

BLACK JULY



Sinhala rioters celebrate as they pause in the destruction of homes and businesses in Tamil sectors of Colombo. The government remained silent through six days of rioting.

genocide.”

The London Times of 5th August reported how “... Army personnel actively encouraged arson and the looting of Tamil business establishments and homes in Colombo” and how “absolutely no action was taken to apprehend or prevent the criminal elements involved in these activities. In many instances army personnel participated in the looting of shops.”

The Economist (6 August) wrote: “...But for days the soldiers and policemen were not overwhelmed; they were un-engaged or, in some cases, apparently abetting the attackers. Numerous eye witnesses attest that soldiers and policemen stood by while Colombo burned..”

According to the London Financial Times, “Troops and police either joined the rioters or stood idly by.”

Tamil detainees held in Colombo jails, mostly for political ‘crimes’ (which usually meant advocating a separate Tamil state), were killed jointly by about 300-400 Sinhalese prisoners and their guards. In Welikande jail, 35 Tamil detainees were killed on 25 July, and another 17 were murdered on 27 July. In a horrific perversion of religious belief, the blood of the victims were reportedly offered to the statue of

Buddha in the prison's shrine.

Dr. Rajasunderam, the secretary of the Gandhiyam society (a community workers organisation who had helped resettle people affected in previous anti-Tamil riots) was amongst the detainees killed on July 27.

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One imprisoned Tamil leader, Kittumani, was forced to kneel by his assailants and ordered to pray to them. When he refused, he was taunted about his last wish and had his eyes gouged out (Kittumani, a nominated MP, had appealed in court on being sentenced to death, that his last wish was his eyes be donated, that one day a separate Tamil state be seen through his eyes). After watching his agony for a few minutes, the Sinhalese hacked him and wrenched his testicles from his body.

Amnesty International said in

their report on Sri Lanka (published June 1994) “Amnesty International has itself interviewed one Tamil detainee who survived the killing and has received a sworn statement from another survivor, both of whom state that the same prisoners who had come to attack them later told the surviving detainees that they had been asked to kill Tamil prisoners. According to the sworn statement: ‘We asked these people as to why they came to kill us. To this they replied that they were given arrack (alcohol) by the prison authorities and they were asked to kill all those at the youth offenders ward (where the Tamil prisoners were kept).’”

All Tamil owned businesses and homes were systematically looted and then torched. If the property had been rented from Sinhalese, it was usually only looted. Sinhalese shopkeepers attacked neighbouring Tamil businesses. Sinhalese households attacked neighbouring Tamil homes. Tamil patients in Colombo hospitals were murdered, often by Sinhalese hospital attendants.

According to N Sanmugathasan, the General Secretary of the Ceylon Communist Party, “In Colombo at least 500 cars some with drivers and passengers inside were burnt. Tamil-owned buses, running between Colombo and

Jaffna were burnt. Tamil patients in hospitals were attacked and killed. Some had their throats cut as they lay in their beds.”

However, in some cases, Sinhalese residents, horrified at the violence, shielded and hid Tamil friends. However, a significant

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proportion of the Sinhala populace joined in the violence, which clearly had the backing of the Sri Lankan army and government.

Many Tamils attempted to flee the city, in whatever transport they could obtain. As the days progressed, some Tamils emerged from hiding and ran the gauntlet of rioters. As one busload of Tamils left Colombo, it passed a wall on which the heads of dozens of murdered Tamils had been neatly arranged.

Several refugee camps came to be established as Tamils, driven

out of their homes, sought sanctuary in numbers by crowding into schools, temples and churches. The Methodist Church in Kollupitya (an affluent suburb in Colombo) was one such camp. The church was hurriedly converted into a refugee camp by Sinhalese Christians, many of whom risked their lives in the subsequent days to save hundreds of Tamils who had lost their homes or were driven out of their homes and were on the run from marauding mobs.

Despite condemnation and protests from all over the world, the violence continued for several days as the mobs searched Colombo for Tamils who had escaped the initial bloodletting.

On the 28th of July, President Jayawardene, in his first public speech since the violence began. He did not condemn the violence, but sought to placate the Sinhalese and virtually justified the mass killings as the “expected reaction of the Sinhala masses to Tamil demands for a separate state.”

Insisting the violence was “not a product of urban mobs but a mass movement of the generality of the Sinhalese people” Jayawardene asserted that “the time had come to accede to the clamour and the national respect of the Sinhalese people.”

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