

Call for formulation of NGO policy. (1995, November 19). *The Sunday Times*.

Call for formulation of NGO policy

By Kishali Adhikari

"We are a very respectable organisation." Assets Executive Secretary of the NGO Forum, Boyn Wolfe plaintively. "I am aghast at the vituperation and violence directed against us. All this is totally unwarranted," he says.

Respectability is indeed the crux of the matter. As local and foreign journalists were allegedly assaulted in the South on Tuesday and guest delegates hid in their rooms in Hotel Renuka on Thursday when a crowd stormed it, what had been planned as a peaceful two day conference turned out to be a nightmare.

Amidst misunderstandings and misconceptions galore, tempers rose and the NGO Forum complained that it had been accused, tried and convicted without a fair hearing. The NGO Forum did not hesitate to attribute the lion's share of the blame for what happened to the Sri Lankan Expatriates Association in U.K. It was this Association which had first written to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the British High Commission, questioning the bona fides of the forum.

"They have labelled us as pro-LTTE. This is a complete untruth," protests Wolfe. He points out that the rights activists that comprise the forum supported the move to instal PA in office in 1994 and continue to support it still. It was precisely because of this more liberal era that we decided to hold our annual meeting in Sri Lanka this year," he claims.

The Sri Lanka Expatriates Association Joint Secretary, G. D. C. Perera is eager to set the record straight.

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"We never accused the forum of being pro-LTTE," he says.

"We questioned whether the forum had the backing of the British Refugee Council, since both its address and the telephone plus fax numbers are of the Council."

In the letter to the authorities, however, the Association refers to partisan fora who engage in vicious propaganda against the government and talks of the international wing of the LTTE which is allegedly aided and abetted by some NGO groups.

Over and above the sound and the fury, some certainties at least can be established. Firstly, the NGO Forum has no link with the British Refugee Council except that it occupies office space rented out by the Council. Secondly, the violence of last week would have earned a much greater international prominence for the NGO Forum than if it had been allowed to hold its meeting as scheduled. Such publicity can only be an unfortunate negation of recent efforts to improve the international image of the government. International delegates were roughhoused in a manner that will take Sri Lanka a while to live down. Upto Friday neither the Foreign Affairs Ministry nor the Government had condemned the incident. It is cause for rejoicing that saner counsel prevailed in the Ministry and a statement was released regretting the incident.

Other assertions about the dispute are less certain. The NGO Forum claims that the meeting due to be held in Bentota last week was merely its annual meeting which is neither secret nor anti Sri Lankan. The forum has been involved in supporting development and peace activities in Sri Lanka since 1990. It was moreover responsible for mobilising and training Sri Lankans in election monitoring in 1994 with the concurrence of the present Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Executive Secretary Boyn Wolfe has been working with the Quaker Peace and Service as a health worker in Sri Lanka since 1988.

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The aborted meeting at the Bentota Beach Hotel was to be attended by a dozen delegates from international humanitarian and development aid bodies including the World Bank.

On Tuesday morning Boyn

Wolfe who had travelled down to Bentota to make advance arrangements for the delegates due to arrive later, had been confronted by a hostile crowd demanding that the "pro-LTTE seminar" be cancelled. After a heated discussion between Wolfe and the hotel management, during which it was found the protestors had swelled to about three thousand people. Wolfe had then decided to postpone the sessions and had travelled to Kalutara under police security. It was subsequently that two foreigners and two local forum activists had arrived on the scene and are said to have been assaulted.

Back in Colombo, on Thursday some two hundred protestors had again gone to Hotel Renuka and demanded a confrontation with forum organisers. Up to the time of writing, the NGO Forum had still not been able to hold its annual meeting.

Meanwhile, the question as to whether official permission was ever granted to the NGO Forum to hold its meeting is fiercely disputed. The forum emphasizes that it had obtained verbal permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A copy of a letter sent to the Minister of Foreign Affairs on October 19, is produced as proof.

"If the Foreign Ministry denies this, I would like to see their denial in print," Wolfe said.

And deny it, the Foreign Ministry did, with all vehemence.

"For every conference in which international delegates participate, clearance has to be obtained from us first. There was no clearance given in this instance," a Foreign Ministry spokesman informed "The Sunday Times".

"It is a matter of opinion whether the conference should ever have been held in Sri Lanka at this time. Discussion that might have been tolerated at another time assumes dangerous undertones in the context of the current war. The topics listed for

discussion at the conference include humanitarian assistance, peace and war, Human Rights and NGO partnership.

"We realise that humanitarian assistance is a touchy subject right now," concedes Wolfe.

"But the idea that our two day conference might affect the Riviresa Operation is totally absurd," he states.

While the forum documents do mention that the massacre of civilians by the LTTE has emerged as a prime LTTE strategy, it does not condemn these attacks. On the other hand, as the Expatriates Association alleges, the documents directly accuse the Sri Lankan Government of "systematically blocking humanitarian assistance to additional food in a civil war against the Tamil people." At the best, such omissions are unfortunate, at the worst they are inflammatory.

Be as it may, the incidents of last week have certainly left a bad impression in the minds of every rational Sri Lankan. Mob rule is no manner to deal with errant Sri Lankan or foreign NGOs. Sri Lanka has many committed non governmental organisations which are of tremendous help to the country.

As in every sphere of activity, some are good and some are bad. Those who are found guilty of activities injurious to the country should be closed down or expelled, with reasons given.

The government cannot turn a Nelsonian eye when it suits them on some occasions and request assistance when it suits them on other occasions. This is specially so as in the aftermath of the war, Non-Governmental Organisations would be asked to put the war torn areas back on track.

It is high time that a consistent and responsible government policy is formulated with regard to the operating of Non-Governmental Organisations.