



Sri Lanka's post-war peacebuilding and the role of external actors

By **Menik Wakkumbura** - August 29, 2024



Colombo city skyline, Sri Lanka, photo via iStock.

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The Sri Lankan government has scheduled the country's presidential election for September 21, 2024. At this critical juncture, debate surrounds the success of the post-war peacebuilding efforts over the past 15 years since the end of the civil war in 2009. Some challenges still remain in areas including: the rightful allocation of lands for original landowners; the distribution of new lands, continuing the reparation process; and operations of the Office of Missing Persons. A sustainable plan for the reintegration process is being addressed, as well as issues such as the voluntary repatriation of Tamil refugees and housing reconstruction.

Following the end of the civil war, Sri Lanka's engagement in post-war peacebuilding has been a persistent question. The catastrophe of the war significantly harmed the Tamil population in the Northern Province, but also other communities including Tamil elsewhere in the country, the Sinhalese, and Muslims in the Eastern Province. All communities have not fully recovered.

This brief analysis examines the role of external actors in Sri Lanka's post-war peacebuilding, looking at three main stakeholders in particular: the United Nations, the donor community, and India, which has played a vital role in both peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance.

The United Nations Human Rights Council Involvement

The United Nations' role in Sri Lanka's post-war recovery is in several areas including investigation and fact-finding, advisory on recovery, assistance, aid and development, and direct involvement of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on discussing critical issues and passing of resolutions. The UNHRC has made several resolutions against the Government of Sri Lanka (hereinafter used as GoSL) regarding the issues of reconciliation and transitional justice.



At the conclusion of the civil war, the United Nations called for a fast recovery and voiced its willingness to assist Sri Lanka with the joint statement made by the UN Secretary-General and Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, when UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visited Sri Lanka on 23 May 2009. Since the war ended, the United Nations has launched a number of programs on war reconstruction and relief, involving technical assistance and consultative programs.

On the other hand, the UNHRC has been the tool for some hard bargaining attempts. UN expert panels have investigated Sri Lanka's human rights situation, criticizing GoSL's poor performance in human rights protection and GoSL's unwillingness to meet international standards on transitional justice. The UNHRC resolutions were directed by recommendations of the Darushman Report (2011) and other UN reports investigating critical issues such as war crimes, the establishing of mechanisms on missing persons, and national level attempts on reconciliation and reparation processes. Among eight UNHRC resolutions (2009-2022), resolution 30/1, adopted without a vote and co-sponsored by the GoSL in 2015, was crucial in establishing a number of institutes for accountable measures in transitional justice and reconciliation. The GoSL has unequivocally rejected the UNHRC drafted resolution from October 2022 and has retracted its co-sponsorship of resolution 30/1. This decision came at a time when the nation was grappling with a severe economic crisis, thereby prioritizing economic recovery and also showing the government's lack of political commitment to ongoing peacebuilding activities.

Sri Lanka and the donor community

Sri Lanka's donor community includes some of the largest international actors in aid and humanitarian assistance for post-war peacebuilding. The donor community is linked at both the state and community levels. It supports major projects related to livelihood development, financial and technical assistance including health, education, housing, and rural development, and the capacity building and training.

Sri Lanka's Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have a direct link to the international donor community. The CSOs in Sri Lanka consist of a mix of groups i.e., Colombo-centered elite communities that hold prolonged linkages to external donor communities, and a linkage to state-level politics. On the other hand, at the grassroots level, civil society activism is involved in mobilization of human forces to community peace engagements. There is much criticism held of Sri Lanka's civil society activism, and often its performance depends on state-level acceptance and special distribution.

India's involvement to Sri Lanka's post-war peacebuilding

India has become Sri Lanka's top bilateral humanitarian and peacebuilding counterpart with its high involvement in housing reconstruction projects in the Northern and Central provinces, and humanitarian assistance to war-affected Tamil communities. It shows that India's diplomatic cooperative strategy since the civil war's end has been a soft approach, while India wins its domestic political support for its presence in Sri Lanka. In 2021, India chose to abstain from voting on a UNHRC resolution leaving a space for the Sri Lankan government's domestic implementations. India

has expressed that its interest is more in providing a conducive environment for political reforms, including the successful implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution.



This brief analysis summarizes some of the vital post-war peacebuilding interests of external actors, and external entities' compelling role in the acceleration of post-war peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. It is also noted that some exercises have exerted pressure, thereby contributing to a complex peacebuilding dilemma in the country. The election of a new government in September presents an opportunity to confront certain ground realities of peacebuilding. The author suggests implementing a post-war peacebuilding mechanism as a national strategy, which would outline current requirements, success, and failures of past actions, thus to ensure the involvement of external actors in future engagements is impactful.

Menik Wakkumbura

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Having experienced in the field of International Relations and Peace & Conflict Studies for more than 18 years, Dr. Menik Wakkumbura is currently serving as a Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, University of Colombo. Prior to joining the University, she served as a Consultant at the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA). Among the publications, she has authored two handbooks titled *Peace Negotiation in International Relations* (2020) and *Introduction to International Security* (2023) published by Colombo University Press among those edited books *Applied Case Studies in Public Administration* (2015) and *Applied Research with Agency Partnership* (2017) were published by the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration. She has published number of book chapters and in reputed international journals. Dr. Wakkumbura is a recipient of renowned scholarships including NORAD Scholarship (2005), Norwegian Government's Quota Scheme Scholarship (2006-2008), Australian Leadership Award (AUSAID) in 2014, Malaysian International Scholarship (MIS) (2016) and recipient of scholarship grant from National Center for Advance Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences (NCAS), Sri Lanka (2018-2020). Dr. Wakkumbura holds the PhD from University of Colombo (Sri Lanka), MPhil in Peace & Conflict Studies from University of Oslo (Norway), and BA Honors, First Class in International Relations, University of Colombo. She contributes to research, focusing her research interests on geopolitics in the Indian Ocean, International Security, International Negotiation and Peacebuilding and Reconciliation.