



Peace would have been won without bloodshed

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Former Norwegian politician, Erik Solheim, who became a household name in Sri Lanka as a peace envoy who tried and failed to make peace between the Tamil Tigers and the government, in an exclusive interview with Ceylon Today, said the war was won at a tremendous cost and that he would stand as witness before any recognized international tribunal, if asked to do so, on war crimes allegedly committed by the Sri Lankan Government.

Solheim, who is now the Chair of the Development Assistance Committee in the USA, is planning to launch a book, early next year, on his mission as a peace envoy during the bloody civil war, highlighting the 'actions' of the politicians and the Tamil Tigers involved in the process.

Excerpts of the interview:
By Sulochana Ramiah Mohan

Q:
According to the media you are gearing up to launch a book on the role of Norway as a peace mediator in Sri Lanka. What is the title of the book?

A: The title of the book is not yet decided. The book is a joint effort with Vidar Helgesen, a Norwegian diplomat and politician. It's authored by Mark Salter.

Q:
What is the purpose of this book and when will it be launched?

A: It will probably be launched early next year. The purpose is to set the record straight. We were very close to peace in Sri Lanka. What happened during the successful time when there were no killings? Why did the peace process ultimately fail? Why did the parties want to go back to war? These topics would be discussed in the book.

Q:
What are the key factors discussed in the book?

A: The actions of the LTTE and most importantly the action of the Sri Lankan politicians would be mentioned. The suffering of ordinary Sri Lankans; Norway's peace efforts; the support for peace from India, USA and other elements will also be described.

Q:



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You have been a peace envoy in the Norwegian delegation to resolve the Sri Lankan Civil War before the outbreak of Eelam War IV. Do you appreciate the Sri Lankan Government's win by eradicating terrorism single handedly without any outside support?

A: I highly appreciate that there is peace in the land and that many can restart their lives. However, the war was won at tremendous cost, mainly in relation to Tamil civilians. Sri Lankan soldiers and LTTE fighters, they too should not be forgotten. I still firmly believe there was another way.

Q:

How do you describe, the LTTE and Sri Lankan Governments (under Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Ranil Wickremesinghe and the Rajapaksa) involvement in peace talks?

A: I think they were all at times sincere in wanting to negotiate peace. Even the LTTE for that matter was sincere. President Mahinda Rajapaksa told us to reach out to Prabhakaran with peace proposals.

Q:

Do you still believe the 30-year war could have been solved through peace talks without military action?

A: Yes! Far too many innocent people died in the war.

Q:

Can you explain how that could have been possible?

A: The two main obstacles to the peace process would have had to be overcome, that is, firm pressure on Prabhakaran to accept federalism and, cooperation, not constant infighting, between the SLFP and the UNP.

Q:

Was the LTTE serious about the Oslo Declaration (calling for a Federal system) ?

A: Yes, they were serious, but there was little doubt that Prabhakaran felt Balasingham had gone too far.

Q:

Did Anton Balasingham agree to the Oslo Declaration on his own, without direct approval from to Prabhakaran?

A: Balasingham agreed to the Oslo Declaration believing that he would bring Prabhakaran on board. They were in constant touch during the negotiations.

Q:

Why did the Norwegian peace negotiations fail You toiled for almost a decade, meeting Prabhakaran more than 10 times?

A: It was wrong to isolate Prabhakaran. As it happened in the past, hardly anyone met Prabhakaran, but the Norwegians did. It would have been much better if a number of international leaders had met him and had impressed upon him the need to compromise and to settle for federalism. Meeting him 10 times was very little since no one else but the Norwegians talked with him. Remember that we met Chandrika, Ranil and Mahinda hundreds of times.

Q:

Was Balasingham sincere with the peace negotiation? Did he have the authority to negotiate?

A: Balasingham was completely sincere and honest with us throughout.

Q:

Was Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga sincere in her peace negotiating exercise?

A: Yes.

Q:

You were involved in many other peace processes in various other countries. How successful were you in those peace processes?

A: I have assisted other peace processes. Nepal is an example of a successful peace process I worked on.

Q:

In your peace building assignments, how do you describe your endeavours in Sri Lanka compared to the rest? Was it tough, impossible, waste of time or worst assignment in your entire career?

A: I have no regrets. Sri Lanka is a fantastic and beautiful land with so many good people from all communities.

Q:

Why did you come under serious criticism from the Sri Lankan Government and its people?

A: I think it was mainly because we were the only persons meeting the LTTE. So, when something went wrong, many blamed those who met the Tigers and those holding negotiation talks with them. I am happy that I still get many letters from grateful Sri Lankans, both Sinhalese and Tamils for trying to bring peace to the nation.

Q:

Is it true that in 2002 some faction of the society had planned to assassinate you in Sri Lanka?

A: There were threats. You cannot try to negotiate peace if you are scared.

Q:

The UN also blames the LTTE too for alleged human rights violations. Why wasn't the LTTE pressed hard on human rights?

A: There was strong pressure from India, USA and others on the LTTE urging them to stop killings and other human rights violations. We constantly conveyed this to the LTTE leadership. I also told Prabhakaran that unless you stop killing people, the LTTE will be proscribed by the international community.

Q:

Sri Lanka has been pressured by the international community calling for an international probe into human rights allegations. Is that the right move by the UN?

A: Yes. Tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed. Hospitals were shelled. There are strong indications of people being killed after surrendering themselves to the government. Think of Prabhakaran's 12-year-old son for instance. Such atrocities cannot be buried without conducting investigations into them. Time cannot pass on without probing these alleged crimes. This is the 21st century, remember.

Q:

Will you go before the International Crimes Court to give evidence against Sri Lanka on alleged war crimes?

A: I will be a witness before any recognized international tribunal if I am asked to do so.

Q:

Were you ever approached by the UN for inquiry on alleged human rights violations since it's a UN mandate to inquire into such allegations from an international perspective?

A: Yes. I have been asked by the UN, USA and others on different occasions.

Q:

During the end of the war you had said you had advised LTTE senior militants to surrender to government troops by holding white flags and also by announcing it through a hailer. Do you know what happened thereafter?

A: During the last four months of the war, we called upon Prabhakaran to accept an 'organized' end to the war, which would have saved the lives of tens of thousands of civilians and thousands of LTTE cadres. Kumaran Pathmanathan (KP) can bear witness to this. It is so sad he did not accept the facts.

On 17 May, 2009, the Norwegians and others received calls by Pulidevan and Nadesan who wanted to surrender. We told them it was too late for us to arrange anything and advised them to hoist a white flag. On 18 May, we were informed they were killed.

Q:

However, Dr. Palitha Kohona declared, after the war, that the LTTE senior militants shot and killed Prabhakaran and his immediate members as they did not want anyone to surrender to government troops. Isn't this a possibility?

A: You will have a huge difficulty finding any other person believing this story.

Q:

The government claims the West and the US interest in Sri Lanka is geopolitics and they care less about human rights violations and alleged war crimes. What is your take on that?

A: It is nonsense. If the US only looked after its traditional strategic interests, why would it not ally with the government? In the 21st century human rights are part of hardcore political interest. The USA and many others want 'global rule of law.'

Q:

Did you anticipate, after the war came to an end, that there would be a series of allegations aimed at Sri Lanka by the international community?

A: Yes. That was clear from the very beginning.

Q:

Are you happy the way Sri Lanka is progressing now?

A: I am glad it is peaceful now. I am also happy there is economic and social progress. But I support a restoration of democracy and a halt to the attacks on religious minorities. Time has come to reach out to the Tamil community and start power sharing as Indian Prime Minister Modi urged your President a week ago.

Q:

Isn't it unfair by the international community, which did nothing for Sri Lanka during the war, to now criticize it after the war was won?

A: The international community did a lot to support Sri Lanka during the peace process. Sri Lanka does not solve any problem, but always keeps blaming the international community. If the international community is so bad, why did the President's brothers settle in the USA for years?

Q:

India urges for the full implementation of the 13th Amendment. Will that solve the national issue?

A: It will be a major step forward.

Q:

How do you think Modi should work with Sri Lanka to bring a about a lasting solution to the national problem?

A: I am not in a position to advise Modi. I think he had a very good start by inviting the President and other South Asian leaders to attend his swearing-in ceremony, but also by talking bluntly with them.

Q:

You had admitted that the Indian Government, then too, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), played a key role, behind-the-scene, in the framing of the Norwegian-sponsored Ceasefire Agreement. Can you explain what happened?

A: India has been a main supporter of Sri Lanka's peace throughout, both under the BJP and Congress. We had very close working relations with India during Vajpayee's BJP Government.

Q:

To be a successful State, what should Sri Lanka do in the future?

A: Restore democracy and resolve the Tamil national question. Also, focus on development and economic progress.

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