

Inculcating Professionalism in Defence for National Development: The Regional Perspective; “There is more to the Armed Forces and ‘National Development’ than Development”

N Sathiya Moorthy

Director, Observer Research Foundation-Chennai Chapter, India

sathiyam54@gmail.com

Abstract- *Sri Lanka may be among the few nations that have successfully deployed the armed forces to add a ‘developmental’ element in the form of reconstruction efforts even as a war was still raging in other areas of the same sectors. Not only did the Sri Lankan armed forces win the war, they have also won the not-so-whoolly acknowledged war of peace, in the form of reconstruction efforts, then and now. Since the successful conclusion of the anti-terror war, the armed forces have been re-deployed to undertake – and equally successfully – ‘national development’ work, over the past five years and more. They have proved their worth and commitment to the new and additional task, be it the building of houses destroyed in the decades-old war or larger infrastructure construction all across the country. It may thus be time to sit back and pause – and evaluate what more can the armed forces do for ‘National Development’. This session is one such occasion and opportunity. Yet, there may also be an equal need for re-evaluating the concept of ‘National Development’ in the post-war Sri Lankan context. Questions should be asked – and answers found – if the armed forces should move away – more so psychologically than even physically – from its designated role of securing the nation’s security and territory, and if there are other aspects of ‘National Security’ that needs to be gone into, too. To put it in a nutshell, just as ‘National Security’ in the post-Cold War global lexicon includes ‘Human Security’, meaning all - round ‘National Development’, the latter too includes elements of the former even more. In turn, it means that the armed forces need to be professionalised to levels where they are able to carry out both tasks without compromising each other. It also fits into the role for which they are motivated and trained in the first place.*

The Sri Lankan armed forces need not be apologetic as being a burden on the State and the society in the post-war milieu. De-mobilisation, as advised by post-war nations that do not practise the same back home could be more diffused and problematic than the solution, if only over the medium and long-terms. At the same time, it should resist suggestions and temptations, if any, for ‘commercialisation’ and ‘corporatisation’ of the self-sustaining and self-financing models. Instead, it should

devise practical ways to take away perceptions of unease and discomfort – real and perceived – in other sections of the society, and divert its core competence in terms of professionalism and management skills coupled with unstinted patriotism, to inculcate those real values in the larger society in very many ways that are equally, if not even more productive in larger social and economic contexts as well. At the end of the day, it is the State’s obligation to make and maintain the armed forces. It’s the latter’s responsibility to give back to the nation and the society in ways that it alone is raised, equipped and expected to do – and not in myriad other ways that could be both tempting and misleading...

In a way, Sri Lanka in general and the Sri Lankan armed forces in particular do not need lessons in ‘professionalism’, as the conduct of the decisive ‘Eelam War IV’ showed. The decades of war and terrorist violence had necessitated the conversion of what was at best a thin, not lean, ceremonial army, whose inherent weaknesses in terms of professionalism too showed up its ugly face from time to time, into a numerically stronger, highly skilled, competent and professionalised fighting force. In a way, military victory over the dreaded LTTE, the world’s most-feared and the best-organised non-State terrorism outfit with extraordinarily motivated/mesmerised cadres, and a global network of political support and weapons supply, with the added advantage of conventional war capabilities and capacities and a *de facto* administrative structure, which however failed to take off beyond a point, all owed to the infusion and inculcation of professionalism into the armed forces. Gone thus were the days of unmitigated and acknowledged desertion at the thought, and not even sight, of the enemy, before the war could be fought and won. The LTTE’s ultimate failure is also an essay in the inability of the non-State actor to substitute professionalism that only a State player could expect to inculcate in its ranks as different from idolatry-driven mesmerism – from training and arming, garnering political support nearer home and diplomatic victories overseas – with motivation and methodology that only a State actor can sustain as long as was/is required.

Nowhere was the Sri Lankan armed forces' professional approach more visible than in the visible details of its foresighted preparations for the emerging post-war scenario in the war-ravaged North and the East of the nation. If forward thought had gone into planning the reconstruction efforts in post-war areas, the Sri Lankan planners of the time had also included the absence of civilian administration worth the name in these parts, and had prepared a corps of its personnel – and later the failed and forgotten civil administration personnel, too -- to take over the responsibilities of the civilian administration in the interim, which they otherwise had seldom been trained to handle. In the normal circumstances, no training of the kind could have been imparted in a war-raging environment in which the forces found themselves during that specific period or that which had preceded it for long.

Yet, when the forces freed hundreds of thousands of victimised Tamils, held hostage and as human-shield by the LTTE, they had also planned and prepared for what awaited 'em all – both the victims and their saviours in their new role. The crude and cruel thinking of the LTTE could be gauged from the methodologies of its founder, Velupillai Prabhakaran. It did not stop with the outfit brainwashing young Tamil men and women into going as far as being 'human-bombs'. Instead, it had gone on to Prabhakaran swearing from early on that the family members of 'LTTE martyrs/heroes' were like his own kith and kin, and their upkeep, living and personal security were his own responsibility. Much was said and written about this 'qualify' of the 'leader' those early days and even later on, until after his diabolical designs had shown up for what they were worth – full 30 years later. His sickening design became known only when he paraded the ageing parents, young women and younger children of dead LTTE cadres, and possibly maimed cadres, too, through the rough and tumble of the war-front, to wherever he moved his battle-camp, only to use them as human-shields, no questions asked, no qualms felt. But his victims, almost till the end, were made to believe that they were defending a cause, they were getting protection from 'enemy-bombing' under his direct care.

It was in this environment that the Sri Lankan armed forces operated, both in war and peace. Their instant concern from being a battle-machine mostly raised in the thick of warfare, into a peace-time rehabilitation and reconstruction unit-at-large, needs absolute commendation. Considering that a substantial number of those men – officers and soldiers – had been inducted only in the last years of the war, under a new strategy that also involved out-numbering the enemy – the inculcation of professionalism, both on and off-field, in

and out of uniform, too needs to be appreciated. Through those hardy days, when Time too was in short supply, they had been trained not only to fight, but also to care for the dead and the wounded – as much of the "enemy's" as of their own.

For the 'Day-After'...

It was thus that the armed forces, along with other sections of the Sri Lankan State apparatus, was preparing for the 'Day-After' even as the war was being fought. To think that an army otherwise at the eye of collective global storm for years and decades together – thanks mainly to the greater effectiveness of the LTTE propaganda machinery – remained untouched, unaffected and unmolested by it all, and could be thinking, planning and executing schemes for the immediate rehabilitation of the 'Tamil war refugees', and the reconstruction of their homes and civic infrastructure, has not got adequate global acknowledgement, either.

As an aside, it was unfortunate, for instance, that nothing was done about the LTTE claims that the 'Sencholai' training camp of the 'Black Tigers' suicide-squad, bombed by the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) at the height of the war was a civilian facility of some kind for school children, and the victims were all innocent Tamil pupils of either gender. Sad and sadistic as it was, still neither did anyone ask, nor was anyone asked, how then did many, if not all the dead children were in black fatigues, which was not the uniform of any school anywhere in the country, but only that of the dreaded 'Black Tigers' suicide-squad. Years after the end of the war, during the campaign for the 2015 parliamentary polls, a section of the self-styled 'Tamil nationalist' social media group claimed that among the candidates of an 'Independent Group' in the Tamil-majority Northern Province was a woman, who had been the caretaker of the LTTE's 'Sencholai training camp'. It should be demoralising for the forces, *post facto*, when their claims of the kind during the days of 'Sencholai bombing' remain unacknowledged even after the very perpetrators had let their cat out of the bag.

The contrast of the time would be even more striking if one were to recall and reconsider how the armed forces' command of the time had thought about the details at different levels when the war was nearing its inevitable close, and tens of thousands of innocent Tamil hostage-cum-human-shields of the LTTE, began pouring out of forced detention. The TV footage of young army soldiers receiving close to three hundred thousands of those 'LTTE human-shields', with a smile on their face and immediate dry-rations like sandwiches and water-

bottles for each one of them, should etch in memory, the professionalised planning and execution that had gone into what could be called 'Operation Freedom'. That huge forest areas had been cleared in the neighbourhood to house them all temporarily with adequate security and sensitivity meant that to date there has not been any complaint of any high-handedness by those people, about their handlers from the forces. The post-war reconstruction efforts, which involved restoring the homes, civic infrastructure and civilian population and administration in the interim, should be a study, both in appreciation of what was achieved, and in contrast, too, considering the competing and conflicting roles that the forces in a small and otherwise closed nation like Sri Lanka, that too in an even smaller battle-area, were asked to play, all at the same time.

From deployment to re-deployment

Even as the post-war rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in the immediate context of war victims and war-ravaged areas were tapering off, the Sri Lankan armed forces got engaged in large-scale infrastructure development activities aimed at restoring the nation's economy to its pre-war glory. The years lost at war could not have been compensated but could not be allowed to remain static, either. The demands of continued public faith in the State system and trust in the victorious armed forces dictated that they also met the early and immediate requirements of transition.

The fast-tracked road-building efforts, aimed at speedily restoring the nation's economy and that of the individual, more so in the war-torn areas, would not have been/become possible had it not been for the large-scale infusion of State funds, and also the Government's decision to involve the armed forces in the execution of the project. In it all, the armed forces have continued to exhibit a professional approach to construction work as it had done in the case of building a Bailey bridge during war-time or using it and fighting the 'enemy', to victory. Be it participating in the organisation of nationally-important religious and social functions, or selling vegetables in a crisis situation, or restoring pavements and side-walks in cities like Colombo by employing the forces' personnel, the Government and the Command together displayed the kind of imagination that helped make feel the large civilian population as comfortable about their continued presence and service as they had felt proud about their men-in-uniform, through the months and years of the victorious 'Eelam War IV'. It's again another factor, which has neither been acknowledged, nor appreciated.

The question remains: Where from here? What has thus far been achieved by the forces in the traditional sense of the term, 'nation-building' can be described as necessary 'short-term efforts'. In the war-torn areas, their 'developmental contributions' could not have been easily replaced by any other group – governmental, non-governmental, or both together. In areas relatively unaffected by war-centric destruction and time-lag, urbanisation efforts as in the capital city of Colombo could be termed as an 'interim' yet welcome contribution until the armed forces re-assessed and re-evaluated their role in the nation's post-war paradigm-shift from being 'battle-ready' to becoming 'development partners' with other arms and agencies of the Government and the larger community.

There is no denying that the armed forces have acquired skills and talents at various developmental aspects of nation-building, both during war and peace-time, including civilian administration. In a democratic society, however, open and direct participation by the armed forces in civilian administration and nation-building efforts becomes an unacceptable acronym. It is also an irony of the post-war national developmental psyche that even as there was much talk of re-discovering Sri Lanka's 'Singapore-like', pre-war economic position, there was non-acceptance to inculcating societal discipline and mindset required for the purpose, the Singapore way. Leave alone the 'Singapore model' of compulsory military training for the nation's youth, the amorphous and even more vociferous civil society in particular post-war Sri Lanka frowned upon the concept of 'summer camps' for prospective university students, to inculcate military discipline, management skills, a greater sense of patriotism and national vision in them, aimed at making them better citizens.

It is another matter that Sri Lanka, during these post-war years, could register a high growth-rate without having to inculcate 'military discipline', professionalism, management-skills and the like in its youth. Whether it would require military-like professionalism thrown in would have been yet another question that could not be considered under changed circumstances. Yet, the special skills of the substantial number of armed forces in relation to the nation's population-score, does not have to be wasted, that too at a time when no war of the previous kind looks imminent or likely in the foreseeable future. How to garner them and channelize them for nation-building efforts is the question that the nation could take up for a much larger discourse at all levels.

The nation's police having been brought back under the supervisory role of the Interior Ministry post-war, as against the unified command of the Defence Ministry for

most parts of the war era, they can be trained in better civilian management of their own constitutional/administrative role through special training programmes that the defence forces and institutions like the KDU could encapsulate for them. There is much that the civilian arms of the Intelligence Services can learn from the Military Intelligence, particularly in terms of information-gathering and analysing. These are also areas that are better left to civilian administration, if a greater sense of post-war normalisation had to return and get felt, all across.

In smaller nations with relatively high military score in terms of the personnel numbers, the tendency, more than the temptation, is to deploy them in normal policing duties, particularly in handling riot-like situations, crowd-control and disaster management. Sri Lanka is no exception. The size of the nation's armed forces owe to historic reasons and political blunders, in which the armed forces as an institution did not exactly play any part. Traditionally, disaster-management has fallen on the shoulders of the armed forces across the world, as their personnel are equipped and trained not only in handling the physical work but also develop a mental make-up required for the purpose – of seeing and feeling death and destruction all round, and still move on.

However, constant and extensive usage of the military, as different from other uniformed services, can cut both ways. Independent of stray occurrence of over-ambitious men in uniform, who might see a need and circumstance for usurping politico-administrative power, finding fault with the inherently faulty democratic systems the world over, the armed forces have been disciplined enough to take orders from the politico-administrative civilian apparatus. Sri Lanka is not an exception to the rule. Hence, inherent mechanisms need to be build to ensure that the armed forces' institutionalised loyalty to the Nation, Flag and leadership is not misused and abused in ways that are detrimental to the overall well-being of democracy, as understood and practised, nor taken for granted and proceeded with.

'Dual-purpose' force

In more recent decades, nations across the world have found a *via media* by introducing the concept of paramilitary forces for civilian use and deployment – rather, to serve a 'dual purpose'. The world over the Coast Guard, for instance, fits into the description. They are part of a nation's Navy in times of war in particular, but in other times, they have specific and less of a military role to perform on their own. On the land, armed forces are often involved in the management of

disasters, natural and man-made, big and small, including the handling of periodic flood situations.

In nations such as India, the para-military forces, coming under the Union/federal Home/Interior Ministry, are numerically stronger than the armed forces fighting the nation's wars. Among them, the Border Security Force (BSF), the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), the Assam Rifles (AR), etc, have twin-roles, both in the interior areas and on the border. Each of these denominations also has a specific, and at times area-specific, task-specific role to play. The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) in India, for instance, is exclusively in charge of providing security for all strategic and public sector industrial installations across the country. Their job includes frisking passengers and otherwise securing the nation's airports. Yet, for historic and equally logistic reasons, the nation's railways – the fourth longest network in the world – their security is handled independently by another paramilitary force, with relatively less firepower and role. The Railway Protection Force (RPF) works under the Railways Ministry, which again for historic reasons, has an independent existence with an independent Budget.

There is thus no one-size-fits-all solution. Independent situations demand, and find, innovative solutions. Given the vastness of the land and the possibilities that it provides for, under law, India, thus, for instance, has provisions for the stationing of any or all of these paramilitary forces in the States/Provinces, to be called into emergency service, either at the request of the State Government concerned or at the best of the federal/Union government, or both. Yet, under the Indian law, the paramilitary forces, and other agencies of the Union which have a parallel in the States do not have powers for prosecution. That job is constitutionally mandated in favour of the States and their own police forces. The example of the Sri Lankan Coast Guard handing over law-violators in the sea to the nation's police force is an inherent provision that would need to be considered if suggested changes were attempted to re-distributing the non-combat usefulness and purpose of the armed forces.

Given the post-war political environment and demands, Sri Lanka can also consider the re-distribution of the armed forces camps across the country, but with a re-defined role, for specific units, often after they have been rechristened, re-designed and re-oriented to a new or newer role(s). The nation can also consider such an approach to the re-organisation of its armed forces, to address tasks that also require specific talent and training, skills and expertise. Whether in context, institutions such as the KDU too can open more

campuses across the country, to carry forward its current vision and mission too may have to be weighed adequately.

Non-military faculties

Post-war, the KDU, for instance, has expanded the scope of its education process by opening up non-combat, 'non-military' faculties like medicine, engineering and law for civilians. In-built into such an approach is the inculcation of military-like professionalism and competence that other institutions of the kind in the country may not have achieved -- and for no fault of theirs alone. These professionals, when they go back into the society, are expected to do better than their counterparts. Post-tsunami reconstruction showed how for a Third World nation, that too for one relying on inward remittances from its skilled and semi-skilled labour working outside the country, Sri Lanka had fallen woefully short of trained construction and allied sectors' personnel like carpenters, plumbers and electricians, nearer home. In all seriousness, institutions such as the KDU and such other arms of the armed forces can help train such personnel, with an added emphasis on greater professionalism and discipline, for which the informal trades sector is not known in this country or elsewhere. Nursing staff and house-helpers are other groups of fore-earning civilian personnel who can do with better-management and psychological make-up that training in an institution run by the armed forces for its own personnel could inculcate even better.

Yet, there are also Greenfield areas where the armed forces can equip their personnel to do more in terms of direct efforts at nation-building. The possible expansion of the nation's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the seas under UNCLOS-III would open up possibilities on exploration and exploitation for sea-bed minerals and their extraction. While the temptation and also technical need might be for engaging the services of the private sector, and more so from foreign shores, the occasion may demand deployment of a large number of security personnel and also people with technical skills in these projects. The forces could consider how to re-deploy their men, without they having to 'steal' civilian jobs, which is what the post-war kind of their reconstruction contribution would end up being interpreted as.

Commercialisation, corporatisation?

As noted, 'Professionalism' is a continuing developmental paradigm from 'post-war reconstruction' to larger and greater national achievements, where the re-deployment of the armed forces can go a long way in re-casting its own role and priorities in ways that helps and motivates the society as a whole to gear up to a new

national psyche. Yet, the armed forces need not feel over-burdened either by thoughts about its relative size and non-combat role in times of peace, and become over-anxious to return to the nation what it is otherwise ill-equipped to return. There is more to 'nation-building' and 'development' than the conventional thinking about 'development', *per se*.

Just as conventional form of 'security' has gone on to include 'non-traditional security' concerns including 'human security' the reverse is true in terms of 'national development', too. No development is possible without the State having to ensure the safety and security of its people, infrastructure and economic assets. In a liberalised, global economic model, of which Sri Lanka is already a part and active partner, whoever has been in power, the much-needed foreign direct investment (FDI) becomes tentative at best if the nation and the State is not able to guarantee not only traditional security in context, but also create a sense of security -- which is felt, only in its absence, real and perceived. The LTTE's infamous attack on Kattayanake airport, at the time housing the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) base as well, and earlier attack on Sri Lanka's very own 'Twin Tower', and other economic assets, were aimed at achieving precisely that. Though much of international tourism, at one time the mainstay of the nation's economy returned at the end of the war, the fact that they were lost to the LTTE terror attacks, war and violence should not be forgotten, either.

In the post-war environment and circumstances, too, the armed forces, if out in the open, only makes that sense of security tentative and questionable. Yet, their presence in the barracks ensures that the sense prevails and gets spread out across the investor community and their respective governments, the world over. Suffice is to point out that in times of national security crises of even the slightest possibility, investor-nations and their governments sent out 'travel advisory' to their people, which affects investor-mood and methods more than travellers and tourists.

The Sri Lankan armed forces need not be apologetic as being a burden on the State and the society in the post-war milieu. De-mobilisation, as advised by post-war nations that do not practise the same back home could be more diffused and problematic than the solution, if only over the medium and long-terms. At the same time, it should resist suggestions and temptations, if any, for 'commercialisation' and 'corporatisation' of the self-sustaining and self-financing models. Instead, it should devise practical ways to take away perceptions of unease and discomfort -- real and otherwise -- in other sections of the society, and divert its core competence in terms of

professionalism and management skills coupled with unstinted patriotism, to inculcate those real values in the larger society in very many ways that are equally, if not even more productive in larger social and economic contexts as well. At the end of the day, it is the State's obligation to make and maintain the armed forces. It's the latter's responsibility to give back to the nation and the society in ways that it alone is raised, equipped and expected to do – and not in myriad other ways that could be both tempting and misleading...

Even while feeling, or is made to feel guilty about their being a burden on the nation's economy and budget, the armed forces should thus eschew any temptation or need for them to earn for their upkeep. It is the responsibility of the armed forces to secure the nation, in times of war and in times of peace – to secure the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation in the case of the former, and ensure right climate for the larger population to live in a peaceful and predictable atmosphere, with a deep sense of enjoying the same – and being able to do so, too. Such enjoyment becomes possible only with a sustained economic growth over the medium and long terms, too, which goes beyond State-funded infrastructure development, which can at best only be a beginner and facilitator at the same time. In turn, it is the responsibility of the State and the society to ensure that the security forces of the nation are enabled and are also assured of their upkeep and upgrading, as and when required, in ways only the practitioner can predict.

This would in turn mean that possible discourses on 'commercialisation' and 'corporatisation' of the armed forces, to earn for their upkeep and expansion, have to be nipped in the bud. Such discourses, if commenced, have the potential to linger on for a longer period and in directions that are most unexpected. If tested, they grow wildly. If allowed to grow wildly – or, they end up growing, otherwise – they have the proven tendency to devour the basic structures of nations and democracies in ways that the Founding Fathers and the contemporary society had not intended. As the saying goes, nations need armies, but armies cannot have nations. Crass commercialisation and consequent corporatisation of the

armed forces have the tendency to do precisely this -- and more.

In the final analysis, what Sri Lanka might need is not demobilisation, about which there had been much talk overseas than nearer home even as the war was inching towards a successful closure for the State. Much of the domestic discourse was silenced owing to the double-quick thoughtfulness that went into the near-simultaneous deployment of the armed forces in rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts, including the restoration of the civilian administration, training the civilian personnel, frightened and rendered self-defeating by LTTE terrorism.

The overall pause provided by unrelated changes elsewhere may have provided both the need and occasion for the armed forces to revisit its post-war role and re-orient the self to newer ones. This phase of re-orienting the armed forces to post-war realities and requirements, when guided in the right direction and with the right quality and quantum of newly-infused ideas, could contribute to nation-building, growth and development in ways that had not been possible in the post-Independence past, war or no-war.

The post-War history and growth of what are now known as 'developed nations' show how their constant engagement in wars the world over, then and since, and their constant re-orientation, have contributed to being what they are and where they are today. There is no reason why Sri Lanka could not reach there, learning from its 'war experience' in ways wars are not supposed / expected to teach, but they end up teaching, nonetheless, if only nations and societies dig deep beyond the immediate gains of those wars, for something more and more sustaining – and sustainable, too! The story of how Sri Lanka won what was seen even until very lately as a war that it could not win is a part of military folklore and classroom lessons in many parts of the world, developed and otherwise. The armed forces' role in post-war reconstruction and their consequent 'redeployment' has not been fully told. It also demands a larger reach and audience.