

Winning to Lose?

by Tisarane Gunasekara

The Co-Chairs have asked the LTTE to consider laying down arms – a sensible notion, particularly from the point of the view of the 200,000 plus Tamil civilians caught in the Tiger-Lankan Forces meat grinder in Vanni. But this request cannot but fall on deaf ears. Vellupillai Pirapaharan is committed to fight to the last Tamil man, woman and child and, in the Rajapakse administration he has found an opponent more than willing to oblige him. Invoking liberation, these two implacable entities are fast transforming the tiny strip of land still under Tiger control into Sri Lanka's Gaza.

Despite innumerable appeals from diverse quarters, the Tiger are forcibly detaining more than 200,000 civilian Tamils in the conflict zone, as human shields cum cannon-fodder. In a policy decision of outstanding callousness, the Lankan state has abdicated all responsibility for the safety of these hapless unfortunates, held against their will by the LTTE. Responding to a question about the repeated shelling of the Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital and the resultant civilian casualties, Gotabaya Rajapakse, Defence Secretary and Presidential sibling declared, "Nothing should exist beyond the no-fire zone... No hospital should operate in the area" (*Interview with Sky News – 2.2.2009*). 24 hours later, this crassly expressed sentiment was to be repeated, in a more spruced up form, by the Director of the Media Centre for National Security: "The government cannot be responsible for the safety and security of civilians still living among the LTTE terrorists" (*The Independent – 3.2.2009*). Within the next twenty four hours, 52 civilians were killed and 80 injured in the cross fire, some by a cluster bomb attack on the Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital, according to the UN spokesperson.

The President and the government deserve praise for taking on the LTTE instead of being taken in by the LTTE. But the regime's need to end the war fast is partially responsible for the unfolding humanitarian tragedy. While the LTTE is using terror to keep civilians in the conflict zone, the regime is using counter-terror to drive them out, according to Prof. Rajan Hoole (of the UTHR – J).

"From 2006 the government began to do what would have been unthinkable after 1987. Intense shelling and deliberate displacement of Tamil populations became integral to its military strategy..... In the Muslim-majority town of Muttur, 50 civilians were killed when indiscriminately fired government shells struck mosques, churches and schools, where civilians had taken shelter after the LTTE occupied the town. Thereafter, Tamil civilians, including elderly and children, fled south on foot. Wherever they stopped they were bombed and shelled. In Kathiraveli, with no LTTE provocation, the army shelled a school with refugees, killing over 40. Once the civilians reached Vaharai, the LTTE prevented them from moving further south... (When) a shell struck the (Vaharai) Hospital, civilians began fleeing, in defiance of the LTTE... A number of witnesses assert that people died due to firing by both sides, and that the LTTE fired at people whose desperation had finally exceeded their fear of the Tigers.... This scorched-earth policy towards Tamil civilians was later to be repeated in the Vanni (*Himal – February 2009*).

The LTTE never cared how many Tamils it killed in order to liberate them from the Lankan state. The Rajapakse administration too seems not to care how many Tamils it kills in order to liberate them from the Tigers. By the regime's own admission, the civilians in the conflict zone are innocents held forcibly by the Tigers. And yet the regime feels no responsibility towards them and shows no compunction about taking measures which may kill or injure them. With that abdication of responsibility, the regime has turned these civilians into *Untermenschen*, people without any rights and to whom the regime owes no protection; they do not exist, as citizens or even as human beings. This is not an attitude behoving a responsible, democratic government or a civilised country. And it is an attitude which presages not a lasting peace but another cycle of violence and counter-violence, fed by the memory of crimes and the desire for revenge.

Sri Lanka's Gaza?

The humanitarian crisis in the Vanni may be unavoidable; but its existence cannot be credibly denied, as the government is doing. While the Tigers are primarily responsible for this tragedy, the government is not blameless either. It was the government which ordered the expulsion of those international organisations which were providing the civilians in the Tiger controlled areas with many basic facilities. True, the Tigers made off with a large quantity of the aid provided (just as politicians in the South misuse public funds and public goods for personal advantage). But to deprive the civilians of a necessary support structure simply because it was being abused by the Tigers is as unconscionable as Israel imposing a blockade on Gaza to prevent the Hamas from smuggling weapons. Even the safe zone declared by the government is not quite safe; according to the website *Countercurrents*, the American Ceylon Mission Church at Suthanthirapuram in the safe zone came under aerial bombardment on the 28th of January, killing 17 and injuring 39. Since the LTTE would want to see as many Tamil civilian corpses as possible (women and children for preference) the government should expect the Tigers to misuse the safe zone. But just as Hamas' acts of provocation did not justify the massive Israel retaliation, Tiger provocations cannot be used to excuse counteractions which harm innocent men, women and children.

Last *Sunday's Island* carried an interview with Defence Secretary Rajapakse in which he fulminates against the *CNN*, the *BBC* and *Al Jazeera* for 'sensationalising civilian hardships'. If a hospital comes under attack nine times and if 52 civilians die in one day, neither item requires any embellishment; the bare facts would do. And these are crimes which must be exposed and condemned, irrespective of the identity of their authors. To Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who tried to expel all North-Eastern Tamils from Colombo lodges in order to keep the city safe from suicide bombers, exposing the plight of civilians caught in the conflict zone may seem akin to giving 'second wind' to the Tigers. And if his brother's administration adopts the same disastrous attitude, the current victories will be ephemeral ones, an interregnum of relief and jubilation in a larger cycle of violent conflict.

The Second JVP Insurgency ended on the day Rohana Wijeweera (and the entirety of the politbureau, bar one) was killed. Had he remained a free man, the Insurgency would have survived, albeit with less effect and virulence. The Eelam War will not be over so long as Vellupillai Pirapaharan is alive; instead it will merely shift to a different mode – from

a conventional war to a guerrilla conflict. Though Wijeweera was killed in November 1989, the effort to remove the politico-economic underpinnings of the Insurgency was begun months earlier by the Premadasa administration (notably the demand for the withdrawal of the IPKF and the launching of Janasaviya Round I in the JVP stronghold of Hambantota); they continued until Mr. Premadasa was killed by a Black Tiger. Today there is no comparable effort to deal with the ethnic problem or to win over the civilian Tamils. With the weakening of the Tigers, the regime seems less inclined to devolve power and more willing to treat the Tamils with disdain. The resultant disillusionment and anger would indeed give the Tigers a 'second wind' by politically empowering the takeoff of Mr. Pirapaharan's new guerrilla war.

The pattern is becoming evident in the 'liberated' East where extra-judicial crimes by the power-wielders are spewing fear and discontent among the populace. There is no real devolution in the East; instead there is rule by two contending warlords, each more brutal and rapacious than the other. Despite stringent security, the Tigers have managed to carry out a number of attacks against Lankan Forces and the TMVP in Batticaloa and Trincomalee. The East seems to be heading the Afghanistan way and the North is bound to follow suit – unless there is a major attitudinal and policy change on the part of the Rajapakse administration. Geographical unity is important but it is not the same as national unity. Sri Lanka cannot know either peace or normalcy if her minorities do not feel a sense of belonging. ***Alienating the minorities in order to achieve geographical unity will undermine national unity. Causing massive civilian deaths, even if they result from the LTTE's refusal to permit a mass exodus, will rebound to the discredit of not only the Rajapakse administration but of Sri Lanka as a country.***

Internal Enemies

The 61st Independence Day was of great significance because it was held when the Tigers were on the brink of a devastating defeat. The occasion should have been used to reach out to Tamils, to reassure them about the future. The President, in his speech, made the usual gratuitous references to equality and unity which, even the JHU is not averse to mouthing these days. That apart, no concession was made to the Tamils, particularly regarding a post-war political settlement. The non-mention of the phrase ethnic problem was to be expected, as Mr. Rajapakse has, on a number of occasions, stated his disbelief in the existence of the ethnic problem. But there was no mention of a political solution or the APRC process, no expression of commitment to the full implementation of the 13th Amendment, let alone to enhanced devolution. Instead, the President praised three Kings, enshrined in the Sinhala psyche as bulwarks against 'Tamil expansionism': Dutugemunu, Gajaba and Vijayaba. This choice echoed a recent speech by JHU Minister Champika Ranawaka who declared that post-Tiger Sri Lanka should return to the 'glorious era of kings Dutugemunu and Gajaba'. The impression conveyed was of a shared mindset and a commonality of purpose between the President and his Sinhala hardline allies, further accentuated by the fact that Mr. Rajapakse mentioned several atrocities committed by the Tigers against non-Tamils, but made no mention of the Black July.

Given the regime's willingness to transgress civilised and democratic norms in the battle against the LTTE, the next phase of the war will be

rather similar to the First Eelam War. The LTTE will revert to hit and run attacks in newly cleared areas; the Lankan Forces will respond with reprisals against anyone who happens to be in the vicinity – i.e. civilian residents. In the meantime a new frontier will be opened in the South with the Anti-Conversion Bill. Enacting this Bill over the objections of almost the entirety of the Christian community will alienate yet another minority, but this seems a matter of indifference to an administration, drunk with arrogance and blinded by hubris. Sri Lanka cannot be turned into a Sinhala Buddhist country without a massive campaign of religio-ethnic cleansing; but it can be made into a country under Sinhala Buddhist domination through legislative means, *a la* 1956. This would make sense from the point of view of the dynastic project of the Rajapakses since the Family's main base is Sinhala Buddhist. Of its national and systemic impact they would be unconcerned, as was that far more intelligent man of the world, SWRD Bandaranaike.

As a new spiral of violence grips the North and the East, the regime will restrict democratic freedoms in the South, using patriotism to justify each act of repression. The President sounded an ominous note in his Independence Day Speech when he said, "We are today a nation that has defeated a powerful enemy that stood before us. *Similarly we should have the ability to defeat all internal enemies that are found in our midst*" (emphasis mine). That 'internal enemy' could be a political opponent, a journalist, a Christian priest... any citizen who questions the regime's omnipotence.