

**The Island on Washington DC
Book Launch**

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At the Atlantic Council early January, 2015. (L-R) Bharath Gopaldaswamy, Director of the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center, Mark Salter, author of To End a Civil War, Erik Solheim and Richard L. Armitage, former US Deputy Secretary of State.

Here's some nice publicity for the book in yesterday's edition of one of Sri Lanka's best-established newspapers. Only shame is its offering such a jaundiced perspective on the Norwegian mediation effort in the country . . .

**Norway failed in SL for want of broader int'l involvement –
Solheim**

The Island, 9 February 2016, by Shamindra Ferdinando

Washington DC-based Atlantic Council was recently told that Norwegian peace efforts, in Sri Lanka, in the 2002-2006 period, would have certainly succeeded had there been a broader international involvement. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The then powerful Norwegian minister and chief peace negotiator in Sri Lanka, Erik Solheim, told the Atlantic

Council that the Norwegian project failed for want of required international support. The participants, at the discussion, as well as the audience, accepted Solheim's assertion.

The Sri Lankan government hadn't been involved in the discussion.

The Norwegian alleged that in the absence of a dedicated international commitment, the Sri Lankan military had waged war until an offensive was brought to a conclusion, in May, 2009. The then government launched a combined forces offensive, in early Sept. 2006, in the wake of the LTTE resuming eelam war IV, with large scale simultaneous operations in both the northern and eastern provinces.

Recalling the role played by India, Japan and Norway to broker peace in Sri Lanka, Solheim said: "a broader and stronger coalition of outside international players was needed." The Norwegian conveniently failed to mention a significant US effort in support of the Norwegian initiative.

Solheim was participating in a panel discussion hosted by the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center. Richard L. Armitage, who has served as Deputy Secretary of State, in the George W. Bush administration, and Mark Salter, author of *To End a Civil War*, which recounts mediation efforts in Sri Lanka, were also part of the panel. Bharath Gopaldaswamy, Director of the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center, moderated the discussion.

Solheim said patience was paramount from the first day on the ground: "Only if you can be patient and accept that there will be ups and downs then you can potentially have some impact on the path to peace."

Solheim identified specific challenges, surrounding the diplomatic mission—namely, the dearth of information his team had on dealing with senior officials in both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. "We needed a bigger team to tap into Tamil-Sinhala relationships and, more importantly, we needed

to gain insight into the unique leadership of the Tamil Tigers," he said. "At the end of the day it was about this."

Obviously, Solheim was making a foolish attempt cover up the Norwegian failure in Sri Lanka. Hadn't there been a major international interest, in the Sri Lankan conflict, during the Norwegian project, the Atlantic Council wouldn't even have considered taking it up, nearly seven years after the annihilation of the LTTE. The panel discussion, moderated by Bharath Gopaldaswamy, underscored the abiding international interest in post-war Sri Lanka.

Seven years after her triumph, over terrorism, Sri Lanka is facing war crimes probe under the supervision of the Geneva-based United Nations Human Rights Council. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, today concluded a four-day visit to Sri Lanka.

The heavily US funded Atlantic Council is one of the most influential organizations shaping American and European foreign policy. Established over five decades ago, to promote the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Atlantic Council wields immense power. Having served the Obama administration, former Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel joined the Atlantic Council in early last year. Hagel served the Atlantic Centre as its chairman (2009-2013).

Contrary to Solheim's assertion that a broader and stronger international coalition could have prevented an all out war, thereby ensured a negotiated settlement in Sri Lanka, the grouping, involved in the 2002-2006 peace effort, had been perhaps one of the strongest backing a particular peace initiative.

Indian Bharath Gopaldaswamy, Director of the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center, as well as other panelists, conveniently forgot the circumstances leading to Norway's involvement in Sri Lanka, consequent to New Delhi's diabolical project to

destabilize the neighbouring country. India employed both terrorism and conventional military strategies to subvert Sri Lanka. No less a person than one-time Indian Foreign Secretary, J.N. Dixit, had acknowledged the Indian destabilization project in his memoirs, launched in 2004.

Norway has been involved in Sri Lanka since 1997. Two years, later in May, the then President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga secretly requested Norway to explore ways and means of bringing the LTTE back to the negotiating table. Mrs. Kumaratunga revealed the Norwegian role soon after the LTTE made an abortive bid to assassinate her during the third week of December, 1999. Mrs. Kumaratunga's extended an invitation to Norway, with the LTTE's blessings. In fact, Norway was among five countries chosen by the LTTE as the likely third party to spearhead the peace initiative.

Against the backdrop of Solheim's claim that the 2002-2006 peace initiative had failed for want of broader international involvement, it would be pertinent to examine the Norwegian-led highly publicized effort. The Norwegian arranged Ceasefire Agreement had the backing of the US, EU and Japan. The US, EU, Norway and Japan functioned as Co-chairs to the peace process throughout this period. India, too, threw its weight behind the process though New Delhi refrained from playing a public role.

Regardless of what the likes of Solheim said today, Oslo ran a well coordinated, as well as an expensive project here. In fact, Norway gave the LTTE as much as possible international exposure, consequent to the then Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, and LTTE leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, endorsing the CFA, in February 2002. Norway arranged six rounds of direct negotiations between the two parties at overseas venues – Sattahip Naval Base, Chonburi, Thailand (mid – Sept 2002), Rose Garden Hotel, Nakhorn Pathom, Thailand (Oct-Nov 2002), Radisson SAS Plaza Hotel, Oslo, Norway (early Dec 2002), Rose Garden Hotel, Nakhorn Pathom, Thailand

(January 2003), Norwegian Embassy, Nordic Embassy Complex, Berlin, Germany (early Feb 2003) and Hakone Prince Hotel, Hakone, Japan (mid March 2003).

In spite of Premier Wickremesinghe going out of his way to reach a negotiated settlement, to the conflict, the LTTE acted belligerently. In fact, Wickremesinghe took decisions, even at the risk of his political career, to pursue a peaceful settlement. Unfortunately, those who had been pushing Sri Lanka to reach an understanding with the LTTE never put real pressure on the LTTE. Had Solheim and other international players resorted to tough actions, to rein in the group, Prabhakaran wouldn't have jeopardized the entire process by quitting the negotiating table, in April, 2003. The LTTE move created an environment for then President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga to dissolve parliament to pave the way for a general election, in April, 2004.

Western powers could have certainly prevented all out war had they taken tangible measures against the LTTE in the wake of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar's assassination, in Aug. 2005, and the assassination attempt on the then Army Chief Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka, in April, 2006. Peacemakers turned a blind eye to high profile LTTE operations, thereby further strengthening Prabhakaran's position, as well as those who believed in division of the country on ethnic lines. Instead of taking action against terrorism, perpetrated by the LTTE, Norway engaged in massive propaganda campaign meant to somehow keep the process on track.

Two years after the annihilation of the LTTE, Norway carried out a costly evaluation of its involvement in Sri Lanka under the leadership of Gunnar Sørbo of the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and Jonathan Goodhand from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

The Norwegian study revealed even the involvement of NATO in support of the Norwegian effort. Both NATO as well as India

had provided intelligence to Norway as well as the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, comprising Scandinavian countries. The support received from Norway, from the most powerful military organization in the world, underscored the significance of the Norwegian project here. The amount of secret US diplomatic cables, released by WikiLeaks, revealed the US interest in the conflict here and her efforts to manipulate political parties et al. Solheim had been among about 120 politicians and officials from various countries interviewed by those who had been involved in the Norwegian evaluation.

The report, released in Sept., 2011, revealed the Norwegian project went awry primarily due to wrong Norwegian assessment on Sri Lanka. Norway, and its partners, excluding the US, believed that Sri Lanka should tolerate the high handed actions of the LTTE. They took up this position on the basis of wrong assumption that the LTTE couldn't be defeated on the battlefield, under any circumstances. They asserted that the Sri Lanka military could never succeeded against the Indian Army's failure to crush the LTTE. Had the then President Ranasinghe Premadasa not succumbed to the LTTE ploy, India could have wiped out the LTTE. Premadasa saved the LTTE only to be blasted by a suicide cadre, four years later, on May Day, 1993.

The Norwegian evaluation report revealed the circumstances under which Oslo pursued a wrong policy, thereby paving the way for the LTTE to dig its own grave. The bottom line is that both Norway and the LTTE failed to realize the previous political-military leadership's commitment to defeat the LTTE. The following section, reproduced verbatim, exposed the weakness in the Norwegian strategy: During an internal strategy session with Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Store, in May, 2007, the mediation team reiterates that all observers think that this is a conflict that cannot be won by military means and most believe that the government cannot beat the LTTE militarily..." "In hindsight, the Norwegian underestimates

the Sri Lankan government's strength, both militarily and politically. The team considers a wide range of likely and less likely scenarios, but (like most observers at that time), it does not reckon with the sequence of events that is to follow: a strong SLFP-led coalition and military victory.

Even after the assassination of Minister Kadirgamar, and the attempt on Lt. Gen. Fonseka's life, Norway continued to mollycoddle the LTTE. The peace co-chairs, too, failed to bring the LTTE to heel. In fact, they allowed the LTTE a free hand. In between the assassination of Minister Kadirgamar, in Aug., 2005, and the attempt on Lt. Gen. Fonseka's life, the LTTE engineered UNP presidential candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe's defeat at the Nov. 2005 polls.

Although, the TNA, on behalf of the LTTE, announced the polls boycott order, over a week before Nov. 17 polls, Western powers refrained from taking action. The then President Mrs Kumaratunga personally requested the then Norwegian Prime Minister, Kjell Magne Bondvik, to ensure the LTTE didn't interfere with the electoral process. The request was made on the sidelines of UNGA sessions in New York, in late September, 2005 (Norway to facilitate presidential poll-The Island September 2005). Veteran politician, R. Yogarajan, MP, in a brief interview with this writer, on Nov. 22, 2014, explained the LTTE move as well as the UNP's efforts to persuade the LTTE not to interfere with the electoral process.

Had the LTTE listened to reason, perhaps, eelam war IV would never have taken place, Yogarajan asserted. "We knew something was amiss when the LTTE ordered public servants not to exercise their franchise at postal voting during the first week of November, 2005. All of us were seriously concerned. On the advice of the CWC leader, Arumugam Thondaman, I requested LTTE political wing leader, Tamilchelvam not to interfere with the electoral process. Tamilchelvam declined to cooperate. He also turned down my request for an urgent meeting with LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran to discuss the

matter. I was to accompany Thondaman. But Tamilchelvam insisted there is no point in visiting Kilinochchi as the decision cannot be changed under any circumstances. Tamilchelvam faulted the UNP for not making a formal request to the LTTE leader. We never wanted the LTTE to tell the people to vote for the UNP candidate.”

Still the Norwegians continued to appease the LTTE. Having narrowly won the presidential poll, Mahinda Rajapaksa, in spite of strong opposition from those nationalist elements, who had worked tirelessly for his victory, accepted Norwegian mediated talks, in Geneva. Rajapaksa sent top level delegations twice only to be humiliated by the LTTE which believed in swift battlefield victory over the military. The first round of talks, during the Rajapaksa’s presidency, took place in Feb. 2006, and the second, in Oct. 2006. The former President bent backwards to reach an understanding with the LTTE even after the LTTE resumed eelam war IV with large scale attacks in the northern and eastern provinces during the second week of August, 2006.

Solheim should explain Norway’s failure to rein in the LTTE. The Peace co-chairs, too, should examine their wartime strategy. Western powers could have intervened, at least in mid 2007, after the government liberated the Eastern Province. They refrained from exerting pressure on the LTTE to return to the negotiating table because they firmly believed Prabhakaran’s Vanni bastion couldn’t be conquered. Colombo-based Western diplomatic missions, the Indian High Commission, as well as UN, acted on the premise that the LTTE couldn’t be defeated in the Vanni. A section of the media, too, propagated that theory as late as the third week of December, 2008, as the Task Force I/58 Division and the 57 Division advanced on Kilinochchi, which the LTTE considered as its administrative capital. Canada-based veteran journalist, D.B.S. Jeyaraj confidently declared that the advancing Army would be defeated on the Vanni east front.

Jeyaraj asserted that in spite of vacating the Eastern Province by mid-2007, the LTTE retained an elite fighting cadre capable of routing the Army. Jeyaraj predicted the LTTE rolling back the Army. The Norwegians believed in the LTTE's capability to turn around the situation. The Norwegian evaluation, in May, 2007, prompted the peace facilitator and co-chairs to continue their friendly policy towards the LTTE. They strongly believed that the government lacked the strength to bring the war to a successful conclusion. The Norwegians asserted the LTTE had the wherewithal to cause a battlefield stalemate by either rolling back the Army or resorting to guerrilla tactics. Solheim should peruse *Pawns of Peace: Evaluation of Norwegian peace effort in Sri Lanka 1997-2009* and make available copy to Bharath Gopalswamy, Director of the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center.

To be continued on Feb 17