, and now have begun to resent the presence of former LTTE combatants. Furthermore, and more damagingly it seems that many of female ex-combatants are most at risk after returning home. In Batticaloa there were nearly 700 female ex-combatants who have been reintegrated in to area. According to accounts that appear from the area two females recently have committed suicide after being sexually harassed by what they have termed as armed groups for a prolonged period of time. This raises an important issue of the follow up programs that needs to be put in place in order to protect the interests of these individuals when they are most vulnerable. While the government has put in place some follow up programs to allow these ex-combatants to secure financial aid, through micro finances or job placement, there has been no psychosocial program to aid these individuals in the reintegration process.

While large amounts of funds have been allocated by both the government and other international agencies/foreign governments (International Organization for Migration, International Labor Organization, the government of Australia, U.S.A and Japan to name a few) in the rehabilitation process, there seem to be a lack of funding and programs that are aimed at specifically monitoring the wellbeing of these individuals once they return back home. The government now after successfully completing the initial phase of rehabilitation must now implement a monitoring and support structure mechanism to aid the ex-combatants who are returning home. This would ensure that the good work that has been done in the onset is not wasted, and that the ex-combatants are supported right through the process in entering society. Having such mechanisms will reduce the risk of these individuals being the victims of those who wish to take advantage of their situation, and also reduce their vulnerability to be radicalized once again and/or become unproductive members of their communities.

International organizations and friendly countries too must aid these individuals in the years to come in the slow their arduous journey towards being fully integrated in to a civil society. Furthermore, the government must process the cases that are pending for the hundreds of individuals who are incarcerated under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). So that justice will be equally be distributed. The path to reconciliation must be a holistic one that incorporates all aspects in rehabilitation and reintegration and which leaves no one behind.