

Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in the Post War Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Rehabilitation of ex-combatants and Re-integrating them into society was one of the major post-conflict challenges faced by Sri Lanka soon after the military victory over LTTE in 2009. The subject was not new as the country had similar experiences in the past but the latest assignment required a different approach as the total number of ex-LTTE combatants exceeded 12,000 and it included forcibly conscripted pawns to highly indoctrinated hardcore LTTE cadres, several leaders and suicide assassins.

Nevertheless, the Sri Lankan Government having studied the subject properly implemented a multifaceted and multiagency rehabilitation programme to reintegrate those youth who had been misguided and misled by LTTE. Rather than prosecuting, Sri Lankan Government adopted an approach to rehabilitate their lives with a view of moulding them into productive peaceful ordinary citizens through a comprehensive and well-planned rehabilitation and re-integration process.

Sri Lanka's approach was different to traditional custodial and community rehabilitation. The State apparatus was re-structured to cater to the requirement and accordingly the Bureau of the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation (BCGR) was empowered to organize the misguided youth to go through spiritual, religious, educational, vocational, psycho-social, recreational, social, familial and creative arts in rehabilitation, in order to change their mindset of them. By now, Sri Lanka's efforts in this regard have been a success story. Most of those ex-combatants have been properly rehabilitated and reintegrated into the Sri Lankan society. They enjoy the liberty and the joy of life with no difference from others. Almost all of them are now adding value to the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Sri Lankan society. Interestingly, some of them have chosen their path as peace promoters.

This paper evaluates the Sri Lankan efforts in rehabilitating and reintegrating the ex- LTTE combatants as an innovative and a successful project accomplished by the State in the post conflict scenario. It examines the nature of the issue of Sri Lankan ex-combatants and methods and approaches the State adopted in this endeavour.

The paper also examines the outcomes of the entire process that the Government of Sri Lanka has successfully accomplished.

INTRODUCTION

Rehabilitation of ex-combatants and reintegration of them into society was a major post-conflict challenge that Sri Lanka handled very effectively. The overall process has been a tremendous success story today, as almost no complaint is being received from those rehabilitated ex-combatants on repetitions of crime amounting to terrorism ever since they were re-integrated to society.

The challenge was taken up by the Bureau of the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation (BCGR)¹, a state apparatus that had been established under the Justice Ministry several years ago, but was defunct until then as per the non-necessity of existence in large scale.

An extra-ordinary Gazette notification² was published in September 2006, stipulating the handling of those surrenders. The notice further, very clearly stated that any surrendered or arrested person had to volunteer to be rehabilitated. When military was clearly winning over LTTE, people under the clutches of the terror outfit moved out and also the combatants. Many combatants volunteered to surrender while others were identified. The judiciary also directed certain people for rehabilitation, instead of handing a jail term.

As the number of LTTE cadres who laid down arms increased, a proper rehabilitation process was the need. In view of the requirement, a set of new rehabilitation centers was established by the state while concurrently revamping the existing rehabilitating mechanism with a comprehensive plan that focused attention on many aspects; from initial reception of ex-combatants with warmth, profiling them, provision of training to the staff involved, job oriented training to inmates, rehabilitation, economic, social and financial support, re-integration in the society and subsequent follow up. It was this process in a nutshell that led to successful rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-combatants in Sri Lanka.

INITIAL HANDLING OF THE SITUATION

The “Humanitarian Operations” was victoriously in progress by the year 2008 and it was obvious to many LTTE cadres that the tide was turning against them; average cadres began to flee from LTTE initially with the exodus. The state at this point of time demanded LTTE to lay down arms unconditionally, renounce violence and surrender. Even people who had the slightest involvement with the LTTE were asked to surrender.

The first step was to receive them as brothers and sisters and not as adversaries. Realizing that LTTE had done enough to strain relations in the passage of time, the new procedure to be adopted was communicated up to the frontline soldier. The new method produced incredible results,

¹<http://bcgr.gov.lk/history.php>, see the official website of the Bureau of the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation

²gazette notification 1496/9 of 2006, Govt Printer, Government of Sri Lanka

but that itself was not means to build mutual trust among all LTTE cadres. Therefore, LTTE cadres who still had fears and those who were involved in serious atrocities bypassed this method; evading arrest or the surrender of many of them ended up at IDP centres and found safety for a while being among the civilian population posing no difference to ordinary civilians. The trust among the stranded population was yet to be established firm. However, the LTTE tactic soon evaporated as the hatred against LTTE grew in the population and when Army began to build mutual trust. People began to pinpoint LTTE cadres one by one with details. The outcome was that the Army was left with 12000 more precisely identified LTTE cadres to rehabilitate no sooner the military elimination of the terror outfit was on ground.

There was an innovative system in place for profiling LTTE cadres and in that each of them was categorized according to gender, sex, age, and the degree of involvement with LTTE. It further weighed the education level and skills of each of them and even had an exclusive assessment on what they had additionally accumulated through the nature of their employment in the LTTE. It was done so with a benevolent aim of selecting the appropriate path for individual LTTE cadres in the comprehensive rehabilitation process which was forthcoming. Special attention was paid to channel child soldiers back to school education and assist them to continue among average children in the Sri Lankan society. This was a psychological need in order to change the mindset of those child soldiers and it is of significance to mention that Hindu College, Ratmalana had provided an ideal venue in addressing this requirement.

The classification also followed a three pronged approach and accordingly, some of those LTTE cadres had to be investigated and prosecuted under normal court of law. Another group was to be released based on recommendations of intelligence agencies despite their marginal/peripheral involvement with the LTTE. The balance was meant to follow the rehabilitation process straightaway. They were separately housed in 24 rehabilitation centers which was a Skeleton arrangement at the time. However, the state was with a clear view that the rehabilitation process should be meant to all despite their category while legal proceedings were underway for some of them.

THE INNOVATIVE APPROACH

The innovative process was a design by the BCGR under the guidance and direction of Ministry of Defense in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and Law and Reforms. There were two fundamentals in the design: Firstly, the state perceived the situation as an opportunity rather than a burden to reintegrate a misguided section into the Sri Lankan multi-cultural and multi ethnic society. LTTE was brainwashing not only youths but the entire Tamil community under their custody for nearly three decades.

Secondly, a study into several popular scenarios of the world hitherto witnessed found adopting straight away to be difficult in the Sri Lankan context. Here, the situation was different in many facets and hence, it required to design a home grown approach.

In view of these factors, Sri Lanka adopted an approach to rebuild the lives of the ex-combatants through rehabilitation programmes carried out at protective accommodation and Rehabilitation Centers (PARCs) in areas native to those ex-combatants. With full blessings of the state apparatus involved in the mission, all PARCs were therefore set up in the Northern and Eastern areas.

The state declared that rehabilitation and re-integration of ex-combatants should be the highest in priority and so designed a set of goals to achieve with a conceptual framework that coordinated and integrated all efforts towards a comprehensive action with a clear direction and focus. Policies and a legal framework were also formulated to meet the set goals.

All programmes were geared towards winning the hearts and minds of those beneficiaries with a clear vision of “enhancing self-esteem, integrity, knowledge, employability and ability to participate actively in life to meet the interests of families and communities of those ex-combatants and children formerly associated with armed groups, in a post-conflict scenario, thus contributing to the National reconciliation, a long lasting peace, prosperity and development of the country”.

The popular “4R model” of Rehabilitation³ (Rehabilitation, Re-insertion, Reintegration and Reconciliation) thus was further developed as “6+1 model” to suit the native cultural and religious Tamil speaking social fabric. The new model consisted of six integrated and one segregated components namely spiritual religious cultural, educational, vocational/livelihood, social community family, psychological, sports/extracurricular and community awareness component. The new mechanism was soon refilling individual, family, parental, social, national and religious values that had been missing in ex-combatants for years, while synchronizing their heads, heart and hands together. Much emphasis was laid on to balance the psychological, spiritual and vocational needs of them to develop a broader understanding of life under rehabilitation.

³ International NGO Journal Vol. 3 (9), pp. 146-151, September, 2008
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ACTION PLAN AND THE REHABILITATION PROCESS

The Action Plan was primarily based on the Sri Lankan context whilst drawing on lessons learnt from international best practices and international legal principles and precedents, and in accordance with the mandate vested upon the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation. It involved a series of programmes to rehabilitate, reinsert, reintegrate and reconcile rehabilitees into the civil society by BCGR. The terrorist nature of the conflict made it imperative for reintegration programmes to pay substantial attention in providing psychological care and civic education to rehabilitees. In the same essence, there was another parallel careful programme to prepare the host communities and the public as a whole in accepting those rehabilitees back into the society. “Beneficiaries” was the official term used at all possible levels to refer to them instead of common derogations such as “terrorists”, “ex-combatants”, insurgents etc.

Increasing the employability, minimizing the risk of socio-economic marginalization and utilizing their under-utilized knowledge and skills to create opportunities for economic revitalization and preventing misuse or abuse were of high concern in the plan.

On the recommendation of Attorney General’s Department, Sri Lanka adopted a three pronged approach with regard to ex-combatants. They were classified into three categories. The first category was to be investigated and prosecuted under the normal court of law. The second was to be rehabilitated under BCGR and the last category was to be released on confirmation by intelligence agencies after verifying their marginal/peripheral involvements. The minimum period of rehabilitation was one year which could be extended by three-months upto four folds, to be extended upto another year. So, the maximum period for rehabilitation was two years. This could be done under the authority of the Secretary of Defence.

Rehabilitation was done at the expense of the Government. The Government by May 2011 has spent more than Rs. 2.5 billion on this⁴. In addition, vocational training was provided to them by the Government.

The space for communication between family members and beneficiaries was always allowed and encouraged without jeopardizing security and hindering the vocational/corrective programmes in progress. Access to UN agencies and reputed local and international monitors⁵ was always allowed to inmates. There was also much emphasis on educating them on ways to create a peaceful society, free of violence and hatred by other means sans terror and gun toting fanatics. Ways and means to achieve that peaceful transformation themselves were also taught with set examples from their own cultural and religious setting.

⁴http://www.priu.gov.lk/news_update/Current_Affairs/ca201205/20120528more_ltte_cadres_reintegrated.htm: Official website of the Govt of Sri Lanka

⁵ BCGR news report “military visitors see facility rehabilitating ex-LTTE combatants” : available at <http://bcgr.gov.lk/news.php?id=80>

One prominent area of rehabilitation was vocational training. It kept them occupied and cultivated hopes in them for job prospects. The BCGR had educational rehabilitation, especially for the child soldiers. They were allowed to go to school. Beneficiaries who had with an interest and skills on various crafts and sports were encouraged and promoted to be engaged in such arts and activities to keep them occupied.

The staff of the BCGR mostly comprised National Cadet Corps as they had the skills to handle the students. Army personnel in the staff were minimal. The rehabilitation process was officially commenced on 01st October 2009 and prior to that the whole Staff of the BCGR was given a special training on the rehabilitation process to execute their job humanely. Even cooks and minor staff were not spared of these training and educative sessions.

While rehabilitation programmes were job oriented in the design, much time and space had been also allotted to educate them on life's realities; challenges, obstacles and opportunities in life and ways of success. The rehabilitation process further guaranteed the future prospects through an innovative group training module. For an example a group consisted of five members and each were individually given training on five skills namely masonry, carpentry, plumbing, gardening and electrical work to building houses with the aim of continuing their profession in a more organized manner. BCGR provided them initial wherewithal to restart the life at their "release" while guaranteeing soft bank loans schemes to further uplift their lives. A similar model was also included in the training programmes on Agriculture, Fisheries etc. to guarantee their success in the post-reintegration.

REINTERGRATION

Reintegration of those beneficiaries back in society required a different strategy. This was where the segregated component of the "6+1 model" worked. Well before the conclusion of each rehabilitation programme, the BCGR along with many local bodies and support of benevolent institutions and individuals other than state organs managed to create the environment suitable and supportive for them. They were unified in their families in batches in state - sponsored ceremonial events attended by representatives of all sections of the society: clergy, local government, police and military officials etc. The idea was not merely to achieve a petty publicity goal but to inculcate a sense in the society that they have no more trust on violence; to communicate the message that they have been rehabilitated, benefited and accepted by the state, clergy, police and military as peaceful law - abiding citizens and so the rest of the society should treat them in the same ardor.

Several of these moments of "release" have been presented with considerable publicity in local newspapers⁶ and TV. On one occasion the state arranged for public marriage ceremonies for

⁶ DailyMirror:2/09/2012: News Story titled "Ex-combatants released": available at <http://www.dailymirror.lk/caption-story/17704-ex-combatants-released.html>

former Tiger rehabilitees and their partners. The highest level state patronage was extended to ex-combatants' releases in front of their relatives and an assemblage of foreign and local dignitaries assisted to make public concurrence and acceptance of those rehabilitees. Such marriages were conducted according to the religious customs of the community with the attendance of VIPs, parents and well-wishers. The Bureau facilitated the entire ceremony. 'Peace Village' was established to facilitate the reunification of married ex-combatants who underwent rehabilitation separately at different centres. Fifty three more couples who had the privilege of being members of the first mass marriage ceremonies of Sri Lanka were housed in this village with a plot of land each for cultivation. These beneficiaries underwent rehabilitation and vocational training programmes while living under one roof as a family unit.

Prior to reintegration, all beneficiaries attended a special three day workshop on pre - integration mentorship, covering important areas such as: diversity and harmonious living, peace building, role of man and women in the society. Interpersonal relationships and empowerment, banking system, micro finance, developing project plans and obtaining loans were developed as a special programme on economic rehabilitation; assessment of de-radicalization was given special attention. All beneficiaries were provided with special medical care, including wheel chairs, provision of artificial limbs, crutches, spectacles and hearing aid equipment. A special programme in liaison with the Registrar General's office and the Education Department was arranged for those who have lost or who were not in possession of the NIC, birth certificates, marriage certificates, and educational certificates.

Specially created rehabilitation authorities with the support of local government authorities have been entrusted to monitor the reintegrated ex-combatants in a personalized fashion down to the village level for a sustainable period until they developed their livelihood and ability to live with dignity.

TESTIMONIES TO THE SUCCESS

More than 90 percent of the ex-combatants after thirty years of fighting have been successfully reintegrated into the Sri Lankan society as law - abiding peace loving citizens through this innovative rehabilitation and re-integration model in a mere one and a half year time. This undoubtedly has been a proven exemplary case in the world.

There are almost no police records of terrorist nature of ex-combatants after rehabilitation. So the process has been successful on ground and in the mindset of those involved; no clue of a re-committal by those who engaged. The transformed behavior seems to be leading them to live non-violent peaceful lives.

Society as a whole, irrespective of ethnicities has been generous towards those rehabilitated ex-combatants to live a peaceful coexisting life, find employment opportunities, access to public facilities, participation and social work.

Security forces' skillful identification of ex-combatants from ordinary Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have won confidence among the public and as well as among civilians.

Many LTTE ex-combatants did not possess competency for skilled jobs as they had been in the LTTE since their childhood basically resorting to "battlefield jobs". This situation much affected BCGR's efforts to channel them for new employment opportunities which are mushrooming. However, the vocational training, English language, beauty culture, Computing, electrical and mechanical engineering programmes introduced by the BCGR have been able to fill the knowledge gap in them, to get them qualified for emerging job opportunities and thereby uplift standards of a war-torn community parallel to the rehabilitation process.

The way that rehabilitation and re-integration model unfolded on ground has generated much trust and mutual understanding between security forces and ex-combatants. They are now closer than ever in realizing that solutions to their problems are more viable without LTTE.

Many of them have no cause to fight and die now. A suicide cadre according to psychological explanations is with two goals; a personal and a communal goal what he simultaneously attempts to achieve in his suicide mission⁷. By now, the communal goal of many LTTE extremists has been diluted with the success of rehabilitation and re-integration process. Armed Forces are not hostile towards them and so they are left with no foe to fight but a set of social and individual life goals to meet same as the other ordinary citizens in society. Perhaps, this may be the most significant achievement of this programme.

CONCLUSION

The state's genuine effort in the process of rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-LTTE combatants is obviously apparent in its formation of a separate ministry that fully understood the importance of the seriousness of rehabilitation. Further, the adequate funding, monitoring and support from policy formations to the operational and tactical levels to its implementation by the military have proved to be the vital components of success.

⁷ Prof. Riaz Hassen: *What motivates the suicide bombers?* :A publication of Yale center for the Study of globalization: available at <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/what-motivates-suicide-bombers-0>

The transformation of an offensive force in the interests of national security into an employable ,law-abiding work force that contributes to the development and well-being of Sri Lanka through a new embraced role by the Sri Lankan military Forces is unique and an ideal model.

This, by now has been a ground tested case worth studying to see its suitability to adopt similar post-conflict situations in the world.

A resurgence of similar violent uprising by a successive generation despite the latest success cannot be under-estimated or overestimated provided that the ideology remains internationally, regionally and domestically in varying proportions. This has to be separately dealt with and is out of the focus of this research paper; nevertheless, it is also a matter to be delved into as the success of this rehabilitation and re-integration process lies in it.

What we have witnessed so far is the physical elimination of LTTE terror on ground, and a subsequent successful rehabilitation and re-integration process which is nearing completion. It was not a mechanism in isolation but part of a larger process ensuring parallel infrastructure development, demining and reconstruction and political solution towards rebuilding a nation torn apart. The holistic view of the status quo says that it is in the right direction towards social, political and economic stability to guarantee lasting peace.