



## Why obstruct foreign aid to NGOs

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The Ministry of Defense, now also the Ministry in charge of NGOs, has declared new regulations curtailing NGOs from receiving foreign aid for their work. A few days earlier there were regulations against NGOs having media conferences; this was to prevent them from expressing their opposition against these restrictive laws. Why? There are certain hesitations against NGOs doing certain things, holding and propagating certain views. What are these? Are they against NGOs criticizing certain activities done in the name of Development? If it is for defense it is all right. But is it for defense?

When NGOs or people's organisations criticize unwise activities done in the name of development they were doing them in defense of national interest and justice, not against defense. When water privatization was proposed many NGOs opposed it and the Government failed to introduce full regulations for water privatization, making water a full commodity. Mahinda Chinthanaya says water is the right and property of the people, while the WB says that Privatization of water was essential, but people defended Mahinda Chinthanaya. It was in defense of the rights of the people and not against defense national security. Now the NGOs demand that recommendations of the LLRC should be implemented, it is the recommendations of the Government's own Commission that NGOs are defending, for reconciliation and defense, not against them.

When the Phosphate deposits in Eppawela were to be sold to a US and a Japanese company NGOs headed the resistance and others joined and finally the courts gave a decision preventing it. Courts decision was that the government was only the custodian and not the owner, people were the owners and government had no right to sell it away against the interests of the people and the phosphate deposit was saved. Now it is being better used. When Norochchole coal power station was being built and people protested against it NGOs supported the protest. It was done and now we see it not functioning properly. Express highways were built to facilitate the coming in of foreign investors NGOs protested, some were built and others are being built but these have not increased the flow of foreign investment into the country, the roads are useful but they have not fulfilled their initial objective. A lot of foreign borrowings have been misused. People have to pay back the loans. When land was to be sold to foreign companies people protested since there was a land shortage in the country, when trade unions were suppressed and security of jobs was endangered people protested against it and NGOs supported, some of the suppressive laws were prevented. When International airports were being built NGOs protested now they have been proved to be not very useful. Similarly the building of the international harbour and airport. NGOs do not have armed forces and they cannot do things that people do not support, they can only support people's struggles for justice and rationality. Victories are won only when people support them, so why fear and why prevent NGOs from helping in the democratic processes of people deciding. If you look at many of these issues what NGOs have done is to demand that promises made to win elections be fulfilled. This is a demand for democracy. It is within the constitutional rights of the people and they help governments to be democratic. It helps government and not obstruct it.

This restriction was intentionally planned and done. The first step was to get NGOs under the Ministry of Defense. Then ministry tried to do military type of questioning, trying to frighten NGOs away from doing certain types of activity, there are already existing laws to ensure that NGOs work within their mandate, so why obstruct them further. Is foreign funds all bad, isn't the Government receiving a lot of foreign loans often spending them against the interests of the people. Foreign funds received by Governments are obtained with conditionalities to violate people's views and government promises. So, restrictions should be against obtaining loans under these conditionalities.

There was a time when political parties played a useful role in fighting for rights of people, fighting for democratic functioning of government. Now there is less of this and NGOs have begun to play this role. It is a useful role that should be encouraged if armed resistance is to be avoided.

People have a responsibility to oppose these restrictions. There was a time when efforts were made to prevent and discourage protests that were opposing foreign investments. This was when President Premadasa wanted to declare the whole country an export processing zone. But this was resisted and he had to remove the restrictions, now they are trying to re-impose restrictions. NGOs are playing another very positive role. They help and encourage people to plan their own development. For instance, when Divineguma was declared some NGOs suggested better ways of implementing Divineguma, getting people to do their own planning at village and other levels. Government has already agreed to expand ecological agriculture the way NGOs have done it in various parts of the country. This is a way in which much saving could be done on the expenditure on chemical subsidies, other chemical inputs, saving on health, improving soil fertility, saving on water, improving water and soil. These can guide development very positively and saving expenses. Poverty and malnutrition could be prevented. So, this positive role has to be accepted and encouraged and not restricted. It is Ok for the government to keep a check on abuse of money. This is necessary, it's a responsibility. But what is attempted is very different.

Some authorities and some Ministers have not even been elected. They have come to these positions through nepotism. They may be having other agenda, on the instructions of some foreign powers. This is what needs to be prevented. NGOs have a responsibility to ensure that their actions and ideas are approved by the people that they are not their own fantasies.



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