

Sri Lanka: Background to brutality

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The resumption of Sri Lanka's bloody civil war following the government's unilateral abrogation of the ceasefire with the Tamil Tigers last year has seen killing and other abuses on a massive scale. Deirdre McConnell examines the background to the continuing conflict between the country's Sinhalese majority and its Tamil and other minorities.

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At the beginning of 2008, the Sri Lankan government unilaterally abrogated the ceasefire agreement that it had signed with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE, commonly known as the Tamil Tigers) in February 2002 with the mediation of Norway. It is now pursuing a brutal military strategy of bombing Tamil areas previously under the Tigers' control from land, air and sea. On 6 September 2008 it ordered UN humanitarian organisations such as Unicef and UNHCR to vacate the Vanni area, leaving the people living there unprotected and vulnerable to abuse by the Sri Lankan armed forces, who are occupying the ancestral Tamil areas in the north east of Sri Lanka.

Currently 350,000 Tamil civilians are being held in what the Sri Lankan government has described as a 'safe area'. In an interview with the BBC on 2 February, defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse said that everything was a legitimate target if it was not within this area. The only hospital in the region is not in the 'safe area'.

Last November, Rajapakse went on record stating that 14.4 million kilos of explosives had been dropped in the Vanni area and that the government had bombed Tamil areas on 6,000 occasions. Since the beginning of 2009, more than 2,000 Tamil civilians have been killed by the Sri Lankan armed forces, including by the use of cluster bombs.

The former UN high commissioner for human rights, Mary Robinson, has compared the situation in Sri Lanka to that in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She was quoted by the Inner City Press at the UN in New York on 20 February as saying: 'We diminish the value of life ... if we don't question the disproportionate use of force.' The same news article, referring to the death toll in Sri Lanka, and underlining the lack of international concern, suggests that: 'One thousand was deemed too much in Gaza, but 2,000 for now seems deemed okay in Sri Lanka.'

Historical background

Some historians have asserted that the ancestors of the present-day Tamils were among the original inhabitants of the island of Sri Lanka. Tamil people have certainly lived for more than 2,500 years in

the northern and eastern parts of the country. In pre-colonial days there existed a Tamil kingdom in the north-east (Jaffna) and two Sinhalese kingdoms in the south, called Kotte and Kandy. Drawings and maps from the time of the Greek astronomer and geographer Ptolemy, and later from the period when the British came to the island, show how the areas of the Tamils and the Sinhalese were recorded separately from antiquity.

The Tamils are predominantly Saivites, Hindus who revere Shiva as the supreme being, whose religion and written language date back more than 2,500 years. There are also Christian Tamils, who converted from Saivism during the colonial era, and Muslims, who share much of the Tamil culture, including the language. The Sinhalese people are predominantly Buddhists but there are also Christians.

The Portuguese (from 1505) and the Dutch (from 1658) colonial powers ruled the kingdoms of the Tamil and Sinhalese peoples separately, in recognition of the two peoples having a distinct culture, religion and language. In 1796, though, Britain conquered the island and in 1815 captured the Kandyan kingdom, until then unconquered by the two previous colonial powers.

For administrative convenience, the British amalgamated the Tamil and Sinhalese kingdoms in 1833, creating a 'unitary state', later named Ceylon. Britain acknowledged the concept of a Tamil homeland, using the distribution of Tamil and Sinhala place names as the basis to demarcate the boundaries of two Tamil provinces in 1873. The British also brought around a million Tamils from south India to work mainly on tea plantations in the central hill country. They are known as the plantation, or 'up-country' Tamils.

The island's total current population is about 20 million. According to the most recent island-wide census, conducted in 1981, nearly three-quarters of the population were Sinhalese, whereas Tamils, including Muslim Tamils, comprised about one-quarter of the population. There are also Burghers (dual-heritage descendents of the Europeans), Malays and the Vedas.

Attempts by the British to create a homogeneous single Ceylonese nation failed. Proportional representation was agreed between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in an attempt to defuse the gathering ethnic conflict, and measures were put forward to ensure that no single community would be able to outvote all other communities combined, but they were eventually dropped. Although section 29(c) of the Soulbury constitution of 1946, which provided the basis for independence in 1948, prohibited parliament from introducing discriminatory legislation, laws that discriminated against Tamils were nonetheless introduced and implemented. In any case this constitutional safeguard was abolished in the new constitution of 1972.

Buddhist chauvinism

Given Buddhism's presumed nonviolent philosophy, the question arises: how could committed Buddhist monks and their wider community in Sri Lanka actively take part in the political violence against the Tamils? The nature of the participation of monks in national politics became increasingly volatile from the 1940s. Some Buddhist monk ideologues have been seeking to establish an 'ideal Buddhist-administered society'. In this, they refer to and rely on the 'Myth of Reconquest' (Mahavamsa), which eulogises the ancient victories of the Sinhalese Prince Dutugemunu over the Tamil King Ellalan, in which thousands of Tamils were killed, and makes a virtue of killing in defence of Buddhism. It also inculcates the belief that Sinhala Buddhists are racially superior to the Tamils.

In the early 20th century, the leading proponent of these ideas was Anagarika Dharmapala. In his view, the Tamils and other non-Sinhalese did not belong on the island. It is this ideology that influences the policies and actions of the Sinhalese government today.

Ethnic conflict

In the 61 years since independence, Sri Lanka has implemented regular waves of anti-Tamil legislation, starting with the disenfranchisement of the one million plantation Tamils in 1948. Barely eight years later, a single language act (Sinhala Only Act) discriminated linguistically, culturally and economically against the Tamils. In the 1970s, discrimination in education (requiring, among other things, Tamils to gain more marks than Sinhalese to gain university entrance) and the new constitution (which as well as abolishing section 29(c) gave precedence to the religion of the Sinhalese Buddhists) further advantaged the position of Sinhalese over the Tamils. Tamils objected to the suppression of their language and their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s they used satyagraha (nonviolent resistance) to no avail. Military suppression was the response from the authorities, and peaceful protesters were slaughtered.

Alongside the nonviolent resistance movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Tamil politicians proposed political solutions. However, peace agreements, based on a quasi-federal system devolving certain powers to the Tamils in the north-eastern province, which were signed between the Sinhalese leaders (prime ministers) and the Tamil leaders (parliamentarians) to resolve the political turmoil in the country, were unilaterally abrogated by the governments of the day. This became a continuing pattern, accompanied by increasing violence against Tamils - which occurred long before the birth of the armed resistance movement.

In the 1977 general election Tamils voted overwhelmingly in support of their right to self-determination. And international outrage followed 'Black July', the horrific pogroms in 1983, when thousands of Tamils were burnt alive. But no mechanisms were put in place to prevent what was clearly genocide, and documented as such by the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists.

Instead, after 1983, there began the next phase of persecution: torture, rape and extra-judicial killings on a genocidal scale, under the pretext of counter-insurgency and later counter-terrorism. This phase is continuing now, with total impunity. More than 80,000 Tamil civilians have been killed in the past 25 years. 12,000 Tamil women have been raped by members of the Sri Lankan armed forces. Some 2,300 Tamil places of worship - Churches and temples - have been destroyed. Not one perpetrator has been brought to book.

The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and 29 years of emergency regulations have given unlimited powers to the Sri Lankan security forces, who arrest, detain, torture, rape, kill and dispose of the bodies of Tamils with impunity. Tamil detainees are forced to sign confession documents written in Sinhala, a language that the vast majority of them do not understand.

Media ban and killings of journalists

The media, both local and international, has consistently been banned from the conflict areas by the government. Instead, military-guided press trips are used to disseminate the government's propaganda. Assassinations of eminent Tamil journalists have become systematic, and now Sinhala journalists too are being killed, as a result of their attempts to report on the conflict in a balanced way. Early this year, the editor of the Sunday Leader, Lasantha Wickrematunga, was assassinated by unknown gunmen in the capital Colombo. There has been no independent inquiry into this or any other killing. He wrote his own obituary before he was killed.

Disappearances

Former foreign minister Mangala Samaraweera stated in January 2007 that there was one abduction

taking place every five hours in Sri Lanka. According to the UN, the country has the highest number of 'disappearances' in the world. Given the population and size of the island, this is a shocking fact. Nobel laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel has compared the routine torture and the hundreds of 'disappearances' and extra-judicial killings committed by government forces to the 'dirty wars' waged by various Latin American governments against their own citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. He says: 'As Latin Americans know all too well, there are few crimes more horrible for a government to commit than summarily removing its own citizens from their homes and families, often late at night, never to be heard from again.'

Arms to Sri Lanka

There has been increasing concern at the support given to the Sri Lankan government by other countries. In 2007, according to the Campaign Against the Arms Trade, quoting Foreign Office figures, Britain exported £1 million worth of armaments to the military there. The items sold include components for heavy machine guns, communications and ground equipment for military aircraft, small arms ammunition, components for military helicopters, military sonar equipment, parachutes and ejector seats.

Andrew Love, chair of the parliamentary all party committee on Sri Lanka, stated on BBC Radio 4 on 6 February 2009: 'The (UK) government of course tell us that they don't sell arms that can be used against civilian populations. But clearly as we can see from what is unfolding now, this is happening, and whilst much of those arms are coming from other countries it is a real concern that Britain may be contributing towards the humanitarian disaster that we are seeing.'

The Tamils of the north and east of the island of Sri Lanka deserve better than yet more brutality. They deserve our solidarity.

P.S.

* From Red Pepper, April 2009:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/Backgro...>