

# TAMIL GUARDIAN

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## High Time

### Tamil expectations of a peace dividend have risen

No sooner had the negotiating teams of the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan government returned home after the success of the first round of talks in Thailand last week, preparations have begun for the next meeting at the end of October. Devoid of acrimony and resulting in agreement on several issues, the talks have at the very least met, if not greatly exceeded, the expectations amongst the peoples of Sri Lanka. The international community has also been enthusiastic in its applause. But, as excitement cools, the need for tangible and immediate progress on the key agreed issues - reconstruction and rehabilitation - is starkly clear. As Erik Solheim, Special Advisor to the Norwegian Foreign Minister, explained, for confidence in the peace process to be retained "it is extremely important that what is agreed on paper is also implemented on the ground."

All actors in Sri Lanka's peace process agree on what the immediate need is: a comprehensive program of resettlement, rehabilitation and reconstruction in the war affected parts of the island. Up to a million people have been displaced by the conflict, according to a United Nations study out this week. The overwhelming majority are in the north and east. The Tamil areas, the north in particular, has seen near total devastation in two decades of high intensity war and deliberate economic strangulation. Roads are fragile and often impassable. Many schools and hospitals are unusable. Most homes and other buildings have been destroyed or damaged: in many parts, the sight of a single intact structure draws visitors' wonder.

Expectations amongst ordinary people have risen sharply, spurred anew by the success of the talks last week. As the Chief Negotiator of the Liberation Tigers, Mr. Anton Balasingham, pointed out in his address to the opening ceremony of the talks in Thailand, "over and above the intricate questions of conflict resolution and power sharing, the people expect a peace dividend; they require immediate relief to resolve their urgent, existential problems." But it is not only that matters must improve, but there is also an expectation that the international community, which has been vociferous in its calls for peace - and insistence this will lead to pros-

perity - must come forward. When Mr. Balasingham argued that "the concerned international governments, who have been supporting a negotiated settlement to the Tamil national question should contribute generously for the reconstruction of the war-damaged economy of the northeast," he was reflecting an acutely felt sentiment across the Tamil areas. It is also widely felt that compared to the substantial amount of financial aid delivered to Colombo over many years - much of which indirectly supported Colombo's military campaign - the cost of rebuilding the north and east is modest.

Norway, whose peace initiative in Sri Lanka has been underway for three years, and whose envoys have visited the island several times, is equally aware of the pressing need for international assistance. When Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen last week appealed for tangible - in other words, financial - aid, he pointed out to the assembled Bangkok diplomatic corps that peace, after all, "is about restoring normalcy in people's daily lives." But apart from the actual provision of funds, there must also be a will amongst world governments to ensure the Tamil people are able to determine the process, prioritising their own needs and shaping their homeland's return to normalcy. It is therefore incumbent on the international community to work closely with the Liberation Tigers in drawing up and implementing a sustained campaign of reconstruction and rehabilitation in the north and east.

As Mr. Balasingham pointed out at the opening ceremony in Thailand, the LTTE has shared the living conditions of the Tamil people for the past two decades and thereby has "a comprehensive knowledge of the socio-economic needs confronting the Tamil people." The movement's resultant expectation of a 'leading and pivotal' role in the economic development of the north and east is one shared by the Tamil community. The creation of a Joint Task for Humanitarian and Reconstruction Activities is meant as a first step in this regard - but care must be taken to ensure this structure does not suffer the fate which routinely befalls other committees in Sri Lanka: bureaucratic lethargy and ultimate stagnation.

## Colombo's Circus

### Kumaratunga is patently unfit to govern

Amid the excitement of the peace talks in Thailand last week, the tabling in Sri Lanka's Parliament of the 19th amendment to the constitution on Thursday almost went unnoticed. The United National Front (UNF) government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe expects to debate the matter in Parliament in a few weeks. In the meantime, the horsetrading is underway in earnest as the UNF seeks support from dissenters in the main opposition People's Alliance (PA) to reach the two-thirds majority required to pass the amendment. President Chandrika Kumaratunga's response to government move was typical. At an address in Kandy this weekend she vowed to fight the amendment. As ever, it was her colourful turn of phrase that drew justifiable press attention, even though Kumaratunga's vitriolic hectoring has been a hallmark of her term in office. Never hesitating to stoop to new levels of uncouthness, she hurls accusations of the gravest nature about without a care for the consequences - not least her country's image abroad.

The President this weekend claimed the Prime Minister of conspiring to assassinate her. She then vowed to take 500 - no less - of 'them' with her, were an attempt to be made on her life. Recently, she suggested the cabinet meeting room was the UNF's proposed ambush site - although at the time she was

more conservative, suggesting she'd kill a mere ten of the UNF ministers before she succumbed. Whilst the international community might hail Sri Lanka as a democracy, its head of state makes a mockery of good governance. The Tamil community has not forgotten how Kumaratunga was hailed by the international community as the paragon of liberal virtue - even when she embarked on the most savage program of military repression in the ethnic conflict's history. We also remember the praise international human rights groups - now conspicuously silent - heaped on her as torture, rape and disappearance became routine under her rule.

From a Tamil perspective, however, the most important aspect of the circus in Colombo is the utter helplessness today of the Sinhala people who voted Kumaratunga into power eight years ago. Despite her manifest unsuitability to govern, the evident moral decay during her administration and the sweeping mandate for peace the UNF received from the Sinhala people, the government is unable to marginalize the President, contenting itself with merely protecting Parliament from her increasingly unpredictable and irrational whim. Little wonder that Sri Lanka languishes in the economic doldrums while its peers have gone ahead. But the island's woes cannot be blamed on the ethnic conflict alone. Good governance must be sought to be received.



Kandyan Dance

## Beware the new racism: religious hate

The rise of an ugly new phobia is threatening the notion of multiculturalism in Australia, writes Robert Manne in *The Age*.

ONE OF the most significant ways the world has changed since the terrible crime of September 11 has been the rise of an ugly strain of Islamophobia throughout the Western world. From this new ideological virus Australia has, unfortunately, proven far from immune.

On the far right of the political spectrum something sociologists have come to call "new racism" seems to be taking hold. Old racism argued that the intractable differences between human groups were rooted in biology and blood. This form of racism was discredited by Hitler and the Holocaust. A new racism took its place. It argued that differences between human collectivities were based on the ultimate incompatibility not of blood and biology but of culture and religion.

After September 11, in Australia, this kind of new racism emerged with surprising swiftness. Let one important example suffice. Former Treasury Secretary John Stone had long been an opponent of Asian immigration. Following September 11 the focus of his concern shifted to Muslims instead. According to Stone, Australia was, from the cultural point of view, a "Judeo-Christian" country. Because of its supposed incompatibility with such a culture, Stone argued now that all future Muslim immigration must end.

Stone was aware, of course, that on account of his suggestion he would be accused of racism. Such accusations were, he claimed, both mischievous and wrong. In advocating a racially discriminatory immigration policy Stone pointed out he had no interest in the colour of a potential migrant's skin. The only issue that concerned him was "culture" and not "race". In light of the academic definition of new racism, John Stone and his supporters unwittingly supplied an almost perfect textbook case.

The second stand of Islamophobia, encouraged by the events of September 11, took place on more traditional Christian ground. The best example here was seen in the writings of Andrew Bolt, resident right-wing columnist at the Melbourne Herald Sun.

At first Bolt responded to September 11 in a decent way. Was it not, he argued, a "tragedy" that the crimes of fundamentalist Islamic terrorists had rendered "the many peaceable Muslims among us the undeserving target of suspicion and hate". Would it not, he argued, be "a disgrace if the terrorist atrocities in the United States made us lash out" at Australia's Muslim community?

As it soon turned out, no one was more in need of such a warning than Andrew Bolt himself. Within days he

had begun to wonder darkly about why Australia's Islamic leaders had not issued a fatwa against Osama bin Laden. Although he had no fight with Islam, he said, but only with "the terrorists who perverted its teachings", was it not the case that the Koran was all "too easily interpreted to justify terrorism"?

Within three months of September 11, Bolt was experiencing "grave doubts about the role of Islam in a secular, multi-ethnic nation like Australia". Within six months he was absolutely outraged by the opinion that Islam, truly understood, was a religion of peace and human rights. By mid-2002, Andrew Bolt had involved himself in the defence of an anti-Islamic campaign waged by a fundamentalist Christian sect called Catch

the Fire. The gloves were now completely off.

"Let's compare," Bolt wrote on June 3, 2002, "those two most holy of men - those founders of great religions. Unlike Mohammed, Christ did not slaughter unbelievers, execute women who sang rude songs about him, cut off the limbs of apostates, sleep with a woman whose family he had just killed, have sex with a nine-year-old, urge the murder of Jews, authorise the beating of wives... and promise heaven above all to those who made war on infidels."

I do not know whether it was a matter of concern for Bolt or his editor that he was writing, thus, of the man who stood at the centre of the faith of 300,000 or so of their fellow Australians.

As it happens, Andrew Bolt was not the only journalist in Australia who had begun to play with fire. A third strand of Islamophobia appearing in the press after September 11 was rooted in something even deeper than religious soil - ethnic difference and sexual fear.

After September 11, The Australian's columnist Janet Albrechtsen began to take considerable interest in the terrible rape cases in Sydney perpetrated by gangs of Lebanese Australian Muslim males. Concerning these

cases, Albrechtsen appears to have conducted a search for evidence with the express intention of discovering as many instances as possible where Muslim males have been involved in rape. On the basis of this anecdotal evidence she began to write in a manner that suggested that rapes by Muslims of young women had reached epidemic proportions in the West.

In conjuring this moral panic - as Media Watch revealed last Monday - Albrechtsen, on more than one occasion, distorted the evidence on which she relied. Where, for example, a French sociologist had written of rape as an initiation rite of young men, Albrechtsen claimed, quite falsely, that he had been writing specifically about Muslim males. Or again, to reveal the callousness of the local Muslim leadership on the question of the Sydney rapes, Albrechtsen claimed in a recent column that a leader of the Lebanese community had absolved the young men of moral responsibility for their crimes. As it turned out, in the article from which she quoted, the question of the rapes had not even been discussed.

No one possessing even a passing acquaintance with the history of race relations could be unaware of the explosive potentiality of the question of inter-ethnic rape. Accordingly, no contemporary subject in Australia demands from a journalist greater wisdom, maturity and tact. Janet Albrechtsen's writing has been factually careless, socially reckless and morally cavalier at once.

The emergence of Islamophobia in Australia in recent times is not, in the end, difficult to explain. The ground was prepared with the rightward drift in Australian political culture during the period of Hansonism. For three years, anti-Islamic feelings grew as a consequence of the denigration and incarceration of the mainly Muslim asylum seekers from the Middle East. Those we mistreated we came to despise. With the coincidence of the Tampa "crisis" and the September 11 terrorist attacks, a dangerous explosion of anti-Islamic feeling took place.

In a recent ABC television program, a secular Islamic leader spoke with eloquence about the wounds inflicted on the Muslims of Australia by the continuous insults to their culture and religion over the past year. His sentiments are easy to understand. Islamophobia now represents by far the most serious threat to the idea of multiculturalism, and even to the ideas of religious and ethnic toleration, that Australia has witnessed for very many years.

Robert Manne is associate professor of politics at La Trobe University

# Preparing for the coming 'Tiger Economy'

President Kumaratunga is, increasingly, an irrelevancy, argues *The Sunday Leader* newspaper in its editorial this week.

IT WILL soon be a year since Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, which over the past two decades has claimed more than 64,000 lives, claimed yet another victim. For many of the younger generation, this has been the first year of peace in their memory. The first year without roadblocks and checkpoints; the first without gory pictures of charred bodies on the evening news; the first in which the word 'debauch' has ejected itself from the lexicon; and the first in which every time the phones are jammed or a loud report is heard, it is not attributed immediately to yet another bomb. For many of us, life has returned to normal.

But there is no dancing in the streets. Banish the thought. That is not the way the public mind works. The days when heroes were lionised are past. That is how come, having won World War II, Winston Churchill was flung ignominiously out of office. The dust had barely settled on Europe before the old warrior was handed his hat and shown the door. No Nelson or Wellington he. Memories are short, and the public is never satisfied with what they've got.

That is perhaps why, in his search for peace, Ranil Wickremesinghe is in no great hurry. For the first time in this conflict, a politician is deliberately allowing himself to be led by events rather than seeking to lead them. The risk involved in clearing the roadblocks and dismantling the checkpoints was grave indeed; the removal of restrictions of travel between the north and south was well nigh reckless. After all, but for the brief ceasefires from February to June 1990 (five months) and January to April 1995 (four months), we have been at war for almost 20 years. The current ceasefire, now seven months old, is something of a record.

While Ranil Wickremesinghe's dismantling of the apparatus of war and suspicion were gambles, they were gambles that have paid off. It gave each side an opportunity to see that the other was not as inherently evil and monstrous as they earlier thought. For let's face it, barbarism is not something endemic to the LTTE: the Sinhalese have been every bit as brutal, as anyone who was around in 1983 knows only too well. Just as almost no Sinhalese were prosecuted for the crimes of that outbreak of race hate, the Tiger cadres who committed the most heinous crimes in this war too, will walk away unpunished.

Tough luck. There are times when a quest for justice is simply not the most pragmatic course to follow. That opinion however, will not be shared by the JVP, who want blood. Mind you, they do not want justice for the murders, thefts and kidnappings they committed in the 1980s: but it is their view that murders, thefts and kidnappings committed by Tamils are just that much worse than excesses of the same kind committed by Sinhalese.

Incredibly poor taste, President Kumaratunga chose not to wish the talks well or offer encouragement to either side, but to belittle them altogether. Barely 24 hours prior to the first meeting at Sattahip last Monday, she alleged publicly that the talks were about nothing more than "holding carnivals in the north." Playing to the extreme right-wing Sinhala Urumaya lobby that is increasingly her only audience these days, Kumaratunga demanded that the LTTE openly renounce Eelam and promise to lay down arms. The president's remarks went almost unnoticed however, as the world focused its attention on the events unfolding at Sattahip.

The unstated fact is however, that there is very little in the talks that were, by any yardstick, substantive. Most of the legwork had been done behind the scenes well in advance by G.L. Peiris and Milinda Moragoda. Given their self-effacing style, both ministers are well fitted to diplomacy. Neither claims credit for himself, and both are content to let credit pass on to others. For all intents and purposes, Sattahip has been little more than a photo opportunity, but it nevertheless paved the way for a very significant statement by Anton Balasingham.

Taking time off from his otherwise upbeat opening speech, Balasingham was not above taking a swipe at Kumaratunga. "There are powerful forces in southern Sri Lanka who are irrationally opposed to peace and ethnic reconciliation," he said. "The intransigence of the previous government could only be attributed to its incredible military theory that war begets peace and political solutions can only be realised by military means. By practising such an absurd notion the last government of Sri Lanka plunged the entire country into the abyss of social and economic disaster."

Balasingham was not above levity, the first time in 20 years that a spontaneous smile has lit the faces of an audience he has addressed. Turning a pun on the so-called tiger economies of Southeast Asia, he said that Wickremesinghe has pledged, "to transform the island into a successful Tiger economy." Significantly, the "T" was capitalised in the official handout of the speech given to the media by the LTTE. Even as that would have made the hairs on Kumaratunga's head stand on end as quills upon the fretful porcupine, Balasingham assuaged Sinhala suspicions by making it clear that the demand for a homeland should not be equated to a demand for eelam. He also went out of his way to emphasise that the northeast was the homeland of the Tamils and the Muslims.

None of this could have been music to Kumaratunga's ears. In desperate straits, with her party breaking up before her very eyes, the president is preparing a last ditch stand to dissolve the executive presidency and return to parliament, from where she hopes to lead her troops to victory. Wickremesinghe however, is equally opposed to dismantling the executive presidency, and is happy to have Kumaratunga squirming at the top of the constitutional pinnacle, emasculated and impotent. The quandary that faces the president is that she holds office only for another three years, when she must fade gracefully into the sunset, still barely 60. For her part, she'd much rather head the government from parliament into her dotage, just as her mother did. The reforms she seeks may well come in the form of a referendum under Section 86 of the constitution, which gives her the right to "submit to the people at a referendum any matter which, in the opinion of the president, is of national importance."

The battle lines were drawn last Wednesday however, when the government formally tabled the 19th Amendment to the constitution in parliament. With a vote due in October, and with every likelihood of the PA being further fractured in consequence, Kumaratunga must want to kick her confidante, Mangala Samaraweera, for leaking the infamous 'coup' memorandum which precipitated this crisis. Be that as it may, she too, is no doubt bracing herself for the Tiger economy that is to come.

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