

The Struggle for Tamil Eelam

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The world has witnessed with unsurprised horror the ongoing carnage set up by the mainly Sinhalese¹ regime of Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa against the Tamil people with the ruthless military offensive unleashed two years ago, which escalated after the capture of the Tamil capital of Kilinochchi in early January, and which overall has cost the lives of some 40,000 people. Since then, the cruelties of war have surpassed many times those unspeakable acts of barbarity perpetrated by the Israeli State against the people in Gaza: officially, there are 6,500 civilian casualties confirmed in a couple of months, but it seems these figures are conservative estimates, as observers, humanitarian staff and UN officials have been kept out of the “No-Fire” Zone (a quite misleading name for the combat zone), where some 50,000 Tamil civilians are trapped under heavy fire from the Sri Lankan government.

According to Kandeepan, a Tamil activist based in Dublin whom we met in a protest, “*Sri Lanka has been using heavy weapons to cause massive destruction, resulting in the death of 7,000 Tamil civilians & 15,000 wounded within 100 days. State terrorists have been using control of water, food, medicine and shelter as weapons against the Tamil civilians and their armed forces, the Tamil Tigers of the Tamil Eelam. Many Tamils who have been going to the government controlled areas in Vanni have been screened and sent to the concentration camps and death camps*”. Certainly, the real picture of what is going on in the “No Fire Zone” seems to be much grimmer than the reports we are getting from the official press, no matter how bad they seem to be in any case.

War & Propaganda: Turning a whole nation into “terrorists”

As it is often the case, one needs to be suspicious of official reports which are being produced from Sri Lankan sources, more interested in denying their gross humanitarian violations than in giving an accurate view of what is actually going on. Propaganda and misleading jargon such as talking of a No-Fire Zone instead of Combat Zone have been quite skilfully used by the Rajapaksa government, who accuses anyone who dares denounce its human rights’ violations to be a Tamil Tigers’ sympathizer (a list that includes most human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch)². Daily reports of “concerned” Sri Lankan military officers are tirelessly reproduced in all of the media. The Tamil population that remains in the “No Fire” zone is portrayed as “hostages” of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), with a Sri Lankan Brigadier going as far as to claim, without a blush, that their “*only concern is to free the civilians*”³, “obviously” from the grips of the LTTE. So much is their “concern” for the “poor” Tamil people, that at least 72,000 of them are held in concentration camps by the Sri Lankan army⁴...

We also hear on a daily basis that the LTTE is using civilians as “human shields” –a claim not unfamiliar to anyone following the news in Lebanon, Palestine or anywhere imperialist powers have decided to bomb wantonly civilian areas. In a massive act of subversion of the facts, the Sri Lankan army pretends us to believe it to be the “genuine” liberation force of the Tamils!

But one fails to understand, if this would be the case, why the Tamil population all over the world has stood up, in a monolithic block, to protest not against their supposed “oppressors” according to the official reports (the LTTE), but actually the Sri Lankan army. Only the blindest

¹ Ethnic group that counts for around 70% of Sri Lanka’s population.

² www.defence.lk

³ www.economist.com

⁴ www.economist.com

among the blind would fail to read through this shameless propaganda⁵. Against the claim that civilians are being used as “human shields”, Kandeepan says that “The Tamil people have moved from place to place with withdrawing armed forces of the Eelam instead of getting killed by the state terrorists”.

There’s no doubt that the support among the Tamil population for the Liberation Tigers is high, and that they are the hegemonic political force fighting for Tamil rights and self-determination. This is further demonstrated by the massive protests taking place all over Europe, which have been particularly big and confrontational in London. The Tamil people are angry and outraged about this massacre and its media coverage and they are taking this anger to the streets. Although it is impossible to know the exact level of support for the LTTE, that Kandeepan says to be of around 80% in Tamil Eelam and Tamil Nadu (the Tamil region in India) and of 95% among the Tamil Diaspora, there’s no other way you can keep a national liberation struggle for 26 years with a force that operates largely along conventional lines with thousands of fighters if it is not with large support from the local population. I remember years ago, while I worked in a Food Factory in Ballymount, Dublin, I used to have a Tamil workmate who happened to be Muslim –I heard around that time stories about the LTTE being anti-Muslim and perpetrating acts of violence against that particular community. Asked about this, my workmate was quick to reply “*we are a nation, not a sectarian religious force. Any such a talk is an attempt from the Sri Lankan State to divide us. No matter what your religion is, we are all Tamils and we are all Tigers*”. Whatever the actual statistics of support, it is clear that any talk of the LTTE being a “minority” force by the Sri Lankan government is nothing but their own groundless wishful thinking.

A spurious military “victory”

With such a support the only reason why the Sri Lankan army has managed to push such a military offensive has been by building up disproportionately the military capacity of the Colombo based regime: in three years they doubled the size of the armed forces to 200,000 military effectives⁶. The massive use of force by the Sri Lankan government, however, can have only very limited and short-term impact in such a protracted conflict, and it is costing dearly to Rajapaksa, as thousands of soldiers have died in the offensive (official figures have not been disclosed) and as the economy is left at the brink of bankruptcy and heavily indebted⁷ (for the last 26 years the government has spent an average of U\$850,000,000 a year in the military, according to official figures⁸, and over the last while this amount has gone up to the roof).

We are hearing daily triumphal statements from Rajapaksa and his government, who said that “*we fearlessly stood up to a brand of terrorism that the entire world believed was invincible*”⁹ and who has also claims to have surrounded the LTTE’s leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. At the end of the day, the Sri Lankan government, too quick to declare victory, forgets that a struggle like this is not won in the military field alone and certainly is not won through the wanton slaughter of anything that moves. France said to be at the brink of victory over the FLN after the Battle

⁵ A seminal example of this propaganda can be found in the following article reproduced in the Sri Lankan defence ministry’s website www.defence.lk

⁶ www.economist.com

⁷ www.economist.com

⁸ www.defence.lk

⁹ www.guardian.co.uk

of Algiers in 1957, and certainly that was a military victory for the French colonialists, but a political victory for the national liberation movement. Not all of the massacres perpetrated by French colonialism could prevent independence being declared in 1962. Portugal thought to be at the brink of victory when they killed the Mozambican independence leader of FRELIMO, Eduardo Mondlane, in 1969, but the struggle continued until they got their independence in 1975. Portuguese troops thought the same when they murdered the Guinean leader of the PIGC, Amílcar Cabral, in 1973, but it took just a couple of months for independence to come. Similarly, Turkey thought they had broken Kurdish resistance when they captured the PKK leader, Abdallah Ocalan in 1998, but the resistance is alive and in good health no matter how tough that blow initially was.

We do not believe the case will be any different in Tamil Eelam. The heaviest price to be paid by the Sri Lankan government after this offensive will not be at the economic or the military level, but on the political front. As *The Economist* –hardly a LTTE sympathizer- remarks in its latest edition in the face of mounting pressure within India for Tamil self-determination, “*Military victory for the Sri Lankan government seems tantalisingly close. But it may pay a heavy diplomatic price*”¹⁰. And even military victory in the long term seems evasive, as the largely conventional Tamil force can resume fighting in an unconventional form. As Kandeepan mentions, this is nothing but the “*beginning of another chapter in our struggle for our freedom*”, being the main objective of the Tamil liberation movement to “*save the fighting capabilities, most probably continue the guerrilla war in Sri Lanka and escalate international pressure on the government of Sri Lanka to get freedom*”.

The Battle for Tamil Eelam is far from over

The main source of strength for the Tamil liberation movement comes from decades of neglect, discrimination and oppression at the hands of the mainly Sinhalese State based in Colombo. As professor Basil Davidson reflects in relation to the emergence of Slav nationalism in the XIXth Century, the demand of national liberation comes only when the most basic sense of justice is repeatedly denied, mocked or trodden into the ground¹¹. The systematic abduction and murder of young Tamil people, the use of murderous paramilitary thugs backed by the government in the Eastern Province, the widespread use of torture and the general environment of repression against any form of dissent which have marked the last phase of this dirty war against the Tamil¹², is likely to further increase their will for independence in the long run. Let us remember that the springboard that launched the major fight for Tamil liberation was the “Black July” massacre in 1983, when around 3,000 Tamil people were killed by the Sinhalese in various acts of racist lynching -and this massacre pales in the face of the current scale of the atrocities perpetrated against the Tamil people.

That the Tamil struggle is far from over is clear with the cautious tone of recent statements by *The Economist*, which without denying their unsurprising enthusiasm for a military victory over the LTTE, warns that the hardest fight to come is surely not in the battlefield: “*Removing the vicious Tigers from Sri Lankan politics would be a great blessing. But in their absence, longstanding*

¹⁰ www.economist.com

¹¹ “The Black Man’s Burden –Africa and the Curse of the Nation State” 1992, p.158.

¹² www.economist.com

*Tamil grievances will remain against the government and Sinhalese majority it represents. To make a lasting peace, Mr Rajapaksa will have to eradicate these, too.*¹³ It is not clear if this right-wing mouthpiece means to eradicate the grievances or the Tamil as a whole –or both. It is very difficult, in any case, to foresee that after so much violence there will be any solution to the Tamil “grievances” short of self-determination, as the same magazine is forced to accept: “*Despite the supposed liberation (sic) of the region from the terrorists’ yoke the authorities seem strangely worried that northerners may yet vote in a pro-LTTE government.*”¹⁴ A conclusion that reveals the full extent of the contradictions inherent to the pro-Rajapaksa government’s propaganda, that on the one hand portrays the Tigers as a non-representative minority among the Tamil people, while at the same time dreads the prospect of a formal democracy that would reveal, with all certainty, the full extent of the Tamil overwhelming support for the LTTE.

All of the revolutionary movement should actively oppose the Rajapaksa genocidal regime and support the struggle for self-determination of the Tamil people, even though some may have differences with the main political forces behind it. Political differences are natural and there’s no use in concealing them, but this should not prevent us from understanding that it is up to the Tamil people to decide what sort of a future they want. Neither should political differences prevent us from understanding the graveness of the situation and the fact that this aggression represents a threat to any community in struggle, a *carte blanche* for genocide. This is also a reminder of the extent to which governments are willing to go to pursue an agenda of domination, spurred by the blatantly imperialist and neo-colonialist ideology permeating world politics since the “War on Terror” was declared. Save a statement put forward by Alternative Libertaire in France¹⁵, most libertarians have remained silent in the face of this slaughter –and silence should not be an option for anyone with the most basic sense of social justice, let alone for revolutionaries. We should stand in solidarity with the Tamil people protesting for their right to exist and we should oppose any attempt by the EU, the US or any other power to turn a whole nation into terrorists.

¹³ www.economist.com

¹⁴ www.economist.com

¹⁵ “Sri Lanka : Pour l’autodétermination du peuple tamoul” www.anarkismo.net

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A denunciation of the atrocities perpetrated against the Tamil people in Sri Lanka, of the distortions fed by its government to the international media and of the need to step up solidarity with the Tamil people in their struggle for self-determination.

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