

EDITORIAL AND OPINION

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No Answers

The logic of 'dialogue amongst moderates' amid genocide

For several recent years, the international community's approach to 'Sri Lanka' has been shaped, to a great extent, by the opinions and prescriptions of a select group of - largely British - analysts and policy makers. In their rarely self-questioned conviction, the reasons for war in Sri Lanka - and what consequently needed to be done for 'peace' - were blindingly simple: the root cause of war was the demand for Tamil Eelam and the 'fanatical' LTTE's armed struggle for this goal. Ergo, all that was need for 'peace' was Sri Lanka's 'democratic' government to militarily 'weaken' the LTTE thus bringing it to the negotiating table and making it give up Eelam. In short, the island's problem was 'violent conflict' (i.e. the LTTE) and not the character of the Sri Lankan state (and certainly not 'genocide' as the Tamils outlandishly claim).

This analysis has been utterly discredited by the conduct of the Sri Lankan state (as well as the most of the Sinhala polity) in both the murderous closing stages of the war and, especially, thereafter. But whilst the deliberate massacre of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians and the squalid incarceration of hundreds of thousands has compelled several international actors to look anew - and askance - at the Indian Ocean ethnocracy, the London-based policy nexus which theorised, argued for, and solicited international consensus around Sri Lanka's military onslaught is still insisting the strategy was essentially right, that 'peace' can yet emerge. These handmaidens of Sri Lanka's bloodbath will be proven disastrously wrong again. But not before the Tamils endure much more suffering and further bloodletting.

To begin with, the 'Sinhala first' logic that has informed state policy and the limits of politics since independence has been manifest in both the Colombo regime's conduct and the general support for these policies amongst most of the Sinhala polity and population. It is underlined not only in sustained state brutality towards the Tamils, but, equally, in Colombo's interactions with the international community. The historical persistence of state chauvinism is underlined in Human Rights Watch's observation that, of the commissions set by numerous Sri Lankan governments to investigate abuses, "none have produced significant results, either in providing new information or leading to prosecutions." Several international actors are thus coming to realise that the problem in Sri Lanka is, as

the Tamils have long been arguing, rooted in the character of the Sinhala-dominated state. Consequently, what is required for lasting 'peace' is that the state be compelled to adhere - well beyond mere rhetoric and lipservice as in the past - to the norms of liberal governance.

But, in contrast, the policy nexus that helped implicate the international community in Sri Lanka's mass slaughter is still blundering on in 'conflict resolution' mode. In their logic, their grand strategy is actually working; the LTTE is destroyed, ergo peace is at hand; what is required now is some governance reform and a little poverty alleviation. (The overlap between this logic and that of Sinhala militarism and ultra-nationalism is not inconsequential.) The hunt is thus now on to find 'moderates' of various ethnic hues. What is required, foremost, is to find Tamils who will unconditionally reject 'genocide' and 'Tamil Eelam' and engage in dialogue with the Sinhala regime (these are the prerequisites for Tamils to be deemed 'moderates'). What is less important here is Colombo actually treats Tamils as equal to Sinhalese.

At the root of this analysis is another form of chauvinism, one that has a colonial legacy and serves to both infantilize Third World peoples and trivialise their politics. Or put it another way, Tamil demands for 'self-determination' are deemed laughable, because as a people we are simply not considered capable of grasping the gravity or complexity of such concepts. The Tamils' demand for self-rule is thus seen qualitatively different from, say, that of the Quebecois'. Such condescension is not new - indeed it is exemplified in British colonial conduct in the run up to the island's independence and thereafter.

What is important, however, is that the horrors of contemporary Sri Lanka are not only laying bare the real drivers of protracted ethnic conflict there, but also revealing the dubious analytical and moral foundations of international backing for the Sinhala state. Meanwhile, though it has not yet been noticed, but for all of its bloodletting and cold-blooded cruelty, Colombo has still not been able to compel the Tamils to abide by Sinhala supremacy. The coming period will thus be one of rising Sinhala triumphalism, intransigence and oppression, on the one hand, and deepening Tamil suffering and defiance, on the other. No international strategy is thus more disconnected from reality now than one of seeking dialogue amongst 'moderates'.

Children in Sri Lanka's concentration camps

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MORE than 250 000 humans are kept in concentration camps for "screening" by the Government of Sri Lanka, allegedly to discover "terrorists". The question arises why children are kept there, even babies. These Concentration camps are called "welfare camps" by the Sri Lankan Government.

I refer to the latest report by Human Rights Watch from October 10, 2009: <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/10/09/sri-lanka-tensions-mount-camp-conditions-deteriorate>. It is in agreement with other international human rights organisations' reports. In addition, I refer to the EU Commission's report with an evaluation of Sri Lanka on 19 October 2009: http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2009/october/tradoc_145141.pdf

The following information is documented by human rights' organisations in the field in August/September 2009. Names of the children have been left out here. The list makes it possible to follow up the fate of each child over time and makes denials by the Government of killings through neglect of children impossible. The list can be ordered from me. The world has an eye on every child listed. The list gives unfortunately only a part of the total number of children in all concentration camps.

■ Total number of children on the list: 1200

■ Names of the concentration camps and the number of children:

i. Vavuniya Anantha Kumarasami Camp: 118

ii. Vavuniya Arunachchala Camp: 65

iii. Vavuniya Kathirkamar Camp: 8

iv. Vavuniya Sheriliana: 50

v. Vavuniya Ulukkulam Camp: 959

■ Age of the children: Youngest: 1month. Oldest: 18 years.

■ Number under 5 years: 308

■ Girls: 536 Boys: 664

■ Orphans: 1082

The following is an eye witness report with special regard to children from a prisoner in a concentration camp. The prisoners managed to get free in August 2009. The whole report was published in October 2009 (http://www.tamilnet.com/img/publish/2009/10/Living_in_Menik_Farm.pdf), but the section on children was slightly revised for this message by the former prisoner who rightly prefers to be anonymous.

"I was interned in the ---- camp of Menik Farm----. During those four months in the camp, it is the condition of the children at the camp that I found most depressing. I was too timid to go around collecting statistics though it would have been easy to collect statistics because of the proximity of the people crowded within a small area. However, I observed carefully and was overwhelmed by the wasting away of the children.

"Newborn babies are sent to the camp conditions, which are unsuitable for adults, just few days after being born. Toddlers play in the filthy area right in front of the toilets. I have never seen flies and mosquitoes in such numbers in my life.

"While eating, one hand is fully occupied with chasing the flies; a practice that children will not adopt thus consuming food contaminated by flies that come straight from the toilets very nearby. Children of well off families who appeared well cared for on arrival at the camp were visibly wasting away during the stay in the camp. The contributory factors were poor diet, the hostile weather, and continuous illness.

"Majority of the children including infants did not have milk (powder) except an occasional packet handed out by some charity. Once a father of a seven month old baby came begging for some sugar to put in the plain tea (black tea) to be given to his seven month old baby because the mother did not have enough breast milk and the baby was hungry. Plain tea had become the regular diet for this baby.

"The diet was most definitely inadequate for the children despite some nutritional supplement that were distributed. There was no milk, meat or vegetable in their diet. Sometimes soya bean was given but they were of rotten quality and children would hardly eat them.

"Illness among children was pandemic and it wasted them. Small injuries became infected and caused problems. Vomiting, fever or diarrhea seemed a natural condition in most children. Measures of malnutrition maybe a standard way of measuring worst affected children but it does not capture the general condition of children wasting away. When a child runs a fever most parents worry a lot fearing Hepatitis-A infection.

"The queues are very long at