

Voice of Shakthi Thursday 05 April 2001

In his acclaimed recent novel, *Anil's Ghost*, famed Sri Lankan author and poet, Michael Ondaatjee, makes the profound observation that "the reason for war was war." Set against the backdrop of the terror-filled days of 1988-89 in Sri Lanka, the novel outlines the horrible end of countless victims of JVP insurgents and para-military forces.

Wars, we know, are not fought according to the rules of the Marquis of Queensberry. In guerilla warfare, the capacity for inflicting suffering on one another, it seems, reaches unplumbed depths. The LTTE has been rightfully condemned for the terrible atrocities it has committed against its political and military rivals, its own cadres and most importantly, on the innocent people of Sri Lanka for the past 17 years.

Yet, we expect trained armies of any country to behave with a certain sense of discipline and order, to be led by people of honour and authority. We do not expect them to sink to the same level as their foes, however bloodthirsty and provocative the actions of the latter may be.

Which is why we at Shakthi view with disgust, the alleged actions of the Sri Lanka Police and Army in three recent cases of brutal rape perpetrated on ordinary Tamil women. Two of them were allegedly gang-raped in Mannar by Army officers while a third, in Police custody, was subjected to a degrading sexual assault by Negombo Police, according to papers filed before the judiciary.

Extra-judicial methods or, to put it bluntly, torture, in extracting information from possible terrorist suspects by armed forces has become standard practice in many countries these days. It is argued that such information is vital for protecting the lives of ordinary citizens against terrorist attacks and suicide bombers.

But, as we saw in 1988-89, such excuses were also used by politicians and armed forces personnel to rid themselves of their political, personal and business rivals. The Tamil woman at the centre of the third case, alleges that she was subject to inhuman torture not because she was a LTTE suspect, but because the man she declined to marry had the right connections to get her arrested on trumped up charges.

If this is correct, then the perpetrators of this crime should be brought to book as soon as possible. Instead of singing the praises of these so-called guardians of our homeland and culture, they should be exposed for what they are, beasts of the lowest order who exercise the power of their authority to harass and humiliate ordinary people.

It is a measure of Sri Lanka's rapidly declining moral decay that such persons are allowed to head the so-called intelligence sections of our armed forces. Given the record of Army and Police deserters who now haunt Colombo's underworld, we are left in no doubt that the perpetrators of these latest crimes

are not the guardians of law and order we expect our armed forces to be, but thugs and gangsters in uniform who exploit the situation currently prevailing in Sri Lanka.

We at Shakthi have a message to those people in our expatriate community who believe that "our boys" are beyond reproach, that it is "the other side" who is responsible for all the atrocities. It is a dirty war that is taking place in Sri Lanka. It is up to all of us to speak out against it and do all in our power to bring an end to it.

And for those who claim that the Tamils are not discriminated against because we have a Tamil Foreign Minister and Tamil members of the judiciary, one other recent incident may help to open their eyes a little bit.

A Sinhalese man suspected by the Police to be a LTTEer because he did not have his identity card, was given the same brutal treatment as the Tamil women who were assaulted and tortured. This is a war where everyone is a suspect according to some esteemed members of our armed forces.

To these apologists, we want to paraphrase former President Bill Clinton's election slogan, "we are talking about the ordinary people of Sri Lanka, stupid."