

Why are the Vanni civilians still being held hostage?

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Throughout the last stages of the civil war, the government of Sri Lanka claimed to be engaged in a hostage rescue mission on behalf of civilians in the Vanni who were being held against their will by the LTTE. How far are its words borne out by its actions?

[A question raised by a well informed author who - obviously - cannot be accused of being an LTTE supporter! - Note from ESSF redaction.]

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It is certainly true that the LTTE was keeping hundreds of thousands of civilians hostage and using them as forced labour, a source of child and adult conscripts, and a human shield from behind which they could engage in offensive operations against Sri Lanka's armed forces. It has also been confirmed that in general the soldiers showed compassion to the escaping civilians, and some even risked their own lives to enable civilians to escape to safety. Although it was clear that for the political and military leadership, the aim of finishing off the LTTE involved sacrificing the lives and limbs of civilians, there did not seem to be any deliberate targeting of civilians during the war. Even the claim by some government spokespersons that shelling was necessary in order to free the hostages has some plausibility, given that the LTTE used the cessation of hostilities over the Sinhala and Tamil New Year to tighten its hold over the trapped civilians, not to release them.

However post-war, the picture gets more murky. Around 280,000 of the civilians who have suffered so much already have been kept prisoners behind barbed wire in camps where conditions are in many cases abysmal. It is clear that the government is unable to provide for them adequately, yet those with relations outside who would willingly look after them are being denied the right to join their families. If others want to check up on their homes in the Vanni or start rebuilding them, no one on earth has the right to stop them. This denial of the fundamental right to freedom of movement is especially cruel for families which have been split up, and are thereby denied the possibility of reuniting, or even finding out what has happened to their loved ones. It is lethal for those who are physically vulnerable; senior citizens were supposed to be released after a court found that many had died of starvation and more were dying daily, but the sick and injured, pregnant women, and mothers with babies are also vulnerable. With the monsoon, it is likely that gastrointestinal diseases will kill thousands. Why, then, are these unfortunate people being penalised like this?

Collective Punishment

Two reasons are cited by the government. The first is that it will take at least six months to make the areas from which they come habitable again, and therefore they have to be kept in the camps until then. This is a patently spurious excuse for denying them freedom of movement. Even if it takes six months to make the war-ravaged areas of the Vanni habitable, why can't people who have homes or relatives elsewhere leave the camps? Wouldn't this in fact reduce the burden on the government, and enable it to look after those who remain more adequately? Why can't camp inhabitants go out to look for missing relatives, or receive visits from friends and relations, or visit their homes if they want to? This cannot possibly be the real reason why civilians are being imprisoned in internment camps.

The other reason given for holding them is that they need to be screened to weed out LTTE cadres who escaped with them. It is true that after hostages have been released, they are often screened to find out if any of the hostage-takers are among them. But normally, this takes just a few hours, and the hostages are released immediately after being screened. Even if the large number of hostages in this case means that the screening process would take longer, there is no conceivable reason why it should take much more than a month. By now, all the civilians, or at least most of them, ought to be free. From Day 1, a steady stream of civilians should have been given the right to freedom of movement, as they were screened and cleared.

Moreover, the reason why such screening is carried out is to prevent terrorists from escaping, rejoining their group, and carrying out future attacks. But in this case, the LTTE's military capability has been destroyed, its top leadership wiped out; for a group that was identified completely with its supreme leader Prabakaran, and was defined by its military prowess, this means that it is finished. Furthermore, hatred engendered in these IDPs by the LTTE leadership's utterly brutal treatment of them, especially at the end of the war, is the best guarantee we have that there is no chance it can be revived, regardless of what the pro-LTTE diaspora may think. In fact, as Anandasangaree has pointed out, their escape to government-held territory in defiance of LTTE orders was itself an act of resistance. If any militant group arises in the future, it will be a completely new one. So the benefits of apprehending a few hundred ex-LTTE cadres are far outweighed by the costs of detaining hundreds of thousands of innocent people without charge for an indefinite period and creating, possibly, thousands of future militants.

The fundamental rights petition filed on behalf of five IDPs held in camps at Kodikamam and Vavuniya made it crystal clear that they are being held against their will, and that this constitutes appalling cruelty to individuals still suffering physically and mentally from the trauma they had undergone. The IDPs came out cursing the Tigers and positively inclined towards the government forces which had helped them to escape, but with every day that they remain in detention, their hostility to the government will grow; they will feel that they have jumped out of one frying pan into another. If the new Chief Justice selected by the President delays or refuses to order their release, they will have every justification for feeling that the Sri Lankan state is holding them hostage.

Such collective punishment belies the government's claim that it was trying to free the hostages, and makes it look as if it simply wanted to take them hostage itself. It contradicts Mahinda Rakapaksa's statement that there are no longer any minorities in Sri Lanka by making it clear that there are minorities who do not share the right to freedom of movement and equal protection of the law enjoyed by the majority. As former Chief Justice Sarath N. Silva pointed out, this lays the groundwork for a new war, since comparable discrimination against and persecution of Tamil civilians played a major role in starting the war which has just ended. It thus insults the soldiers who risked and in many cases lost their lives to free the civilians from the LTTE, and makes a mockery of

celebrations of the end of the war.

Indeed, it looks as if this is already the start of a new war: a war against Tamils. The longer Tamil civilians are detained in prison camps, the more disappearances and extrajudicial killings are likely to occur. Given that they are in the custody of an army commanded by Sarath Fonseka, who thinks that Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhalese just as Hitler thought that Germany belonged to the Aryans, we can only fear the worst.

Moving Towards Dictatorship

There are strong indications that some elements in the government and armed forces do not want an end to the war but want to keep it going, or even expand it. The people of Sri Lanka were asked to sacrifice a great deal in the interests of defeating the LTTE, and we would expect that these sacrifices would now come to an end. We would expect at least two-thirds of the soldiers to be demobilised, so that the rest of the country does not have to pay for them any more; they could easily be employed at the same wages to do constructive work rebuilding the war-ravaged areas and upgrading infrastructure elsewhere, thus helping to attract investment into the country. We would expect the government to avoid practices which led to the war, such as discrimination against and persecution of minorities, and to repeal the PTA and Emergency Regulations which were used for the extrajudicial killing of thousands of Tamils as well as Sinhalese.

Instead, the very opposite is being done. Apart from the detention of hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians and the failure to repeal the PTA and Emergency Regulations, we are told that the army, already doubled to 200,000 during the latter stages of the war, is going to be expanded by another 100,000! What earthly purpose could this serve? One purpose, clearly, is that it will enhance the power of military commanders and the Defence establishment, which would otherwise be reduced in peacetime. Presumably the military occupation of the North and East will be continued by the existing soldiers, treating citizens as aliens. But what will all the new soldiers do? Could they, conceivably, be deployed to the South, to crush any protests that might arise when people realise that far from being able to loosen their belts, they have to tighten them even more?

It would not be the first time this has happened. Let us not forget that the Sinhala nationalist regimes of Jayawardene and Premadasa, with some help from the Sinhala nationalist JVP, managed to kill more Sinhalese in the space of three years than the LTTE could kill in thirty. Are some elements in the government and armed forces planning a repeat of the tyre-pyres and mutilated bodies piled up by the roadside, clogging the rivers and washed up on the beaches? There are disturbing indications that the Rajapaksa regime is moving in that direction. The murder of Lasantha Wickrematunga, the fact that his killers were never caught, and the justification of it in a BBC interview by the Defence Secretary, was an indication that the death squads which had been operating in the North and East have moved South. Other attacks on journalists, the fact that those who reported the assault on Poddala Jayantha were themselves detained, images of Mahinda Rajapaksa as a godlike king, and the proposal to cancel the presidential elections, all suggest a regime in which democracy is rapidly being undermined.

If there are elements in the government and armed forces working to destroy the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, it is incumbent on all of us who love our country to resist. The lack of a viable opposition, given the UNP's equally rotten record, is a drawback; but the courage of Anandasangaree and others in his Democratic Tamil National Alliance in resisting the President's pressure to get the DTNA to join the UPFA gives us hope that one could be created. Tamil, Muslim and Left politicians who support a government that is detaining hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan

citizens without charge are betraying their constituencies; they should withdraw their support to the government so that they are in a position to put pressure on it, and stand in solidarity with the DTNA. What is required today is a strong grassroots democracy movement throughout the country, out of which a new political leadership could emerge. The first priority of such a movement should be to defend the democratic rights of displaced civilians.

P.S.

* From Groundviews:

<http://www.groundviews.org/2009/06/...>