

Chandrika's biggest contribution to peace. (1994, September 25).
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Chandrika's biggest contribution to peace

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The journey to peace is never easy. Just before the Israeli-PLO peace agreement was signed, an Israeli walked into a mosque and shot dead dozens of Arab worshippers. The blasting of the navy ship this week by the LTTE was no less a provocation. The costly and high profile LTTE attack took place in the face of the peaceful and confidence-building initiatives taken by the new government immediately upon taking office.

But it must not become the reason for a retreat away from peace. That would be to play into the hands of the opponents of peace of which there are many. When the government lifted much of the economic embargo over the north, it was acting in the best interests of the people in the north. That attitude must continue.

For the first time in a long while Sri Lanka has, in Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga a political leader who has won the confidence of people that she is not playing games with the ethnic conflict for the sake of narrow political advantage.

Despite being in office for barely a month, and being heavily burdened by the fact that President Wijetunga of the opposition UNP remains as Minister of Defence she has captured the imagination of Sri Lanka's Tamil population even in the North in a way that other Sinhalese leaders have been unable to. This has been a very threatening challenge not only to the LTTE but to the hardliners on all sides. Through the sincerity of her quest for peace she has appealed

directly to the hearts of war weary people.

Encouraged by the Prime Minister's positive attitude towards a negotiated peace, the latent desire of people of all communities to put an end to the ethnic conflict was finally given room to emerge. When given the chance to vote for parties that stood for ethnic exclusiveness the people totally rejected them and preferred those parties that stood for pluralism and living together.

By way of contrast, the LTTE has staked its reason for existing, for the ethnic cleansing of the north and for warring against the government on the grounds that the government will, when put to the test, treat the Tamils badly and the Tamils can only have their rights as equal citizens in Tamil Eelam.

If the government therefore reacts to the LTTE provocation by giving up, or even easing up, on its quest for peace and ethnic fair-play and harmony it will be proving the LTTE right.

This is a time for action and not reaction. Instead of reacting to the LTTE and fighting it on its own turf, and in the arena of cruel war in which it performs best, the government must act for peace. The government's strength lies less in its military capacity than in the confidence it can generate in people of its commitment to democracy, equal treatment and respect for the basics of law.

No one likes being ruled by terror whether it is governmental in origin or LTTE. Recent reports from Jaffna indicated that a great hope for peace and

democracy was building up in the North. It is a people's force and momentum that the LTTE may very naturally have feared would get out of their control and eventually lead to open disaffection against them. They may feel confident that the force of arms alone cannot defeat them. The withdrawal of the people's consent of their domination may be their bigger concern.

• Different Approaches

There are several ways to deal with conflicts, some better than others. Successful Sri Lankan leaders have followed different strategies. They all failed. None of the past leaders thought it important or succeeded in appealing directly to the Tamil people. The most simple minded approach was, of course, to ignore the existence of conflict.

By asserting that there was no ethnic problem in Sri Lanka President Wijetunga chose a course of action that ruled out a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The former UNP government under him lost the confidence of the Tamils and other minorities. Ironically it was during this period that the armed forces suffered some of their most serious reversals.

By contrast, his predecessor President Premadasa acknowledged that there was an ethnic conflict. He tried to resolve it through negotiations with the LTTE kept secret from the people. When that failed rather disastrously he adopted a strategy of "conflict management" by which he

attempted to contain the conflict at a socially bearable level while trying to turn it to his own advantage.

President Jayewardene like President

approaches followed parts in other countries. The leaders of the Communist countries were very adamant in denying the



Premadasa acknowledged the existence of an ethnic conflict. His effort to end it was to sign the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord over the heads of the people and in spite of strong dissent from within his own government and the LTTE. But this strategy of "conflict settlement" also failed because the solution was artificially imposed and was not supported by popular opinion within the country.

The three rather anti-people

existence of problems facing the people within their countries. Today Cuba and North Korea continue in this tradition but probably will not for much longer.

In dealing with its Kashmir problem India appears to be following a "conflict management" approach. Unable, at least at present, to win over the Muslim population and solve the problem it is trying to contain it and minimise its impact on the rest of the country.

On the other hand, Lebanon is an example of a country that has reached the stage of "conflict settlement." The peace that exists today in Lebanon is a fragile one, made possible only by the presence of the Syrian army. Internally, however, the Lebanese people remain divided and polarised so that if the Syrian army leaves the settlement may crumble.

• Conflict