

A Discussion with the Hon. Mangala Moonesinghe

June 16, 2009

In light of the government's May victory over the Tamil Tigers, Sri Lankans are experiencing relief, fear, and triumphalism. For the Honorable Mangala Moonesinghe, a veteran Sri Lankan politician and diplomat, optimism for the future of his country supersedes his doubts. Mr. Moonesinghe spoke with a diverse group of individuals at CSIS on the prospect of peacemaking in post-Prabhakaran Sri Lanka. He framed his discussion around his efforts to bring together the country's political parties and civil society groups in a discreet forum under the One-Text Initiative (OTI). OTI and Mr. Moonesinghe's aims in the last few years have been to discuss peaceful solutions to the thirty-year war and develop policy recommendations. For instance, OTI suggested that all civil servants be required to learn Sinhalese, Tamil, and English in order to effectively accommodate the entire population. Now that the war has ended, OTI's direction has shifted considerably from discussing theoretical resolutions to implementing practices which address the new political atmosphere and aid ordinary people.

One Text-Initiative (OTI) as an Alternative Channel for Dialogue

Mr. Moonesinghe discussed the importance of OTI as an alternative to exposed political debate for establishing a productive conversation about real problems in the country. A relatively young initiative, OTI was uniquely designed to incorporate the insight of members of parliament, civil society, and the peace secretariat for the government, Muslims, and LTTE prior to 2005. What separates OTI from other peace-promoting organizations within the country is the forum's commitment to the Chatham House Rule. The Rule helps to facilitate free discussion and protects speaker anonymity by keeping who said what off the official record. The discretion which OTI allows its members, says Mr. Moonesinghe, is one its fundamental strengths and affords the organization great influence in impacting the peace process from issues of language discrimination to bridging connections between the ICRC and political parties, from surveying the population's impression of federalism and desire for peace to helping coordinate access into the No-Fire Zone (NFZ).

“Movement toward Healing”: Inclusivity, Optimism for the Future

Despite the ominous challenges of maintaining and relocating IDPs, possible sporadic violence, and ethnic tension, Mr. Moonesinghe expressed genuine confidence in the ability of the Sri Lankan government and people to preserve the non-static course of the country and overcome the momentary triumphalism that could potentially deter sustainable peace. Mr. Moonesinghe said Sri Lankans want to again be economic world players, learn English, and help one another through aid and regional development. The real obstacle to a successful concession in power may likely be irritants in the government over all else. He doubted that the Rajapakse government would find it politically viable in the long-term to pursue any platform other than one of unity and that some constructive compromises must be made. Mr. Moonesinghe ended by commenting on an OTI survey which found that 97% of participants wanted peace; the democratically elected government therefore has more than a moral incentive to acquiesce.