UNDERSTANDING RECONCILIATION AS A WAY OF PEACEBUILDING: THE CASE OF CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

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Abstract

Many of the peace agreements that had been signed by belligerents since the end of the cold war did not last long. Despite the large-scale involvement of various agencies including states in peacebuilding efforts war has not always been succeeded by peace but by intermittent violence and persistent mistrust. One possible explanation for this is too much emphasis on institution building and infrastructure development at the cost of giving the victims a sense of justice and recognition in the peacebuilding processes. This pattern is noticeable in many peace support operations around the globe in recent years. The discussion in this paper centres on understandings of post conflict peacebuilding in the contemporary practices and literature. The argument forwarded is that peacebuilding efforts run the risk of becoming counterproductive unless reconciliation between the former combatants is achieved. The case in hand is the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region in Bangladesh where an armed conflict between the government and the insurgents fighting for autonomy since the mid 1970s came to an end with signing of an agreement in 1997 that has so far failed to deliver the intended peace. The paper argues that unless appropriate measures are taken to redress the scars of past atrocities by giving the victims a sense of justice, which is conspicuously absent in case of CHT, efforts at building peace are likely to be futile.

Introduction

The euphoria, with which the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord was signed, soon faded away as it failed to deliver the peace that it had promised. The accord, signed between the government of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh and the *Parbattya Chattagram Jana Shanghati Samity* ((PCJSS- The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peoples' Solidarity Association), the political wing of the insurgents struggling for autonomy in the CHT for more than two decades since the mid 1970s, brought an end to the protracted armed conflict but failed to live up to the expectations of the people in ensuring sustainable peace in the region. The people on both sides of the divide are left with profound sense of grievance. Even sixteen years after the signing of the accord peace remains a far cry in the hills and the society remains perhaps more divided today than it was before. The schism is

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manifested in the sporadic outbreak of violence not only between the hill peoples and the ethnic Bengalis settled in the region, but also between the different hill groups that are divided on the question of accepting or rejecting the accord. The division between the pro and anti accord camps is not just confined to the hills alone. Polarization of the major national political parties on the hill issue has made the situation even more complex.

Broadly, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the significance of reconciliation in peacebuilding processes. The 'big' question that motivates the author is why the CHT accord has not resulted in peace that it had promised. By way of looking for answers to this question the paper primarily focuses on the extent to which lack of reconciliation in the peacebuilding process in the CHT played a role in its failure to deliver peace.

Very few of the researches that have been undertaken so far to understand the post accord situations in the CHT thoroughly examined the role of reconciliation as an approach to peacebuilding. This paper, thus, aspires to fill the gap in a comprehensive understanding of peacebuilding process in the CHT, an understanding that is essential to bring about sustainable peace not only in the CHT but also in South Asia as a region.[1] Sustainable peace in the CHT is also a prerequisite to successful nation-building in Bangladesh that has been so conspicuously absent even after four decades of its independence.

Conceptual Framework

There has been a proliferation of literature on different aspects of peacebuilding since the mid 1990s due to a growing interest in research on the conduct of existing peacebuilding operations.[2] Many of these researches

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[1] Chittagong Hill Tracts is bordering Northeast India, a geopolitical area, which has been the theatre of the longest lasting insurgency (Naga insurgency, since 1952) in the region. Insurgency in Northeast India is deemed a nation building failure in large respect. All the seven constituting states have experienced insurgency or have been affected by some form of insurgent violence. Although there are no known direct link (either at ideological or logistical levels) between the numerous insurgencies on the other side of the border and that of the CHT in Bangladesh, there are surprising degrees of similarity among these cases in terms of geographic, ethnic, economic, political and cultural features. The Indian government has negotiated and signed many ceasefire agreements with the insurgent organisations with varying degrees of success. Therefore, a better understanding of the peacebuilding process in the CHT might be put to use in other similar circumstances in the region.

[2] One reason for the surge in research on peacebuilding could be a phenomenal increase in the number of conflicts being settled in the 1990s through negotiations. According to a study by Monica Duffy Toft (Securing the Peace: The Durable Settlement of Civil Wars, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2010, pp.6-7), in any one decade between 1940 and 1989, 75 to 100 percent of civil conflicts ended in military victory, whereas only a handful ended in negotiation. In the 1990s, by contrast, 42 percent such conflicts ended in negotiations compared to a 40 percent in military victory.

critically studied the peacebuilding experiences in Angola, former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, El Salvador, Mozambique, Somalia, Sudan and South Africa, among other countries. Initially, many of the studies concentrated on single cases, with the Oslo process and Northern Ireland peace negotiation producing a particularly high volume of research. The transition to democracy in South Africa has also received much attention in the peace process literature. As the 1990s progressed, comparative studies were made possible due to simultaneous existence of a growing number of peace processes.

However, despite this growth in the interest and consequent research there is still a lack of clear consensus as to the meaning of peacebuilding and its constituting elements. Many terms have been used to refer to the rehabilitation process in societies transiting from conflict to peace: 'new peacekeeping', 'peace maintenance', 'peace support operations' or simply 'post-conflict reconstructions'[3] According to Eide and Holm, the term 'peacebuilding' is perhaps more accurately descriptive of the requirements and realities of the post conflict societies.[4] The term is generally used to describe the process and activities involved in establishing sustainable peace in post conflict societies. It presupposes that the end of conflict does not necessarily or automatically lead to a peaceful society. Sustainable peace in such situations requires efforts by different actors. Peacebuilding is that effort which 'calls for addressing all the main sources of past and potential conflicts, from their historical and structural sources to their immediate manifestations, and at all stages in their "life-cycle".[5] It is seen as an endeavour aiming to create sustainable peace by addressing the "root causes" of violent conflict and eliciting indigenous capacities for peaceful management and resolution of conflict. It is a complex and multidimensional exercise that encompasses tasks ranging from the disarming of warring factions to the rebuilding of political, economic, judicial and civil society institutions.[6]

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[3]   See, for e.g., Steven Ratner, *The UN Peacekeeping*, (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1995); Jarat Chopra, "Special Issue on Peace Maintenance Operations," *Global Governance,* vol. 4, no. 1; Alcira Kreimar, John Eriksson, Robert Muscat, Margaret Arnold and Colin Scott, *The World Bank's Experience with Post-Conflict Reconstruction*, (Washington DC: The World Bank, 1998).

[4]   Espen Barth Eide and Tor Tanke Holm, *Peacebuilding and Police Reform*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 20.

[5]   Michael Lund, *What Kind of Peace is Being Built? Taking Stock of Post-Conflict Peacebuilding and Charting Future Directions*, (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, IDRC, 2003), p. 13.

[6]   W. Andy Knight, "Evaluating recent trends in peacebuilding research," *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 241-264.