

OPINION

The UK Column



Defying the genocide

THE Tamil Diaspora's continued public activity of marches, protests and public meetings is a critical part of the ongoing struggle to safeguard the Tamil national identity and secure Tamil political rights. This is because Tamil political activity plays a vital role in affirming the existence of the Tamil nation and thereby defies Sri Lanka's genocidal policies.

Sri Lanka's sixty years of oppression has reached a climax. The machinery of the state is now focussed quite brazenly on eradicating the Tamil national identity. The internment of Tamils in squalid camps, the abductions and assassinations, the killing of journalists are all aimed at annihilating the existence of the Tamil nation.

Under these conditions, we in the Diaspora have an important role to play in preserving the Tamil national identity and continuing the struggle to secure Tamil political rights. By doing so we can ensure that Sri Lanka is never able to completely erase the Tamil national identity.

Nations only exist when their members act as if they exist. Conditions in Sri Lanka are increasingly making it impossible for Tamils to express their political will or maintain their national identity. In the Diaspora however, we face no such restrictions and must take every opportunity to set forth our demands and express our aspirations.

Disappointment with international inactivity or apathy over Sri Lanka must not be allowed to deter these efforts. Sri Lanka will have succeeded in its objective of obliterating the Tamil nation if all the Tamils in the Diaspora slipped into apathy and fell silent.

Just by making our demands in public we deny Sri Lanka's claim that there is no Tamil nation and no Tamil problem in Sri Lanka. Every time Tamils get together to express their wishes Tamil national identity is affirmed. We are all familiar with Sri Lankan agents' constant efforts to disrupt our activities. Sri Lankan officials do this because they understand how important protests, meetings and marches are in preserving and maintaining the Tamil national cause.

Meetings, protests and marches are therefore not just about setting out a series of demands, they are also about expressing who we are and demonstrating our determination to continue our struggle whatever the obstacles we may face.

Symbols are therefore very important. When we protest or march demanding an end to internment or the enforcement of international law, we are not merely marching or protesting as human rights or hu-

manitarian advocates. We were also marching and protesting as Tamils determined to defend our national identity. This is why along with countless placards demanding humanitarian access, ceasefires and the observance of human rights norms, there is always a sea of red and yellow symbols and maps of our homeland.

There are many different types of activity through which the Diaspora can keep the Tamil identity alive. Huge marches, massive demonstrations and high profile protests are sometimes the best way and will continue to play an important role. At other times small constituency meetings, public lectures and debates, meetings at universities or community organisations, smaller and more limited protests and petitions are also equally effective.

These efforts are important in part because they keep the Tamil problem in the public eye. They are also important because they serve as a constant and visible reminder of the continued existence of the Tamil nation. So long as the Diaspora remains active and engaged, the Tamil national cause will continue to withstand the genocidal violence of the Sri Lankan state.

The previous months of almost constant and frenetic activity have achieved some important results. Firstly the Tamil issue now on the international agenda as it has never been before. Although the Tamils continue to endure Sri Lanka choking violence, there is now widespread international agreement that Sri Lanka's treatment of the Tamils is at the core of the island's protracted political crisis.

There is also a growing consensus on the need for a credible mechanism of justice. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have condemned Sri Lanka's efforts to investigate its own abuses as shambolic and farcical. For the first time key Tamil concerns - such as the use of rape as a weapon of war, ethnic cleansing, the violation of the rule of law - have been taken up by prominent international actors and organisations.

This past year of protest, which coincided with arguably the worst year for the Tamil nation, has shown that the Tamil people are not easily defeated. Whilst Sri Lanka stays true to its past by refusing to engage with credible Tamil leaders, the international community now knows that the Tamils must be taken on board.

For this reason we must continue to make our demands and express our identity in public. Every time we do so we defy Sri Lanka's genocide.



the OPD clinics inside the camp and the doctors work at break neck speed. I have seen a doctor writing a prescription to a 12 year old boy without finding out what is wrong with the boy. The medicines that are dispensed are arranged in a table and the total list of medicines consists of around 30 different medicines. The medicine dispensers too work with breakneck speed in dispensing them. Once an educated mother told me that she visited the doctor for treatment for her baby as well as for herself. The medicine dispensers mixed up the medicines and gave the baby what should have been given to the mother. Since the mother had some awareness of the medications she spotted it. Most mothers in the camp who do not have such awareness would have given the adult medicine to the baby. God only knows how many babies, children and even adults died due such medical negligence. Who is there in the camp to watch, monitor and investigate? Deaths are just that, deaths and no investigations are done as to the cause of it.

"Patients often queue up for doctors for hours even before the doctors arrive from outside. No one in the OPD clinic will know when the doctors are likely to arrive. One just waits around taking one's chances. For all this the level of sickness among inmates is far higher than among the population at large and it is obvious.

"Take the eight tent group where I was staying. Five of the tents out of the eight had children under 10. One child died; one became seriously ill and taken away to Vavuniya hospital and all the other children had frequent fever, vomiting and diarrhoea. The children were wasting away and it was visibly obvious. Some of the children had persistent skin disease despite several visits to the doctors and treatment. Four of the children contracted Hepatitis A and the parents were told by the doctors to just take good care of them and give lots of fruits because the hospitals had no medicine. Fruits were very expensive in the camp. There is a native treatment for Hepatitis A involving a plant named "Keelkainelli" in Tamil. Even to

get this plant was a struggle because it meant someone has to bring it from outside and hand-over to the inmates at the meeting spot as described later.

"People young and old suddenly dying after a few days of fever is a common occurrence. All of us were left puzzled as to the cause and no one gave any explanation. All of us without exception have suffered diarrhoea at least once and most of us many times.

"I used to keep telling myself during the stay in the camp how lucky I was that I do not have any young children under my care. The unhygienic living, especially the play area and the continuous illness is an ordeal for the young mothers. Even thinking about the condition of newborns and their mothers who are sent back to the camp conditions soon after birth is an ordeal. Perhaps the most telling scenes of the camp conditions and the health service can be found by visiting the OPD clinics and observing young mothers with very sick babies waiting for long time in queues with tears trickling down their face.

"Children went to makeshift schools staffed by teachers who were also interned in the camp. Many teachers have lamented how they can teach while living under such conditions. The school is made up of sheds with uneven floor covered with tarpaulin. The children cannot even place their books on the uneven floor to write. They have to keep the soft cover books on their knees to write.

"Most of the young children have to carry very heavy buckets of water to assist their parents who are also struggling to care for the children often as a single parent. The little bodies bent like a question mark under the weight surely would have done permanent damage.

"If we can tolerate the incarceration of the entire population of young children from a community which is clearly leading to long term damage to their development, how does this measure up in any of the international humanitarian/human rights laws? Can the long term damage done to them be measured and judged?"