

Editorial

Reconciliation cannot wait for LLRC report

March 5, 2011, 4:05 pm

Two events that occurred last week are pertinent to the lessons learnt and reconciliation process which the powers-that-be loudly proclaim is in progress. The first of these relate to the Attorney General's undertaking to the Supreme Court that the allegedly forced registration of Jaffna and Kilinochchi residents undertaken by the security forces will be suspended. This was a result of the TNA filing a human rights petition. The second was the non-binding resolution adopted by the U.S. Senate about the situation in Sri Lanka.

It is well known that the AG backtracks in court when he realizes that his case is weak. Rather than allow a determination against the State, he tenders an undertaking virtually conceding the matter raised by the petitioner as was the case in this instance. This is well and good, but the question that obviously arises is why did the authorities embark on the registration process in the first instance if it violated the human rights of the people in those areas? The State engaging in illegal or unfair practices, affecting a community bearing real or perceived grievances, is not the best way to reconciliation. It only retards the process.

Although the war was not over when it happened, readers will remember the clearing of lodges in Colombo used by visiting Tamils in areas like Pettah and Wellawatte. These people came to Colombo for various reasons, usually legitimate. But there was good reason to believe that the LTTE too used this channel as a means of infiltration. The Supreme Court held against the State on this matter and many of those ejected had to be brought back. Some did not wish to return. They naturally felt done down. It will be freely conceded that the situation then was quite different to what it is now. The LTTE at that time sent suicide bombers and terrorist cadres to Colombo in a desperate attempt to conflagrate race riots and get the military heat that was building up off their backs.

It is not possible to fight wars with your hands tied behind your back or according to the Queensberry rules. Also, when your opponent can use any dirty tactic, which he does without the slightest demur, you cannot restrict yourself to playing a straight bat. But States unfortunately must play by a different set of rules and subscribe to standards that do not apply to terrorists. The action taken then was necessary in all probability. Those responsible knew that innocents too were being victimized, but there was no avoiding that in the conditions that prevailed. The adverse judgment on the lodge issue was inevitable though the AG did not give an undertaking to stop clearing these places.

But it is more than a year since the war ended and for reasons that have not been made clear, the government has not made public its plans for resolving long-festering issues that contributed to ethnic tension. The much awaited meeting between the government and the TNA on this issue has been repeatedly deferred. The government obviously consults with its Tamil supporters like Douglas Devananda, Karuna, Pillayan and even KP, who was the LTTE's chief arms procurer. People like Sri Ranga, elected to parliament on the UNP ticket, obviously wield considerable influence with the government on Tamil issues. But they are not representative of all the Tamils and it is necessary that other strands of opinion, including that of opponents, are also consulted. There has been far too much foot dragging on clearing matters of contention. Everything appears to be on hold until the LLRC's final report is in.

The U.S. Senate's non-binding resolution to which the external affairs ministry has responded is an index of the influence the diaspora supporting the LTTE wields. But as has been pointed out, the Senate is part of the legislature and not part of the administration. There are several strands of opinion in the U.S., within the state department, the Pentagon and the administration itself. Obviously the legislature is subject to various pressures members of the diaspora are well placed to apply given their level of education and the positions they hold. Unlike in Britain, some European countries and perhaps Canada, Tamils are less able to apply direct constituency pressure on legislators in the U.S. although we must not forget that no less than Ms. Hillary Clinton received a campaign contribution from a pro-LTTE group!

We can smile at finger-pointing by western powers about alleged war crimes during the final stages of our war. Given their own track record, going as far back to the atom bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki (did the U.S. Senate or Congress pass any resolutions, binding or non-binding, on that score?) and more recent events in Iraq and Afghanistan, preaching from many western capitals can only remind us of the old story about the pot and the kettle. But the fact is that hard line positions taken particularly by some European countries are noticeably easing. We cannot sit on a high horse and scream ``who are you to preach?'' Instead it is up to us to build on the positives and improve the world view of our country which has just emerged from a near three decade long war against one of the world's most ruthless terrorist groups.

Reconciliation must be a national process. We have to address grievances among our minorities not because the big powers or an LTTE rump, licking their war wounds, demand it. We must do what is right by all our people regardless of ethnicity. Many of this country's wounds on the ethnic score are self-inflicted going back to Sinhala Only in 1956. Then there was July 1983 which blackened our image internationally. There must be an appreciation of where we went wrong and how we will right wrongs, whoever be the wrongdoer. Ideally such a process must be apolitical with political advantage neither sought nor seized by anybody.