

## WHAT PRICE PEACE FOR NORTH EAST MUSLIMS?

(M.I.M. MOHIDEEN)

Like any other Sri Lankan, the Muslims also very much keen to have peace. But at what price the peace is going to be for the Muslims? Muslims were very much concerned about the reference to Muslims as "a group of people not directly part of the conflict" in the ceasefire agreement signed by the government and the LTTE on 22nd of February 2002 which has resulted in the denial of Muslims participation in peace process.

Although the Muslims have not staged a war against the government of Sri Lanka for the settlement of our grievances, we are the most affected lot in the North East conflict. The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, the 13th Amendment to the constitution and the provisions of the Provincial Council Act have failed to meet the legitimate and reasonable demands of the Muslims. They have failed to protect our lives and properties. They have failed to promote socio-economic interests of our people. They have failed to recognise the different ethnic and political aspirations of the Muslim. The total disregard shown to Muslim sentiments bring to surface one truth the government has little or no concern about the safety and security of the Muslim people in the North East.

North East was merged temporarily during emergency subject to a referendum at the end of one year. This referendum had not taken place for the last 15 year. Election for the dissolved North-East Provincial Council was not held for more than 13 year. If the Presidential and Parliamentary elections could be held regularly why can't the referendum and the election for the North East Provincial Council could be held at the due dates?

Local government elections in the Muslim areas were not held with other areas in the Eastern Province. Although Mr. Rauff Hackeem was a member of Mr. Ranil Wickremasinghe's cabinet, his request was rejected because of the pressure from the Tamils. However, the former Prime Minister Mr. Ranil Wickramasinghe had allowed the elections in the Sinhalese areas in the East because Minister Dayaratna had pressed for it. It is a pity that Mr. Rauff Hackeem being a cabinet Minister in the UNF government was helpless.

Muslims in the North East are very much concerned about these vital issues and cannot remain as mere spectators while the government continues to ignore the North East Muslim question. Muslim parliamentarians should take-up these issues with the government for a satisfactory solution.

Muslims cannot forget that it was during the former UNP regime that the President Jayawardena circumvented the laws passed by his own government and effected the merger of the Eastern province with the North and made the Muslims a community of political and social slaves under the Tamils. It is hoped that the UPFA Government would not desire the betrayal of the Muslims at the crucial time.

It is because of our desire that the Tamils and Muslims should live in amity in the North and East, a Muslim delegation visited India - Madras on two occasions, in September 1987 and April 1988 and had wide ranging discussions with the Tamil moderates as well as the militant groups for peaceful coexistence in the North East.

After the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement in July 1987 and the 13th Amendment to the constitution, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress took one step further by contesting the election in the Eastern province and helped the formation of the Provincial Council for the temporarily merged North-East province.

In September, 1990, it was agreed between the Tamil parties and the Muslim parties that there shall be one North East provincial council and two ethnic councils of devolution with equal powers. It was categorically decided that the Muslim ethnic council should in no way be inferior to the Tamil ethnic council. It was also agreed that the Provincial Council should be a bicameral legislature with the second chamber having balanced representation for the minorities in the region.

But the Tamil parties have now taken up the position of not agreeing to create a separate unit of devolution for the Muslims in the Northern and Eastern provinces. They have also taken up the position that the 18% Muslims of the Northern and Eastern province should be contented with the constitutional safeguards only. If that is so, we cannot understand as to why the 10% Sri Lankan Tamils cannot be satisfied with similar constitutional safeguards only, without demanding any share of political power through the devolution process.

The present ethnic composition in the Eastern Province Muslims 41%, Tamils 33% and Sinhalese 26% is a serious impediment to the Tamil totalitarian strategy.

The issues confronting the Muslim in the peace process are the extent of devolutions and the status of the Muslims in the North-East. There are considerable apprehensions with regard to

what the future holds out for the Muslims. The LTTE will be the dominant power in the region and if the Government and the LTTE agree to a merged North East, then the extent of devolution, the security and protection of the Muslims rights need to be assured by providing a separate power sharing arrangement.

At the LTTE leader's international media conference on 10th April, 2002, Dr. Anton Balasingham repeated his previous apology made at a public meeting on behalf of the LTTE for the forcible expulsion in 1990 of thousands of Muslims by the LTTE as a "political blunder that cannot be justified". Mr. Balasingham said: "Let us forget and forgive the mistakes made in the past. Tamil Elam is also the homeland of the Muslims and we have to live in harmony and amity to promote peace and prosperity in the region." In the said media conference to a question, whether the LTTE would allow Muslim participation in the peace process, Mr. Velupillai Pirabakaran replied, "certainly we will allow Muslim representation in the peace process. It is very important that the questions of the Muslim people are resolved along with the question of the Tamil people."

However, after the ceasefire agreement, the incident at Valachenai during June 2002 where the LTTE had abducted 13 Muslims and the dead bodies of two Muslim youths killed by the LTTE were burned in front of their parents and government security forces thus denying them the burial according to Muslims rites, which clearly demonstrate the scant respect the LTTE has for the religion and the culture of the Muslims. LTTE has even put up a military camp in our Mosque in the Government controlled area at Kurangupanchan in Kinniya which is a gross violation of the MoU signed after the cease fire.

The ethnic conflict in Sri-Lanka has had a terrible effect on the Muslims, particularly in the North-East. The forcible eviction of more than one hundred thousand Muslims, destruction of more than 150 mosques and murdering of Muslims while in prayer, the confiscation of lands, houses, business and cultural premises, have caused insecurity among the North-East Muslims.

Because of security risks, the Muslims are unable to cultivate more than 100,000 acres of agricultural lands and occupy nearly 12,000 Residential Houses, Business and cultural premises belonging to the Northern Muslims. The losses suffered by the Muslims were estimated to be more than US\$ 100 millions.

The main focus of the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) at the peace talks was on the urgent humanitarian needs to improve the day to day lives of the North East people. To this effect the parties have agreed on an accelerated Resettlement program of the Internally Displaced people.

However, the proposal submitted by the Sri Lanka Government to the Oslo Donors Conference on 25th November 2002, for immediate Humanitarian and Rehabilitation support did not mention the losses suffered by the Muslims and the funds required for the Resettlement and Reconstruction works in Muslim areas. The proposal submitted by the Government of Sri Lanka gave the impression that it was only the Tamils have suffered in the North East conflict. The International Donors Conference held in Tokyo – Japan had pledged US\$ 4.5 Billion for rehabilitation work in the war affected North-East and other infrastructure and Development work in Sri Lanka.

The Muslims are entitle to our share of the aid to reconstruct the Muslim areas destroyed in the conflict, resettle the 105,000 Muslims forcibly displaced in the North East regain, our agricultural lands, residential houses, business and cultural premises and the compensation for the properties appropriated by the Tamils during the forcible expulsion by the LTTE and loss of income from October 1990.

Soon after the Ceasefire Agreement LTTE Leader V. Pirapaharan, invited the Leader of the SLMC, Rauff Hackeem for a meeting on the 13th April 2002. Agreement was reached on important problems faced by the Muslims in the North-East. LTTE Leader Pirapaharan invited the displaced Muslims to come and resettle in their own places.

It was also agreed to appoint Muslims representatives from each district in the North East to discuss the problems faced by the Muslims with LTTE Senior Commanders and to strengthen Tamil Muslims relationship.

During the peace talks SLMC National Leader Rauf Hakeem, had substantive discussions with the members of the LTTE team in the peace talk and came to a good understanding of the North East Muslim problems. The LTTE was prepared to seriously address the issues and requested a register of Muslim claims. Subsequently Hon. Rauf Hakeem had requested the Muslim Rights Organization to prepare the register of Muslim Lands not cultivated by the Muslims, Residential Houses and Mosques destroyed and the Properties appropriated by the Tamils. The register is ready and it is now left to the LTTE to honor their promises.

The resolution of Muslim Land and Property issues in the North East would benefit more than 30,000 families – 150,000 men, women and children and it would certainly go a long way to re-establish trust among the Tamil and Muslim Communities in the North-East.

Perhaps the next round of talks will commence after the current suspension is lifted? We have to learn the lessons from first phase of the peace process. Now, GOSL & LTTE are moving into very complicated stage of the peace process. The new group that has been set up by the LTTE leadership has decided on an Interim Self Government Authority proposals. GOSL is in a very difficult position and they need to negotiate the LTTE proposal but it seems to be very hard when the Sinhalese fundamentalist and the JVP rejecting the LTTE proposal and the Muslims demanding an independent arrangement in the ISGA and a separate representation in the peace talks.

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