

# TAMIL GUARDIAN

P.O. BOX. 16226, LONDON SE1 4FE, UNITED KINGDOM

E-mail: editor@tamilguardian.com Website: www.tamilguardian.com  
Tel / Fax: +44 20 7357 8731

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## Emergent Threat

### Kumaratunga will torpedo Oslo's project - again

As the Norwegian delegation tasked with bringing about negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers once again returned to London to meet with the LTTE, no doubt bringing with them Sri Lanka's responses to the former's proposals for a permanent and stable ceasefire, the prospects for peace - on the surface, at least - seemed to brighten this week. The LTTE extended its unilateral month-long cessations of hostilities by another month. The government reciprocated. The LTTE also released ten Sri Lankan prisoners of war. Following the easing last week of the economic embargo on Tamil areas, material is flowing into the Vanni - though by no means as 'a flood,' as some begrudging opponents of ethnic reconciliation in the Sinhala south protested. The United National Front (UNF) government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is - quite rightly - taking matters a step at a time. The positive reactions from the LTTE and the lack of unmanageably vehement opposition in the Sinhala south to its easing of the economic embargo and restrictions on travel from the Tamil areas will no doubt have been encouraging.

But whilst the optimists might suggest the gestures of goodwill from both sides indicate an inexorable drift towards negotiations, the fragility of the entire Norwegian initiative cannot be underestimated. Numerous problems emerging behind the scenes - traces of which are already manifest in the press - are no doubt keeping Oslo's facilitators busy. The greatest disrupting influence comes, as ever, from President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Apart from the childish tussle with the new government over the Defence and Finance portfolios soon after the UNF came to power, Kumaratunga has, in public at least, avoided confrontation with Wickremesinghe. But last week she entered the fray, forcefully reminding the Parliamentary government that it is "exclusively the President's right to take all actions regarding war and peace." More immediately, given the present focus of Oslo's shuttle diplomacy, Kumaratunga warned that "anything to do with the ceasefire final decision must be taken by the president." Sri Lanka's Defence Minister, Tilak Marapana, nonchalantly dismissed Kumaratunga's assertions, insisting the President must bow to Parliamentary dictat. But the fact that Mr. Wickremesinghe has thus far been overtly careful to tiptoe around Kumaratunga underlies her considerable potential to upset the Norwegian appeasement - as she did last year.

Apart from her publicly aired warning shots across Wickremesinghe's bow, Kumaratunga has also been quietly undermining the UNF government's efforts to de-escalate the conflict and establish conditions of normalcy in the

Tamil areas. The Sri Lankan armed forces, which come under the President's personal authority, have made no effort to conceal their contempt for Wickremesinghe's efforts for peace. Army chief Lionel Balagalle, a sycophantic Kumaratunga loyalist, has been initiating actions that both threaten the ongoing cessations of hostilities and raise ethnic tensions. SLA troops have been attempting to provoke the LTTE units in Nagarkovil whilst Sinhala soldiers in the eastern province are resolutely maintaining the economic embargo and restrictions of movement on the Tamil areas, despite the Parliamentary directives to the contrary. Tensions are simmering amid the harassment of Tamils - including strip searches of women - by Sinhala soldiers and police in the Batticaloa district. Seasoned observers of Sri Lanka's conflict will recall that historically it is in the eastern province that ethnic goodwill disintegrates before peace talks collapse and a new bout of fighting begins. Little wonder that, as the LTTE has reportedly stressed to the Norwegians, the modalities of ceasefire in this war-ravaged region are particularly critical to the stability of any permanent ceasefire.

As we argued before last month's Parliamentary elections, the UNF's ascent to power poses a challenge to Kumaratunga's political future. This year is crucial to her and to Mr. Wickremesinghe's government. That Sri Lanka's political system isn't big enough for both is clear to all. If the UNF does not impeach Kumaratunga this year, the President will undoubtedly dissolve Parliament after December - as the constitution enables her to. If there are to be fresh elections after that, Kumaratunga will beforehand seek to deny Wickremesinghe the stable economy in the pursuit of which is driving the UNF's efforts at ethnic reconciliation. In other words, she will endeavour to comprehensively sabotage, even scuttle, the Norwegian peace initiative. The limited peace dividend already being enjoyed by Sri Lanka's peoples is fuelling new enthusiasm for a negotiated settlement to the conflict - an anathema to Kumaratunga, who cherishes command over a historic defeat of the Tamil independence struggle in the name of Sinhala hegemony. Her former People's Alliance (PA) government demonstrated a callous disregard for Sinhala suffering and Tamil anguish in the pursuit of this ambition, readily sacrificing thousand of Sinhala soldiers while wreaking havoc in the Tamil homeland. Whilst the irredeemable optimists may argue that Kumaratunga will this year be swept along with a tide of peace, seasoned observers of Sri Lanka's conflict know that she will not. Which is why, positive gestures and backslapping notwithstanding, the Norwegian initiative faces a renewed threat from an old enemy.

## One for All

### The US cannot laud ideals and ignore them in practice

The United States this week came under increasing criticism over its treatment of al-Qaida and Taliban suspects from several quarters, including human rights organisations and, perhaps more importantly, from its closest allies in the coalition against terrorism. British disquiet - expressed with characteristic understatement - comes mainly after officially sanctioned photographs taken in Camp X-Ray, the detention centre at the US base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, showed the humiliating treatment of the prisoners, manacled hand and foot and kneeling before their guards.

But the more profound concern from many is regarding the basis of the detentions themselves: the US refuses to accept the Geneva Conventions apply to these prisoners and Guantanamo Bay is not US territory, denying them protection under the US constitution. The US has reacted indignantly to the criticism, insisting it is complying with international law and pointing out that it is extending the prisoners better treatment than could have been expected for Americans in Taliban or al-Qaida hands. But relativism is no defence here, for - as many point out - the Taliban or al-Qaida can hardly be a yardstick for the 'civilised world.'

Yet American outrage is understandable. The pitiless massacres of thousands of people, overwhelmingly civilians, on September 11 must, the US argues, be borne in mind and concern for the comfort of those who

endorsed, perhaps assisted and arguably applauded the attacks in New York and Washington is misplaced. The most striking matter, however, is the charge of hypocrisy. The US has proclaimed civil liberties and human rights to be central to its vision of the ideal political system: liberal democracy. Yet both have been readily ignored in Washington's justified campaign to root out and destroy its implacable enemies - something the US has deemed unacceptable when perpetrated by other state and non-state actors - usually when it involves those whose political beliefs America does not share. Many of the world's liberation struggles, including the Tamil freedom struggle, have been condemned and blacklisted on the basis that, justness of cause notwithstanding, some of the tactics employed by the oppressed run contrary to these ideals. Ironically, the US is falling back on the same defences of relativism and just cause often proffered by those it has criticised.

America has envisioned a global international order based on democracy, human rights and international law. It wanted to act as a beacon for the rest of mankind, believing it has a messianic role in this regard. But if the US considers its society and governance to be the utopian model for the world to emulate, its international conduct should be a perfection in democracy. America's conduct should not be - as Judge Richard Goldstone, a former war crimes prosecutor, protested - "a shocking example to set others."



## The press continues to fail the Tamil people

Journalists who visited the Vanni last week reported on the miserable conditions its residents live in. Ravi Thurairajah looks at the why it has taken so long to bring to light a story which has been common knowledge for years.

LAST week the international and domestic audience observing the situation in Sri Lanka were treated to a deluge of reports detailing the plight of the Tamil people who had been living under a Sri Lanka Army imposed economic embargo due to the fact that they did not reside in Sri Lanka government controlled areas.

The cause of this sudden spree of press coverage was due to the Government of Sri Lanka easing rules pertaining to the press censorship of the north and east of the island to benefit from the public relations benefits of allowing the international community to witness the convoy of food being allowed into the territory as part of their goodwill gesture to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The forty or so journalists filed harrowing reports of poverty and misery, which apparently should surprise the international community.

The fact that the world's press rolled into the Vanni in time to witness the new government's ostensible act of magnanimity and exposed a humanitarian crisis which Tamil human rights activists have been publicising over the past five years smacks of a state orchestrated propaganda campaign.

The fact that the Sri Lanka government barred journalists from the Tamil media from crossing into Liberation Tiger territory confirms that the entire event was a public relations exercise as opposed to a new government embracing the ideals of a free press.

Though it is unlikely that this is part of a global conspiracy the reality is none the less equally concerning. Neither the State Department nor Whitehall summoned the press corps into their respective offices to feed them an official line on Sri Lanka. A harsh but likely presumption

is that most career journalists don't consider the effort necessary to explore the story in question justifiable. Most journalists are well aware of the risks of pursuing stories that are off limits. Apart from journalists who are well aware of the risks of pursuing stories that are off limits, venturing into territory like Sri Lanka's north and east could get them black listed by the government concerned, limiting their careers in the region. Hence the majority of the journalists, whether Colombo based or otherwise, took the opportunity the Sri Lankan government had provided to enhance their resumes at relatively little risk to themselves.

Fortunately, reporting from concocted press tours is notorious for its lack of journalistic merit. Journalists who maintain the ideals of exposing suppressed truths, that brought them into the industry are pitifully few and far between. Marie Colvin exemplified that particular breed of journalists when she broke through Sri Lanka Army lines, at great personal risk and was subsequently black listed by the government, but succeeded in highlighting the plight of the

Tamils of the north and east in the Western press, when coverage was sparse.

Amongst the flock of reporters were also the more malicious journalists intent upon utilising the opportunity to push a different agenda. "That journalists were allowed into rebel territory for the first time in seven years was indicative of the separatists' eagerness for peace talks," said the Associated Press in its report, implying that the press censorship of the North and East to date had been due to LTTE constraints. The ethnic nature of the war ensures that Sinhala journalists, who have ethno-political agendas, based in Colombo writing for international news agencies generously pepper their reports with subtle forms of propaganda.

There is little that can be done about the actions of the latter however one can hope that more neutral journalists take a proactive role in reporting on what is one of the longest running and most bloody conflicts in the world. The Tamil media is littered with information which, though from a Tamil perspec-

tion, allows observers to construct a detailed picture of events. The only impediment remaining is the reluctance to upset the authorities. An accusation justified by the limited coverage of the damning Human Rights Watch reported which was released in the same week.

The free press has a responsible role to play within a liberal democracy. The citizens of Western nations will judge the actions of their respective governments in Sri Lanka based on the information they have on the situation. The failure of the free press is one of the root causes of anti Western sentiment in the third world.

One can expect the present government like, its predecessor to coerce, intimidate and restrict members of the press. Should the current peace efforts fail the Sri Lankan government will once again attempt to obscure the plight of the Tamil people from the world and one hopes that in such an event the Western press will redeem its past failings by standing resolute against the press censorship it has timidly accepted thus far.

## We should not forget Sri Lanka's past atrocities

In calling Sri Lanka a 'rogue state which practices state terrorism,' Thamichelvan has identified an unaddressed issue in addressing Tamil concerns writes Bavani Suntharam.

CERTAIN elements in the Sinhala far right have been outraged by the fact that the head of the Liberation Tigers' political section, Thamichelvan, allegedly referred to Sri Lanka as a rogue state. His words, as quoted in this week's Sunday Times were: 'We are confident that one day we will be accepted as a liberation organisation fighting against a rogue state which practices state terrorism.' Accepting the Sunday Times' interpretation and translation as being a genuine representation of what he said, the question still remains as to what is so outrageous about such a statement.

The Tamil people have been fighting the Sinhala state for decades now, expressing their anger and outrage at the actions of sub-

sequent Sri Lankan governments and several incidents point to the validity of the Thamichelvan's characterisation of Sri Lanka. The country has an international-acknowledged track record for practices contemptuous of human rights - torture continues to be a standard practice by the Sri Lankan forces and disappearances continue to occur. The government's 'licence to terrorise' - the Prevention of Terrorism Act - is still in force, sanctioning inhumane practices and protecting the perpetrators of those acts. While there are too many incidents to mention them all, the treatment of prisoners at Welikade and Bindunuwewa amongst many others, the massacres at Kokkadicholai, airstrikes on Navaly church, the hundreds missing, believed buried in

Chemmani, the thousands massacred in the 1983 pogrom and the thousands starving to death as a result of the economic blockade on the Tamil areas are but examples of the lack of caring demonstrated by the Sri Lanka state towards the Tamil people. In calling Sri Lanka a rogue state, Thamichelvan was, if anything, being magnanimous towards a series of regimes that have systematically planned and executed a campaign of destruction against the Tamils.

The attack on the sacred Temple of the Tooth allegedly by the LTTE lead to the organisation being banned in Sri Lanka and resulted in unprecedented outrage being expressed by Sinhala Buddhists, yet the continued destruction of thousands of Hindu temples have not even merited a footnote in Sinhala annals. When Jaffna Library was burnt, precious manuscripts, thousands of years old, and irreplaceable texts

were lost for ever. The Tamil people, their architecture and infrastructure, their records and culture, have all been under attack for decades now, by successive government intent on wiping out a people Sinhala nationalists view as not belonging on sacred Buddhist ground. Where is the error in calling such a structure a rogue state?

The current Sri Lankan government is making some efforts to understand the concerns of the Tamil people and address them. The economic embargo on Tamil areas, which pushed the regions deeper into poverty and desperation, has been eased, though it will be months, if not years before the effects of the action will be felt in many areas and travel restrictions, which had made it difficult for Tamils to travel into and out of the Vanni, have been eased and though passes still have to be obtained, the process has been made easier. However, there are still many obstacles on the path to

peace talks - the Liberation Tigers have stated that they will not talk until people in the Tamil areas enjoy a level of 'normalcy' and have also cited the Sri Lankan ban on the organisation as an impediment. These efforts must be appreciated for the break with tradition they are - the former government refused to even acknowledge that certain items were not permitted in the Vanni - but they cannot make the Tamils forget the history of the island since independence.

While looking forward to a positive future, the Tamils cannot ignore the realities of the past. The actions of the Sri Lankan government stand as testimony to the fact that it is a rogue state, and one that practices state terrorism. If there is truly to be peace, perhaps it is time for the government to at the least acknowledge and apologise for the genocidal actions of past regimes, if not make reparation for the immense harm caused.

## "Our nation has learnt an important lesson"

The Jaffna based Tamil daily *Uthayan* in a special op-ed on the Pongu Thamil campaign calls for patriotic Tamils to support the protesters.

THE Pongu Thamil uprising started by the Jaffna University community at the beginning of last year is still continuing. It has impressed a key point upon the Sinhala chauvinists and the majority community's leaders. Tamils worldwide rose in unison to demonstrate that until their aspirations are fulfilled, until their right to self-determination is recognised, there can be no peace in this island, that conditions of normalcy cannot prevail. The first anniversary of the day when the then Sri Lankan government tried and failed to suppress the uprising of the Tamil people's emotions should be celebrated with pride.

The army prevented the people going into the university compound to join the protests last year. We have to commemorate the day when people from all walks of life

scaled walls to take part in the events. It was a key moment in the political history of the Tamils. Our nation has learnt an important lesson from the mistakes made by its past leaders. It was because of this that political parties came together to contest the recent elections with important demands. Because it knew the greatness of freedom, because it wanted to enjoy all that was good when it was free in the past, this nation has sacrificed many thousand lives. The Tamil National Alliance was formed prior to the election because this is the undeniable truth. This alliance fought the elections on the manifesto made up of three demands: the recognition of the Tamil people's right to self-determination, the lifting of the ban on the sole representatives of the Tamil people, the Liberation Tigers, and

demanding the government reciprocate the ceasefire and with the help of the Norwegians to create the right atmosphere for negotiation.

The United National Front under the leadership of Ranil Wickremesinghe fought the elections promising to deliver a solution acceptable to the Tamil people and lead the country on a path of growth and development. The Tamil and Sinhala public voted for these parties having accepted these demands and shunned the path of ethnic hatred. Having thrown out the Kumaratunga government which conducted a so-called 'war for peace,' the people have said they prefer a true and just peace. That the Sinhala people have broken the spine of the racist Kumaratunga regime and elected Wickremesinghe on a mandate of peace has placed great responsibility on this government. Sinhala parents do not wish to lose their children trying to suppress the aspirations of the Tamil people in the North and East.

It seems like the UNF government has recognised this. It appears ready to open the door for peace. The easing of the economic blockade of Vanni and travel restrictions point to this. But, the government should do this [seek peace] with sincerity. Otherwise it would have betrayed the peace loving Sinhala public. Tamil people have expressed the high regard they have for their freedom movement's leadership at the last elections. On the other hand, the Tamil people have voted for the Tamil National Alliance and for its manifesto of campaigning for the removal of the ban on the Liberation Tigers and establishing a ceasefire to enable negotiations.

The present government will suffer the consequences if it chooses to ignore these truths. If the Tamil political parties forget these facts they will be taught the requisite lessons by the Tamil people themselves. What the Tamil people long for is the right to self-determination and their

dignity. And that self-respect will be maintained when the Liberation Tigers set about securing this self-rule. On the battlefield and during political discussions, the Tamil people will not want to lose their dignity. They do not want the Liberation Tigers to enter negotiations while still under a ban. The Tamils want to be seen as a people who cannot be sidelined.

Therefore, the Tamil speaking community wants the ban on the Liberation Tigers to be lifted, for their leadership to be invited to negotiate with dignity, and for their right to self-determination be fulfilled. It is to once again stress these demands that Pongu Thamil has once again taken place on January 17 this year. No one can ever deny the relationship between the Jaffna university and the Tamil struggle.

This Pongu Thamil uprising has renewed that sacred link. Every patriotic Tamil and every patriotic organisation should salute this and further strengthen it.