

NEWS

Tamils recall tortured past

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Excalibur

THE scars in Kumar's hands are zipped-up wounds. Though the flesh is repaired, the marks are alive. You could almost reach out and open them, see the blood trickle out softly to tell a story.

He moves in the kitchen like a predatory tiger: swift, hungry and unnoticeable. I worked with him years ago in a tiny-but-charming restaurant in Toronto, where his performance was formidable: quick-tempered and precise.

He used to address my co-workers in confident broken English, and if you didn't understand his machine gun of words, you were asked, "Do you speak English?!" He came from Russia. From England. From Sri Lanka.

I later learned that he owned the place. He was 26 years old. Kumar* began his work in the kitchen before he knew what onion was in English. To him, cooking knows no language, anyway. It's all movement and instinct.

One day, while I was waiting on a dish he was cooking, I asked him where his scars came from. I waited for small stories; wounds acquired in the kitchen.

"From the war. Oh, and refugee camp." He brought a calendar to work one day. It had lovely, balletic Tamil lettering and a group picture of scowling army soldiers in full military regalia.

There's an eerie feeling about their collective expression, quite implacable.

He proceeded to show me a community newspaper. Casualties littered the pages, but none of the images were as concrete as the last page, that of a Tamil family lying scattered in a raided house. There was blood everywhere, but that was no longer unusual.

The story was in the mother's skirt: blood below the waist, confined.

Kumar asked me to imagine the soldiers in the calendar, their lives after the camera flashed. He said he forgot most times, but the slightest ponderous gaze in the distance charged his face.

The calendar, he later told me, commemorated the lives of suicide bombers.

An August 2006 BBC headline, "Dispute over Sri Lanka air raids," hinted at the two disagreeing sides of the story, but the verified facts painted the picture with frightening clarity:

planes roaring over the heads of teenage girls, about to explode inside an orphanage.

BBC admitted the difficulty in reporting the truth about the Sri

Lankan civil war.

"Lots of the worst things that happen go on well away from the eyes of independent journalists." BBC's South Asian editor, Bernard Gabony, stated. "In other words, a lot of lying goes on, but unless you have the proof of who is lying, all you can do is report what the different sides say."

Kumar's friend, Siva*, 33, had one such story. When he was 16 or 17, Siva went to school at St. Patrick's College in Jaffna, taking shelter under a tree when he heard the all-too-familiar roaring plane overhead, felt the tremor of the blast and saw the dust, rising. A few kilometers away, people ran to take cover inside St. Joseph church, thinking it a godly shield.

But this time, the air raid didn't target a school. The pilot of the plane could see where the people were taking cover. The sacrilegious bomb found them there.

And the caved walls of St. Joseph church became flesh.

Instinct told survivors to run, lest they find themselves eclipsed by a creeping airborne shadow-bearing fire. A stronger instinct told them to dig.

"There was no time to be emotional. Your brain tells you to find people who are still alive," Siva said.

Passing vehicles took those injured by flying debris to the nearby hospitals. Siva? He shoveled dead bodies into a truck.

When he was 17, Siva, would disappear for days, not out of teenage rebellion but out of the government's fear that he was connected to the Tamil Tigers, a declared terrorist organization, according to the Stephen Harper government back in 2006. If Siva was connected to the Tamil Tigers, the Sri Lankan government wanted to know.

The military took him, blindfolded and hands tied, to a remote place two to three hours away. There, they fed him gruel. "Sometimes I'd find a rusty nail in it," he said.

But that was the least of his worries.

The interrogations were the main event. They would involve a bowl of boiled chilli pepper and, later, a bucket of gasoline.

"They make you breathe it," Siva recalled. "My eyes and throat burned from the chilli, and the gasoline made me pass out, but not for long. They hit me to wake me up, then they continued with the questions."

Siva's mother, who made only 3,000 rupees a month, was extorted 50,000 rupees in exchange for her son's freedom. "My mother had to sell our land to pay them

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Sri Lanka's soldiers have run into trouble in Haiti again, this time for firing live ammunition at civilians. It follows over 100 being sent home a few years ago for raping girls as young as seven

Sri Lanka forces fire into Haitian civilians

IN Haiti on November 10, United Nations peacekeepers from Sri Lanka fired live ammunition resulting in injuries to civilians, reported Inner City Press.

Sri Lanka contributes a large number of peacekeepers to the Haiti mission. Previously they have been accused of raping local women and girls.

Inner City Press asked spokesperson Michele Montas about the incident, about UN peacekeepers using live ammunition instead of rubber bullets and about the credibility of previous UN investigations.

Ms. Montas replied that after an emergency landing, "some Haitians entered the helicopter," reported Inner City Press.

She said a person in the helicopter fired and a cartridge hit a civilian. She also said that "a per-

son in the plane shot in the air."

Shooting in the air is the protocol, Ms. Montas answered, when questioned whether it is UN protocol to shoot live ammunition in the air. This is reminiscent of the incident in 2008 during the Security Council's visit to Goma in the Congo, where a UN security official shot his weapon in the plane to try to show that it was empty, triggering an all night bus ride by Ambassador to Kigali, Rwanda, the press site reported.

Later, Inner City Press spoke with a senior UN peacekeeping official, who explained that UN Formed Police Units have rubber bullets, but that in this case is was "military people."

Reportedly, these were Sri Lankan soldiers, in all probability previously involved in the conflict in northern Sri Lanka in

which the U.S. and others have found presumptive war crimes, reported Inner City Press.

UN officials in New York and Port au Prince have reportedly received a letter that in 2005 "a Jordanian soldier's brutal rape and sodomizing a Haitian mother of five in Haiti. The report was sent to the UN, the victim complained to the UN." The investigation process never led to a resolution that was ever revealed to the victim, Inner City Press reported.

Sri Lankan soldiers were accused of systematically raping Haitian women and girls, some as young as 7 years old.

The UN still refuses to disclose the outcome of its repatriation from Haiti of over 100 Sri Lankan peacekeepers on allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Sri Lanka landmine use defended

Matthew Russell Lee
Inner City Press

THE United Nations and its Secretary General are said to be strong advocates for countries to become parties to the Mine-Ban Convention. But when it comes to Sri Lanka, which has refused to join the Convention and which states openly that it uses land mines, it is unclear what the UN is doing to urge the country to stop using mines.

The UN is paying for removal of mines laid by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Meanwhile, in a debate in the UN General Assembly's Fourth

Committee on October 30, Samantha Jayasuriya of the Sri Lankan Mission argued that "for legitimate national security concerns, Sri Lanka had not become a party to the Mine-Ban Convention... Land mines were used by security forces 'always for defensive purposes' and mainly to demarcate the limits of their military installations."

This statement, more than five months after the Rajapaksa government declared final victory over the LTTE or Tamil Tigers, went unmentioned on by the UN. At a press conference on November 17, Inner City Press asked Dmitry Titov of UN Peacekeeping and Maxwell Kerley, Director of the UN Mine

Action Service, about Sri Lanka's statement and continued use of land mines.

Mr. Titov replied that the Secretary General is in strong support of the Mine Ban Treaty. But when Inner City Press asked if Ban Ki-moon, in his many bilateral talks this year with President Mahinda Rajapaksa, has ever directly asked that Sri Lanka join the Mine Ban Convention, Mr. Titov passed the question to Mr. Kerley, who described UNDP's work removing LTTE mines.

With the LTTE defeated, the Sri Lankan government's justification for using land mines is gone. But it was repeated on October 30 at the UN.