

BLACK JULY

July 1983: Anatomy of a pogrom

In July 1983, violence on an unprecedented scale was unleashed against the Tamil community by Sinhalese mobs, assisted and organized by the Sri Lankan security forces. Over 3,000 Tamil people were killed in over 6 days of unrestrained anarchy between July 24 and 30 (the government figure for the deaths was 358). Hundreds of Tamil girls and women were raped before being murdered. Most Tamil owned properties in Colombo were razed to the ground and the entire community fled to the north and abroad. The ethnic cleansing of Colombo was systematic and thorough. The pogrom of July 1983 is referred to by the Tamil people as their 'Holocaust'.

CONTRARY to popular belief, the Holocaust was not a spontaneous reaction to the ambush of a Sri Lankan army patrol by Tamil guerrillas. In a report on the attacks, the International Commission of Jurists said "the suspicion is strong that this organised attack on the Tamil population was planned and controlled by extremist elements in the government UNP party, and that the killing of the 13 soldiers by [Tamil guerrillas] served as the occasion for putting the plan into operation. The reports go so far as to allege that a member of the Cabinet was actively involved in planning these attacks".

Sri Lanka had already seen unprovoked anti-Tamil riots before, albeit in a smaller scale; in 1956, in 1968, in 1977 and 1981. Hundreds of Tamils had been killed in these bouts of island wide violence. The involvement of Sri Lankan government officials in these have been documented, especially in 1981, when ruling party MPs supervised the violence in Jaffna.

Since 1981, the violence by the predominantly Sinhalese Sri Lankan security forces against the Tamil populace had enhanced the public support enjoyed by Tamil guerrillas fighting for a separate state, and attacks on the security forces escalated. President J. R. Jayawardene responded with draconian security measures, giving his forces sweeping powers.

Scattered, but continuous anti-Tamil violence had taken place in several parts of the island in the months preceding the Holocaust.

Through early 1983, the predominantly Sinhalese Sri Lankan army was deployed in strength in the Tamil areas of the island. There was a sharp escalation in violence and abuses. Sinhalese troops shot Tamil civilians on the streets, entered houses and raped Tamil women, arrested and tortured at will, with complete impunity.

In early July 1983, Sri Lankan troop levels in Colombo were increased. At the same time, the notorious 'Public Security Act' was introduced. This law permitted security forces' personnel to dispose of dead bodies without post mortem examination, inquest or judicial inquiry. In effect, it allowed for killing with impunity provided under the guise of 'maintaining security'.

President Jayawardene was quoted in the Daily Telegraph of 11 July 1983 as saying: "I am not worried about the opinion of the Tamil people.. now we cannot think of them, not about their lives or their opinion ... Really if I starve the Tamils out, the Sinhala people will be happy".

On July 19th 1993, the movement of (foreign) journalists was abruptly limited and strict press censorship imposed throughout

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the island. All the factors necessary for a crackdown on the Tamil populace were, it seems, in place.

However, on July 23rd, Tamil guerrillas carried out their first major attack on the Sri Lankan security forces. An army patrol on night duty in the northern Tamil town of Jaffna was ambushed and 13 Sinhalese soldiers killed - an unprecedented number.

The attack stunned the Sinhala populace. The government, how-



A Sinhala mob looking for Tamils confronts and surrounds a mini-bus in Colombo. Police stood by.

ever, saw the incident as an opportunity to mobilise support amongst the Sinhala people. The deaths of 13 Sinhala army privates were treated as a national tragedy and a state funeral planned.

On July 24, the bodies of the dead soldiers were brought to Colombo. Attacks on Tamil residents started, almost on cue, in several parts of Colombo on the night of July 24. There was also violence by the security forces in Jaffna, where over 50 Tamils were killed, and in other locations on the island.

The Lawasia Human Rights Standing Committee Report said: "The violence had broken out in different parts of Colombo almost simultaneously on the night of July 24th and on July 25th, extended during the course of the next few days to different centres throughout the country."

Despite the increased possibility of world condemnation, the Sri Lankan government remained silent as anti-Tamil rioting escalated to horrific levels on July 25.

The Sri Lankan security forces openly assisted the Sinhalese rioters. Sri Lankan army lorries moved gangs of armed Sinhalese from district to district in Colombo. As they arrived in each area, the attackers were given the local voting lists. The addresses occupied by people with Tamil names were systematically 'cleansed'. Defenceless residents were hacked to death, women were raped, often in front of their relatives. Many young girls were raped before having their throats cut. Sri Lankan army lorries

removed heaps of Tamil corpses for destruction, and supplied the gangs with refreshments.

London's Daily Telegraph (July 26) wrote: "Motorists were dragged from their cars to be stoned and beaten with sticks. Others were cut down with knives and axes. Mobs of Sinhala youth rampaged through the streets, ransacking homes, shops and offices, looting them and setting them ablaze, as they sought out members of the Tamil ethnic minority. A mob attacked a Tamil cyclist

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riding near Colombo's eye hospital. The cyclist was hauled from his bike, drenched with petrol and set alight. As he ran screaming down the street, the mob set on him again and hacked him down with jungle knives."

In his book, 'The tragedy of Sri Lanka', William McGowan wrote: "While travelling on a bus when a mob laid siege to it, passengers watched as a small boy was

hacked 'to limb-less death.' The bus driver was ordered to give up a Tamil. He pointed out a woman who was desperately trying to erase the mark on her forehead - called a kumkum- as the thugs bore down on her. The woman's belly was ripped open with a broken bottle and she was immolated as people clapped and danced. In another incident, two sisters, one eighteen and one eleven, were decapitated and raped, the latter 'until there was nothing left to violate and no volunteers could come forward,' after which she was burned. While all this was going on, a line of Buddhist monks appeared, arms flailing, their voices raised in a delirium of exhortation, summoning the Sinhalese to put all Tamils to death."

The London Daily Express (29 July) wrote: "Mrs. Eli Skarstein, back home in Stavanger, Norway, told how she and her 15 year old daughter, Kristen witnessed one massacre. 'A mini bus full of Tamils were forced to stop in front of us in Colombo' she said. A Sinhalese mob poured petrol over the bus and set it on fire. They blocked the car door and prevented the Tamils from leaving the vehicle. 'Hundreds of spectators watched as about 20 Tamils were burnt to death' Mrs. Skarstein added: 'We can't believe the official casualty figures. Hundreds, may be thousands, must have been killed already. The police force (which is 95% Sinhalese) did nothing to stop the mobs. There was no mercy. Women, children and old people were slaughtered. Police did nothing to stop the