

Armed Conflict Termination in Sri Lanka: An Opportunity to End Displaced Life and Renew Tamil-Muslim Relations

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Abstract

The 30 years of local armed conflict in Sri Lanka that broke out between the state security forces and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) in early 1980s came to an end after Sri Lankan government demolished the LTTE in 2009. A termination of such civil war was highly hoped by the people displaced by the same armed conflict, mainly Tamils and Muslims, to be an opportunity to return to their homes ending their protracted displaced live. The termination was also widely interpreted by Tamil and Muslim communities as an opportunity to renew their onetime ethnic relations, which today remained vulnerably damaged after this armed conflict. The return and the renewal of Tamil-Muslim relations have been two most notable aspects that have received a dominant position in social development programme and Tamil-Muslim public discourse of the post-conflict Sri Lanka. This paper is an attempt to examine if the Sri Lanka's conflict termination has really served to end the displaced life and to bring Tamil-Muslim relations back. The paper focuses only on Muslims. This is a qualitative study. 11 Muslims, five from north and six from east, were recruited with purposive sample. The data was collected by one-on-one interviews with respondents and analysed with a descriptive method. The findings suggested that the conflict termination has hardly satisfied people's hope to end their displaced live and renew their former ethnic relations. The paper, therefore, proposed some recommendations that need to be effectively advanced by government, civil communities and even non-governmental actors.

Keywords: conflict termination, Tamil- Muslim relations, government, civil community, NGOs

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka, an Island, is a home to some 21 million people featuring an ethnic and religious diversity. The people of the country are ethnically divided into three major groups: Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. Sinhalese are the ethnic majority of the country, making up 74%. They are of Aryan origin, speak Sinhala and predominantly Buddhists. Sri Lanka's largest ethnic minority includes Tamils (18%). They receive their ethnic origin from south Indian Dravidian speak Tamil and are mainly Hindus. Tamils live in the north and the east. The second largest ethnic minority after the Tamils is Muslims. The Muslims (8%) are Moor in origin (Ali, 2004; McGilvray, 2011b; Mayilvaganan, 2008). However, Muslims later re-established their ethnic identity as Muslims based on their religion of Islam. This identity transformation was a local consequence of world-wide Islamic awakening in the early 20th century (Ali, 2004). This Muslim development was not unrealistic at all since ethnic identity could be characterised based on geography, family, culture, religion and even language (Mayilvaganan, 2008). Muslims have been a ubiquitous minority of the country. Around one-third (38%) of them is concentrated in the north and east and two-third or 68% of them live elsewhere in the island. While the Muslims outside the north and east speak Sinhala as their first language, their counter parts of the north and east use Tamil as their first language (Imtiaz & Hoole, 2011; McGilvray, 2011a; McGilvray, 2011b).

1.1 *Inter-Ethnic Amity in Sri Lanka*

Since before independence, ethnic relations in Sri Lanka between Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims have not been necessarily harmonious. The elements that were largely driven by ethno-religious- nationalistic ideals have seriously disturbed the relations among such ethnic groups by violently rioting against lives and interests of opposite groups. The Sinhala-Muslim riot of 1915 was a most serious incident that had badly compromised Sinhalese-Muslim harmony of pre-independent Sri Lanka. This communal riot directed with the blessings of Sinhalese-Buddhist- nationalists had targeted innocent Muslim lives and their economies (Ali, 1997; Ali, 2004;

International Crisis Group [ICG], 2007). The July 1983 ethnic violence, popularly called “the Black July,” was an infamous incident that extremely sabotaged Sinhalese-Tamil relations of post-independent Sri Lanka. The black July not only targeted many Tamil lives and their interests but also contributed to a notorious local armed conflict in the country between ethnic groups. The contemporary Sri Lanka is also no exception from such inter-communal disturbance even after it had returned from a 30-year ethnic conflict three years ago and in 2009. Sinhalese extremists led by some Buddhists monks have created tense relations among communities by their attacks on worship sites of minorities. In June 2011, a four-century old Muslim shrine in Anuradhapura, north-central province of the country, was demolished by a Sinhalese mob. In April 2002, a Muslim mosque of Dambulla in central province of the country was attacked by a group of Sinhalese protesters, including locally well-known monk, and the Friday Muslim prayer in the mosque was inhibited on the day of attack. Issuing a deadline, the protesters led by that monk demanded a relocation of the mosque elsewhere or otherwise its demolition. A nearby Hindu temple in the area also received a possible destruction threat from the protesters. In May 2012, another Muslim mosque in Dehiwala, outskirts of capital Colombo, was threatened with destruction if prayers continued at the mosques by a group of Sinhalese rioters. These types of sporadic anti-minority practices, even though considered minor incidents, had decisive implications on and jeopardised the amity among communities (Dewasiri, 2012; Farook, 2012).

1.2 Tamil-Muslim Relations

However, Tamil and Muslim minorities relatively have maintained better communal relations until the late 20th century. Both communities living in the north and east have lived in peace and harmony for decades. Many aspects they shared in their daily lives have been the main reason for their strong harmonious relations. Language, vocational and economic dealings, and mutual political understanding were such aspects (McGivray, 2011b). Like Tamils, Muslims too have equally contributed to Tamil with their poetry, folklore and religious literature (McGivray, 2011b). For example, Muslim artists like Segumadhar, Mohamed Rabi and Hashim Alim were most popular among Tamil and Muslim communities for their creation of *Naithal* and *Marutham* in religious literature. The former (*Naithal*) was a religious appeal made by wife to god for a safe return of her husband who had gone to sea to fish. The latter involved the Muslim drama and folklore mirroring Muslim live and treatment of others. (Note 1)

As of pre-independence, Tamils and Muslims have attended together the same Christian missionary schools in colonial Sri Lanka for their primary and secondary education. Even after schools were established for all three communities -Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim- separately in independent Sri Lanka, they still continued their education in the same manner. Several Muslim parents still sent their children to Tamil schools or around 90% of teachers who taught primary and secondary education to their children were Tamils over the course of early independent times. During their learning and teaching, neither these students nor teachers treated each other along ethnic lines. This Tamil-Muslim educational intermingling was resulted from their use of Tamil as first language. (Note 2)

Vocational and economic ties regularly received by Tamil and Muslim communities also served to their unbreakable ethnic amity. Muslims in the east were largely relied for their certain needs on Tamil workforce. If not for a Tamil blacksmith, a Muslim farmer could hardly get his farming implements, iron tires of his bullock cartwheels and shoes of his bullocks. In building their structures, including houses, Tamil masonry was and has been still vital for Muslim community. Tamil Washermen, Tamil Barbers and Tamil coconut tree- climbers all contributed to Tamil-Muslim interactions with their respective occupations (McGivray, 2011b).

A mutual trust that held politically among both ethnic groups in representing them irrespective of their ethnic and religious affiliations also nurtured their harmony better. For example, during British colonial time, Muslims of the east elected a Tamil affluent Darmarathnam Vanniyanar as their representative to the State Council. For them, they found no difficulties with Tamil Vanniyanar's ethnic and Hindu religious associations when electing him. (Note 3) The Municipal Council of Jaffna in the north named a Muslim, Protector Sultan, as its Mayor at that time. Even though Tamils seemed to be overwhelming majority of the council and Muslim community had only members in the council, Proctor Sultan's religious background and ethnicity never discouraged that Tamil-dominated council from appointing him for such a key political office (Imtiaz & Iqbal, 2011).

1.3 Displacement and Tamil-Muslim Estrangement as Consequences of Armed Conflict

Unfortunately, the latest social situation that emerged in the country with armed violence overturned these two minorities' ethnic relations in the late 20th century. In Sri Lanka, a local armed conflict broke out between the government security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE), a separatist movement, in the late 1980s when the Tamil Tigers violently attempted to form a separate state in the north and east of the country.

This three-decade long civil war displaced about 470,000 people and claimed over one hundred thousand lives (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2012; Imtiaz & Iqbal, 2011) The same conflict also deeply damaged decades of relations between Tamil and Muslim ethnic groups. As the actors of the conflict, the government and the LTTE were perpetrators of people's displacement. Tamils and Muslims were victims of the displacement, but their victimisations were varied in their perpetration. Tamils were displaced by government's establishing of Higher Security Zone (HSZ) in the conflict territory, government-LTTE sporadic armed confrontations and fears and possible threats of abduction, abuse and killing. An estimated 370, 000 Tamils were reported to be displaced during all stages of the conflict until it ended in 2009 (IDMC, 2012; ICG, 2012).

In contrast to Tamil displacement, Muslim displacement was involuntary, coerced and perpetrated by the LTTE. In 1990s, the Muslims from Mannar, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi Districts of north were ordered by the LTTE to leave their homes within two days, even two hours in one case (Jaffna). The Tamil Tigers also asked them to leave behind all their belongings, allowing them to take only a pair of cloths and LKR 150 (US\$ 1.4) when expelling them (Hanifa, 2010). Around 100, 000 Muslims from entire north left their homes, leaving behind US\$ 110 million worth of their property (according to 1990 rates).(Hanifa, 2010). These Muslims today are living in Puttalam, Anuradhapura and Colombo as internally displaced persons (IDPs), experiencing numerous difficulties to continue live (Hasbullah, 2012; ICG, 2007; McGilvray & Raheem, 2007).

As they completely wiped out Muslim existence in the north, the Tamil Tigers vulnerably targeted the Muslims in the east too, effectively implementing a series of anti-Muslim violent campaigns regardless of children, elderly and even pregnant women. In July 1990, more than 60 Muslims were murdered by the LTTE at Kurukul Madam as they were returning home performing hajj pilgrim in Saudi Arabia. On 30 July, some 14 Muslim cultivators of Akkaraipattu were shot dead by LTTE armed cadres while working in the rice fields. On 3 August, as many as 140 Muslim worshippers were massacred by Tamil Tigers at the time of their prayers in the Meera Jumma and the Hussaniya mosques of kattankudi. On 11 August, some 118 Muslims from Surattayankuda, Michnagar, Meerakerni and Saddam Hussein village - including 36 women and 31 children- were slaughtered by LTTE members while sleeping at homes. Among these killings, a horrible episode was that a pregnant woman's stomach was cut and stabbed her baby to death (ICG, 2007; Jaffna Muslim, 2012).

Apart from these, the LTTE effectively implemented measures affecting Muslims economically also. It collected illegal tax from Muslims and prevented them from farming their thousands of acres of paddy land that were in Tamil areas. The Muslims in the east, one assessment reported, lost at least 63,000 acres of their land because of this LTTE ban (ICG, 2007). Muslim business men and Muslim civil servants in the east also faced abduction and death threat unless they satisfied the LTTE demand of ransom (Ali, 2004). These indefensible LTTE practices on Muslims at times sparked Muslim anger also. As a reprisal, a group of frustrated young members of Muslim community, with backing of armed forces, engaged in violence against Tamils in the form of Muslim Home Guard. Tamil houses were torched and Tamil civilians beaten or at times killed by Muslim Home Guards, a force formed by the government to protect Muslim villages in the east from possible LTTE attacks (ICG, 2007).

The LTTE's ethnic cleansing and other inhuman campaigns against Muslims and Muslim Home Guard's violent responses against Tamils all badly damaged Tamil –Muslim amity that held for decades. They also prompted both communities to establish their own conclusions on each other. Muslims viewed that even their existence would be risked in future if the Tamils (LTTE) established a homeland (Tamil Ealam) by their ongoing armed struggle. As such, Tamils (mainly LTTE and its proponents and sympathisers) perceived Muslims as unsympathetic for their homeland campaign and being on the government side of the conflict. Eventually this situation enabled them to grow mutual suspicion and see each other as enemy. All Tamil-Muslim dealings now were based on their mutual suspicion and enemy perception (Mcgilvray & Raheem, 2007; McGilvray, 2011).

Appreciating the gravity of the situation, Muslim civil community made several attempt to preserve the decade-old Tamil-Muslim harmonious relations through negotiations with Tamils, mainly the LTTE. Such efforts were simply undermined and the civil community was deeply discouraged by the disappointing LTTE responses and justifications of it having committed against Muslims. (Note 4) and (Note 5) like Muslim civil community, there were also Tamils who were gravely worried over LTTE violence on Muslims and the deterioration of Tamil-Muslim relations. Yet, "They were effectively silenced by LTTE Kalashnikovs." (Note 6) This situation exacerbated Tamil-Muslim ethnic sabotage further and destroyed every possibility of normalising their relations. The country's years of armed conflict produced a protracted displacement as its legacy and a Tamil-Muslim estrangement as its domino effect.

Today, Sri Lanka has returned from its 30 years of local armed conflict just three years ago. The conflict has come to end after the government demolished the LTTE in 2009. A termination of such civil war was highly

hoped by the people displaced by the same armed conflict, mainly Tamils and Muslims, to be an opportunity to return to their homes ending their protracted displaced life. The termination was also widely interpreted by Tamil and Muslim communities as an opportunity to renew their onetime ethnic relations, which today remained vulnerably damaged after this armed conflict. The return and the renewal of Tamil-Muslim relations have been two most notable aspects that have received a dominant position in social development programme and Tamil-Muslim public discourse of the post-conflict Sri Lanka. This paper is an attempt to examine if the Sri Lanka's conflict termination has really served to end the displaced life and to bring Tamil-Muslim relations back. The paper focuses only on Muslims' view point in its investigation. The paper will also propose some measures as recommendations to turn the conflict termination into meaningful

The paper will use two theories: theory of return and theory of harmonious society. The IDPs return is, according to return theory, aspired by conditions of their areas of origin. In a situation in which a local armed conflict is terminated, the displaced are more determined to go back to their homes only when they are able to access their land and property. They are more reluctant to return home in the same conflict terminated context when they find themselves impotent to repossess them. Such impotence at times even leads the already returned IDPs to again leave back their places of origin. When their land and property are accessible, the displaced more aspire to rebuild their life in their places of origin. In contrast, when they are inaccessible, the displaced want to continue to live in their places of displacement. So, conflict termination can become meaningful in terms of IDPs returning only when the land and property are accessible for them in their areas of origin (Sert, 2010).

According to theory of harmonious society, the relations between different ethnic groups in a country with local armed conflict experiences would remain most essential after a conflict termination in the country. All ethnic groups of the country are not increasingly harmonious because of their inter-communal suspicions and misperceptions as possible war consequences. Unless these suspicions and misperceptions are attended seriously and a "harmonious society" with inter-ethnic amity is ensured, the country will still not be able to rebuild its post-war economies and society. So, a harmonious society would be a key ingredient of any progress of the country. In a post-conflict context, the members of every ethnic group of the country are not largely expected to be conscious of inter-ethnic amity for such a harmonious society, but they need to be educated for it. A conflict termination can be meaningful only when it is used to promote a harmonious society by educating all such ethnic groups of the country. Government of the country might be such key promoter. Government promotion could be related to education and policies (Rong, 2010).

1.4 IDPs Return after the Conflict Termination and Responsible Actors

The displaced people who had returned after a conflict termination have been deeply disturbed in rebuilding their live in their areas of origin because of the land and property dispute.. The returned IDPs were not able to repossess their land property for many reasons. First, there was no appropriate legislation in existence for them to reclaim their property. Second, the existing property law has failed to deliver their property from its illegal occupants. Third, the existing law at times has also deligtimised their right to retake. This situation, therefore, has seriously discouraged IDPs return (Dahlman & Tuathail, 2005).

In a post-conflict context, the home government has been a key stakeholder in helping its displaced people go back home. The government help is often expected to ensure their access to basic needs and services: housing, water and sanitation, public healthcare, livelihood, education and employment opportunities. In addition to this, government is also responsible in addressing most critical problems, like land and property dispute, facing the returning IDPs with effective law and policy and in encouraging them to make their own decision on whether to return or relocate (Cohen, 2006). However, whether during or post conflict situation, most governments have hardly met their obligation of this in terms of basic needs provision, legislation, policy formulation and their implementation (Shukla, 2006; Tamang, 2009).

NGOs humanitarian support to the displaced even during their return has been most crucial when they rebuild their lives in their community of origin after a conflict termination. Often, the war-affected countries with large number of displaced populations highly seek such NGOs aid and services when they are not able to respond to their IDPs' problems and needs due to their limited financial abilities. Therefore, in these countries, NGOs provide the returning displaced populations with material, instrumental and psychological support and other services in the forms of: housing, water and sanitation, livelihood support, vocational training, information dissemination, legal aid, healthcare services and counselling (Zaum, 2009). When delivering such humanitarian support and services, NGOs invariably claim that they are abiding by their declared humanitarian principles of a political, neutral and independent. Yet, given the realities in some case, NGOs have acted out of these principles in helping the war affected people waiting for a normal live in their areas of origin in a post-conflict context.

They are accused of politicising humanitarian aid (Frangonikolopoulos, 2005).

In a post-war context, the government is obligated to persuade its different ethnic groups experiencing severe ethnic estrangement after local armed conflict to return to an inter-ethnic amity. Government can meet such prime obligation by concerned national policy, national education and other programmes and their effective implementation. A country representing an ethnic diversity can gain a socio-politico-economic stability only when it ensures an inter-cohesiveness of its different ethnic groups (Rong, 2010). Apart from government, civil community also has responsibility in this respect. In a post conflict social context, when different ethnic groups in a country that lived once in peace and harmony experience an inter-ethnic sabotage after the conflict, civil communities (religious leaders and community organisations) have helped for such ethnic groups to restore their former relations by their civic activism. Their role was to effectively promote communal harmony between their and other community members by cultural and educational activities (Shukla, 2006).

2. Method

This was an exploratory study employing qualitative data. The respondents of the study were the Muslims of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, Sri Lanka. Eleven respondents were recruited using purposive sample. Five of them were from Musali in the north who were forcibly expelled from their homes by the LTTE in 1990s and now had returned to their places of origin after the conflict termination of 2009. The other six respondents were from Akkarapattu of the east, who, in contrast to their northern counterparts, had not experienced such a forced displacement.

2.1 Recruitment Criteria

The respondents were recruited by the following self-established selection criteria: 1) they were to be displaced voluntarily or involuntarily by the country's local armed conflict, 2) they were to be returnees who had so returned to their homes only after the 2009 conflict termination, 3) they were to be with between 30 – 55 years of age regardless of gender, educational, occupational and political difference and 4) they were to be interested to participate in the study voluntarily. The first two requirements were exclusively for the respondents of the north and the last two were common for both north and east respondents.

2.2 Selection Rationale

There were four reasons in selecting respondents as Muslims of the north and east and determining a sample size. First, the focus of the study was only on Muslims. Second, the selection of north Muslims who were subject to an ethnic cleansing with forced displacement than Muslims in the east could help meet an objective of the study, which was about examining the conflict termination's possibility in ending the displaced life. Third, the selection of the Muslims from the east who relatively had demographic, economic, vocational and political reasons for strong communal relations with Tamils was also essential to meet another objective of the study - a renewal of Tamil-Muslim harmony. And finally small size of sample (11 respondents) was accepted to satisfy a methodological requirement of qualitative study that a moderate size of sample with 10-20 was more effective to capture rich data (Wray, Markovic & Manderson, 2007).

2.3 Data and Analysis

Data was collected by one-on-one interviews with respondents. The main researcher conducted the interviews which shared open-ended questions administered by him. Each interview lasted on average between one – one and half hours. The temporary shelters (north) and houses (east) were interview venues. The interviews (data) were digitally recorded with respondents' consent and transcribed later for analysis. To analyse the data, a manual descriptive method was employed. Information (data) provided by respondents was handled highly confidentially and only used for this research purpose.

3. Results

The displaced Muslims in Sri Lanka faced serious difficulties in rebuilding their life in their places of origin after the country's conflict termination. The illegal occupation of their land as of their 1990 expulsion was a main reason for their difficulties. Respondent A said:

Our agricultural lands, in Savariya Puram (Mannar), have been today unlawfully occupied by them (Tamils). They have built permanent houses also in. We asked them for back. Some of them returned, but others refused claiming they owned them for years. We have petitioned authorities with enough evidences. Government should help us retake them. Otherwise, our return would be vulnerable than our displacement.

Respondent B complained:

With our expulsion, our land was illegally occupied by LTTE supporters. Authorities (Tamils) also had distributed our land to Tamils and deeds also issued without our knowledge. Today, in that land, houses were also built with NGOs assistance. Government should intervene for us to reoccupy them.

Respondent C reported:

We had nothing to do with this conflict but were vulnerably victimised. We were expelled and our property occupied by Tamils. Government authorities of the time, predominantly Tamils, did nothing to preserve our land from this illegal occupation. Today we even face threats to reclaim our land. My friend was threatened when he tried to stop the illegal occupant from building house in his land. We heard that government mulls a new legislation for property return. Government should do this immediately.

NGOs humanitarian assistance was simply vital to ensure more IDP returns in post-conflict Sri Lanka since a limited financial capacity confined the government in addressing needs and problems of the returning IDPs. However, such humanitarian assistance was notably reduced by the Presidential Task Force (PTF) (Note 7)

Respondent A said:

Whatever NGOs, they must come with a PTF approval when they wish to help us. Obtaining an PTF is extremely difficult. The PTF is rejected to NGOs when the details they presented are unsatisfactory. NGOs also face too much delay from PTF. All this has compromised NGOs assistance to us. We, for example, lost an assistance of 200 temporary shelters from the NGO Social Aid and fishing boats from another NGO due to PTF rejection. There are several cases like this. Government should attend our concerns in this.

NGOs were prominent actors in post-conflict Sri Lanka due to their various support to the returning IDPs. However, their humanitarian support remained selective. Several returned Muslim IDPs were being systematically excluded in NGOs humanitarian mission. Respondent B said:

Should NGOs working here consider us all the returned IDPs beyond our ethnic and religious differences, our needs like housing, livelihood and water and sanitation are sure to be met. In contrast, some of NGOs show discrimination against us (Muslims) when delivering their aid. Even UNHCR, for example, has not provided its livelihood support (Rs 25,000 per family) and resettlement aid (Rs 5,000 per family) to all Muslim returnees as provided to others (Tamils). As such, the IOM also ignored us in giving fully what it allocated to be 400 temporary shelters for Muslims.

Respondent D complained:

NGOs support to us (Muslims) is too less compared to Tamil return areas, where many NGOs implement huge projects: housing, livelihood, public healthcare and infrastructure building. We still live in temporary shelter with *cadjan* and tin sheets. We still struggle to find livelihood. The reason for this difference is simply communal, because they (Tamils) control almost every NGO working here (Mannar) from decision-making to implementation. When it comes to humanitarian support, they prefer their people (Tamil) areas. Around 90% of NGOs support recipients are Tamils and Tamil villages. NGOs should prioritise our needs and problems not our communal, religious and political backgrounds.

Respondent E said:

Muslim resettlement in Mannar is hardly assisted. NGOs here mostly prefer Christian areas for their assistance. We had several times brought this Muslim ignorance to NGOs' attention and urged them to help all. Our appeal is unheard. At one point, our Divisional Secretary (government chief of local administration) apparently said NGOs: 'if helping, help all the people irrespective of their religion and race or leave immediately if you only help your people (Christian).' Reason for their Muslim exclusion, in my eyes, is simply communal.

What the post-war Sri Lanka needed was new policies, education and other projects from the government to promote ethnic reconciliation and harmony. Respondent F said:

War is over. Today, we (Muslims) go to their (Tamils) areas and they come to our areas as in early period. Thousands of Tamils – masons, washermen, barbers and tree climbers and hewers- come to Muslim neighbourhoods for work every day. Muslims have begun cultivating their uncultivated paddy land in Tamil areas due to conflict. These may all raise hope to renew our onetime Tamil-Muslim relations. Yet, this is not enough. Much needs on government part. Our government should enact a new

constitution and implement a national education that would sustain better relations not only among Tamil and Muslims but also among all ethnic groups. This conflict termination is good opportunity to do them.

Respondent G said:

Government has always allowed tense relations between Tamil and Muslim communities because its anxiety that any Tamil-Muslim unity would affect its side of conflict with Tamils. Unless there are meaningful changes in constitution and policies on government part, whatever attempts from other sides would not work.

Respondent H Said:

Ever since pre-independence, ethnic polarisation has been a common phenomenon in our country. By their “divide and rule” policy, our colonial rulers,(British) distanced all ethnic groups of the country and made them think and act against each other for preserving their colonial power.. Unfortunately, our post-independent governments also effectively resumed the same policy in the forms of today’s constitution and some other projects that have even more polarised Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities. So, government should first implement changes in its policies and constitution to promote communal harmony among all communities.

Respondent I said:

Rather than deciding and doing everything along ethnic lines, creating an attitude of people that we are all Sri Lanka’s citizens is government prime obligation. policy makers should devote for policies promoting this national identity and ethnic amity in this post-conflict context.

Civil communities, including media, were being widely expected to play a multi- role to restore Tamil-Muslim
Respondent F said:

Tamil-Muslim relations’ return is not an individual effort, but a collective commitment. kovils and mosques are the most influential Tamil and Muslim civil organisations determining people’s social, cultural and even political lives. Only their commitments can serve this. kovil vannakkers and Mosque Maraikkars should organise common gatherings and encourage their community members to participate. This would help both communities appreciate the necessity to continue their relations.

Respondent G said:

Today, we see a first ever apology from some of Tamil intellectual community for what their community members (LLTE) committed against us (Muslims). This is a welcome step, but not going to bring Tamil-Muslim harmony at al. They need to host common programmes educationally and culturally to convince people for social relations. What is needed are not only statement but perfect actions also.

Respondent H said:

In contrast to conflict time, today, Tamils come to Muslim areas to visit their long-time Muslim friends. Tamil professionals, artists and students take part in Muslim literary and cultural forums in Muslim areas. Muslims also attend Tamil events in their areas. For example, more recently a locally well-known young Tamil poet of Akkaraipatu, Mr.Kulanthaivel, published his poem “Annoying” *Kasagaranam*. Many Muslims were invited and attended this. His work clearly mirrored onetime Tamil-Muslim relations with many examples and appealed for its renewal. These are significant developments, but need to be actively promoted by a systematic civil engagement.

Respondent I said:

Unlike its wartime journalistic conduct, Tamil media has to play prominent role to address Tamils-Muslims hope and willingness to revisit their previous social relations. Media can do this by providing space enough to those thinking, speaking, working, writing and debating for Tamil-Muslim harmony. Such professional contribution would help overcome Tamil-Muslim mistrusts restore their relations.

Respondent J said:

Former Tamil- Muslim relations are not going to come back overnight, because post-war Tamil and Muslim communities are deeply convinced by their mutual suspicions and perceive each other as lords and slaves. Intellectuals, social activists and civil organisations of both communities should work to

renew their decade-old relations. Tamils have to do a lot. They should publicly apologise for their injustices of massacre and ethnic cleansing against Muslims, assure not to repeat such practices anymore and recognise Muslim identity. Otherwise, Tamil–Muslim relations are hardly likely.

Muslim civil community was also expected to have obligations of Tamil-Muslim relations. Respondent F said:

The past violence and brutality against Muslims cannot be something committed by whole Tamil community. Rather, it is a deplorable practice of a terrorist organisation (LTTE) belonging to Tamils. There were Tamils who silently campaign against this anti-Muslim practice and were worried about the destruction of Tamil-Muslim relations. We (Muslims) should recognise this difference. Today, the terrorist organisation is demolished. We should use this opportunity to bring back our early relations with Tamils. It is not the time to recount our victimisation.

Respondent K said:

Husband–wife conflict is a perennial phenomenon of family live. Yet, this confrontation is not promoted anymore and does not collapse entire family at all. Husband and wife address their conflict themselves for at least their children’s good. Tamil-Muslim disharmony of today is also like this husband-wife clash. Muslim community should forgive Tamil community for at least their coming generations’ good. They should extend their hand of harmony to Tamils. Both parties should be faithfully committed for their future generations’ good.

4. Discussions

The country’s armed conflict that left 470, 000 people displaced has ended three years ago and in 2009. However, the termination of the conflict has not necessarily served the people to end their displaced life. Around 80% of the displaced Muslim have not been returned yet. Most of the returned Muslims were unable to rebuild their lives in their places of origin. The illegal occupation of land and lack of appropriate law for repossession was the main reason for their inability. The land of displaced Muslims had been illegally occupied by Tamils as of their expulsion. Some of occupants had later received deeds also from local authorities (predominantly Tamils at the time) to legally own their occupied Muslim land. The deeds had been issued by authorities without the knowledge of Muslims who were their title-holders. Although they had submitted their petitions to local authorities with their ownership evidence enough, their possibility to get them back was virtually zero since the existing property law of the country legalised such illegal occupation when it held for over ten years. (Note 9)

The lack of appropriate legislation in the country enabling to retake such occupied property was another serious difficulty. An absence of such law mad the returned Muslims even more impotent in reclaiming their property. This entire situation deeply disturbed the returned Muslims in rebuilding live in their areas of origin and even discouraged the other Muslim IDPs who were still to return. Therefore, they were asking government to solve their land dispute with concerned law. It was government’s obligation to address this issue, but government was yet to meet its obligation. This fact is reinforced by Dahlman & Tuathail’s (2005), Cohen’s (2006) and Tamang (2009) findings (that): land and property issue, and the lack of law to solve that issue have largely discouraged the IDPs return and that the concerned law enactment to address this problem is government obligation, but whether after displacement or during return, governments have largely failed their obligation towards IDPs. The conflict termination in Sri Lanka, in the words of theory of return, was not meaningful since the IDPs were unable to access their land and property.

NGOs were prominent actors in post-conflict Sri Lanka to encourage more returns after the conflict termination by their various supports to IDPs. Their supports included housing, water and sanitation, public healthcare and medical services, livelihood, education and infrastructure repairing. They were highly helpful for returnees to deal with their problems and access their basic needs since its limited financial capacity confined government ability in responding to the problems and needs of the returning IDPs. However, such humanitarian assistance was notably reduced by the Presidential Task Force (PTF), a regulation newly implemented immediately after the conflict termination by Sri Lankan government to monitor NGOs operations in return areas (former conflict territories). Any NGO, whether indigenous or international, wishing to assist the IDPs returning home was asked to have an PTF approval from the government prior to beginning their humanitarian support programme. NGOs with no PTF were not permitted to operate in return areas.

There was enough opportunity of NGOs being rejected the PTF when their details submitted were found unsatisfactory. There were also too delays in granting PTF. PTF rejection and time consumption reflected serious effects on returned IDPs, compromising their basic needs. The returnees, for example, happened to lose a 200-shelter housing assistance and a livelihood of providing fishing boats from NGOs due to PTF rejection. The

PTF delays effectively led time-defined NGOs projects to expire before their implementations. The returned IDPs want their government either to repeal the PTF or adopt flexibilities in its approval requirements.

On the other hand, although NGOs were providing an invaluable support, they were not adhered enough to their humanitarian principles of apolitical, neutral and independent when distributing their aid services to the returned IDPs. NGOs operating in the return areas excluded Muslims returnees systematically in their humanitarian mission of IDPs return. NGOs did not consider enough the returned Muslims with housing, livelihood and public healthcare problems while they recognised Tamil returnees with the same problems as their beneficiaries. While NGOs humanitarian aid helps Tamil villages to build houses, rebuild their infrastructure, increase people's livelihood opportunities and improve education, Muslim returnees and Muslim villages were largely ignored from them. They still lived in temporary shelters with *cadjan* and tin sheets erected in the early time of their return and extremely struggled to access livelihood. The only reason for this NGOs ignorance, according to Muslim returnees, was that they were Muslims and different ethnic group. This fact is supported by the findings of Frangonikolopoulos (2005) that NGOs, in some cases, act against their humanitarian principles – apolitical, neutral and independent- by politicising humanitarian aid. It was unfortunate that NGOs had hidden criteria of recipient (according to Muslim returnees) based on religious and ethnic differences. If that is the case, NGOs working for IDPs should not prioritise recipients' religion or ethnicity but their problems and needs.

Two different ethnic groups that shared strong relations due to linguistic, demographic, vocational and political reasons for decades have today become deeply estranged. In effect, the country's 30 years of armed conflict needed to be responsible for their vulnerable estrangement. The LTTE's, one of the actors of the conflict, anti-Muslim campaign (forcible expulsion, massacre, land confiscation and illegal tax imposition) and violent reprisal of a group of frustrated Muslim youth all distanced these two communities and sowed seed of mutual suspicion in their relations. Today, this three-decade war has come to an end. In this context, the members of both communities were willing to return to their onetime inter-ethnic amity. At grass root level, there were some signs reflecting this willingness. For example, Tamils went to Muslim neighbourhoods to visit their long-time Muslim friends and participated in Muslim educational and cultural programmes. As such, Muslims also attended Tamil literary and cultural events in Tamil areas. However, they appreciated that only these were not enough and believed that a renewal of Tamil-Muslim relations was not an individual effort but a collective commitment. Main stakeholders of this commitment, they strongly regarded, were government and Tamil and Muslim civil communities. Government, according to them, could effectively promote inter-ethnic relations not only for Tamils and Muslims but also for all ethnic groups of the country. Therefore, members of Muslim community wanted their government to bring necessary changes in the constitution, incorporate new curriculum into national education and introduce policies that could promote inter-ethnic relations, and implement them effectively.

Members also regarded Tamil and Muslim civil communities as influential players facilitating Tamil-Muslim relations. Tamil civil communities' role, Muslim members expected, was to issue a public apology for their (LTTE) injustice against Muslims, assure a prevention of their recurrence and recognise Muslims' distinct identity. Muslim civil community, according to them, should forgive what Tamils (LTTE) committed against them and extend their hand of harmony, because such forgiveness, members hoped, could be a basis for any restoration of Tamil-Muslim relations. Both communities were also expected to jointly organise common educational and cultural events, encourage their members' participation and consequently convince them to appreciate the necessity of their relations. This conflict termination, they viewed, was most appropriate time for such renewal of their former relations. This expectation is echoed by the findings of Rong (2010) and Shukla (2006) that government and civil communities have been serious players in promoting inter-ethnic relations among different ethnic groups whose relations were sabotaged by armed conflict. However, the conflict termination of Sri Lanka, in the words of theory of harmonious society, was not meaningful, because it was yet to be used significantly to promote inter-ethnic relations among Tamil and Muslims in particular and all ethnic groups of the country in general.

5. Recommendations

It is a trilateral practice that conflict termination is meaningful in terms of ending people's protracted displaced live and restoring Tamil-Muslim relations. The government, civil community and even NGOs are the partners of this practice. This paper would propose some recommendations: first, the government of Sri Lanka should implement a property law to lead the IDPs to get back their illegally occupied land and property. Second, government should advance a cluster mechanism with a wider NGOs collaboration to respond to IDPs needs and problems. Third, despite its necessity, the government should allow some flexibility in PTF approval requirements and possibly avoid unnecessary time consumption when granting the PTF, which could

increasingly help returning IDPs receive more NGOs assistance to address their needs and problems. Fourth, the NGOs helping the returning IDPs in Sri Lanka should be strictly adhered to their noble humanitarian principles (apolitical, neutral and independent) by dismissing people's ethnic, religious, and even political affiliations during their support to people in need. Fifth, the government should actively promote inter-ethnic relations not only among Tamil and Muslim but among all ethnic groups of the country by education, policy, constitutional changes and other national programmes and their effective implementations. And finally, civil community leaders and organisations belonging to all ethnic groups should offer to play their influential role: ethnic reconciliation dialogues, media campaign of inter-ethnic amity and common cultural and educational events (for example, literary work) among ethnic groups. This could contribute to overcome mutual suspicion and rebuild inter-ethnic relations among already deeply estranged Sri Lankan communities.

6. Conclusion

Sri Lanka's decade-long local armed conflict has ended more than about three years ago and in 2009. Although this conflict termination was widely hoped to end displaced live of the people and contribute to renew relations among Tamils and Muslims (two ethnic minorities), it has hardly satisfied this hope. To make conflict termination meaningful to meet this hope, several initiatives need to be effectively implemented. Government, local civil communities and even non-governmental organisations have to be serious partners of such initiatives.

7. Limitation of the Study

The study focused only on Muslims. The findings, therefore, would be hard to be generalised. The sample size of the study, 11 respondents, also remained a limitation.

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Notes

Note 1. Personal communication by main authors with Makkathar Majeed, a retired principle, on April 4, 2012.

Note 2. Personal communication by main author with K. L. M. Najimudeen, a retired Assistant Director for none-formal education, on April 9, 2012.

Note 3. Personal communication by main author with Sheriffideen Marikkar, a trustee board member of Akkaraipattu Grand Mosque, on April 4, 2012.

Note 4. Mr. Yogaratnam Yogi, LTTE political commissar of the time, in a public speech defending LTTE's Muslim expulsion said that Muslim in the north and east were never a distinct race and they were Tamils . Their denial of this fact forced his LTTE to penalise them with a forcible expulsion.

Note 5. During main author's personal communication with him on April 8, 2012, M.M.M. Hasim, a retired teacher, said that when a group of Muslim representatives from Mosques Federation of East, including him, met Eastern LTTE political leader Karikalan in Kokkadicholai in order to address Muslim grievance upon deteriorating Tamil-Muslim relations by LTTE's anti-Muslim behaviours, he unequivocally noted LTTE's unwillingness of Tamil-Muslim amity by his remarks: " we should achieve a Tamil Ealam (homeland) with a great Tamil martyrdom, in which you (Muslims) should be better off, going around in Benz car, is it? We will shoot Muslims like shooting dogs and throw them away in the streets if they refused to give us tax," which was illegally imposed on Muslims and effectively implemented by the LTTE.

Note 6. A personal communication by main author with K. L. M. Najimudeen on April 9, 2012.

Note 7. The government uncovering of some NGOs assistance to the LTTE during war time had forced Sri Lankan government to implement such a new PTF regulation to monitor NGOs operations in former conflict areas immediately after conflict termination.