

OPINION

Trampled Tamils lack election appetite

As a video prompts UN calls for an inquiry into war crimes by Sri Lankan troops, Tamils are in no mood to play kingmaker

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The Guardian

ON [January 7], UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings Philip Alston called for "an independent inquiry to be established to carry out an impartial investigation into war crimes" in Sri Lanka. In particular, Alston has given the UN's imprimatur to the authenticity of video footage apparently showing summary executions of prisoners in January 2009 in the final stages of the civil war.

The Sri Lankan government has, unsurprisingly, rejected the video as "fabricated", despite the UN's reliance on three independent experts in assessing it, accusing Alston of bias and a personal crusade. Any investigation would have to involve both main presidential candidates: sitting president Mahinda Rajapaksa, who has been the commander-in-chief of the defence forces, and General Sarath Fonseka, who was in charge of the army.

A year ago, Lasantha Wickrematunge, a newspaper editor, was gunned down in broad daylight for being critical of Rajapaksa's government. No one has been charged to this day but allegations of a government hand in the killing are widely made. General Fonseka has referred to the Tamil Nadu politicians as "jokers" and in an interview with Canada's National Post he made comments widely seen as ultra-nationalistic or racist in nature:

I strongly believe that Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhalese, but there are minority-communities and we treat them like our people ... They can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things.

These two men with others share the responsibility for deaths and destruction in a war that killed more than 80,000 combatants and civilians in the three years prior to May 2009 alone.

On this current president's watch, Sri Lanka has been stripped of a lucrative tariff concession from the EU on the grounds of

poor governance and human rights violations, at least three Tamil elected parliamentarians have been killed, extrajudicial killings and abductions are common, at least eight journalists have been killed and many armed paramilitary groups have been created with government sponsorship.

With this background the majority Sinhala vote is expected to be split almost in half at the presidential election on 26 January. Ironically, Tamils are presumed to be the kingmakers.

However, Tamils have no appetite for an election at a time when they haven't even begun to rebuild their own lives and livelihood destroyed during many years of war that only ended just seven months ago. They live generally in fear under military and armed paramilitary occupation with human rights abuses accepted as part of life.

Tamils voted overwhelmingly in a general election in 1977 for separation, prior to the introduction of the sixth amendment to Sri Lanka's constitution, which disallows the espousal of separation. Despite this limited freedom of speech, Tamils have engaged in many such elections since 1977 and before.

Tamil leaders have in good faith signed agreements with many Sinhala leaders to resolve their differences. Successive governments have withdrawn unilaterally from these agreements complaining that the party that signed the agreement has given in too much to Tamils' demands. The latest such casualty in a long list of agreements since independence was the ceasefire agreement signed by one of the main parties with international sponsorship, which was abrogated unilaterally by the Rajapaksa regime.

Now Fonseka, who is the joint candidate of two main opposition parties, has signed another "agreement" with the main Tamil party. One of the points in the "agreement" and also in one of the previous agreements (Indo-Sri Lanka accord) is the merger of northern and eastern provinces, which together make up the Tamil homeland. Not a day went by before the president played to the



For Tamils, the choice between Mahinda Rajapakse and Sarath Fonseka is a 'choice between two evils'

Sinhala nationalists by saying he would never agree to a merger if re-elected.

Is history repeating itself? One wonders.

Just as with the previous agreements, this may have been signed by the Tamil leaders in good faith to generate some short-term benefits. But if the then ANC leaders had succumbed to international pressure and accrued short-term benefits that com-

promised their long-term goals, black South Africans would still be second-class citizens in their own land.

Further suspicions are raised by the fact that this "agreement" is with a presidential candidate who is claiming to relinquish executive powers – meaning he wouldn't have the powers to implement it. Furthermore, agreed points are not listed in his formal manifesto, so he will not have the

Sinhala masses mandate. And JVP, one of the main coalition partners, hasn't signed the "agreement".

One hopes that history doesn't judge the current Tamil leadership as betrayers of Tamil nationalism for which the party was originated in the first place.

As Max Lerner said: "When you choose the lesser of two evils, always remember that it is still an evil".

Don't completely accept ...

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will even grant all our solutions. But at least there is space to discuss with Mr. Fonseka and Ranil Wickremesinghe. During the last 4 years we were not even in a position to discuss these issues. This is why we felt a need for a change. We're not mad to believe that Sarath Fonseka will deliver everything but if he's a disciplined Army General and understands the problem then there is space for that.

Q: Certainly Fonseka has promised a political package that 'goes beyond' the 13th amendment as has the President. How convinced is the TNA that this will ensure that the grievances of

the community will be met given that nothing has been said about your demands like land or police powers or the merger of the North and East?

One reality that must be accepted by everyone is that in the North and the East the Tamil speaking people are in the majority. This is why their problems must be accepted. If this doesn't happen we will get together with the Muslim people and seek all avenues available to us to win these rights that will create serious problems.

Q: There is a criticism against the TNA that it refuses to engage with the Sri Lankan political entities, instead relying unrealistical-

ly with the Tamil Diaspora, despite the limitation in obtaining any solutions in this manner?

The Tamil Diaspora comprises 2 million people and even if the TNA is independent as a political entity the Tamil Diaspora has always supported us. It is unfair to say we haven't or we failed to engage with the government after the war ended. Like I explained earlier even if we tried we were kept away. Mr. Sampanthan held a discussion with the President on the displaced people and I discussed with Mr. Basil Rajapaksa but there was no point. This is the result of a failed attitude of the government towards us during the course of the last four years.

Lesser of two evils ...

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plined professional and committed Tri forces, Police and Civil Defence Force capable of safeguarding the country and its citizens from external and internal threats and boost naval and coast guard capabilities to thwart smuggling of humans, weapons, drugs and all other illegal activities that compromises national security.

An interview by TNA MP Suresh Premachandran demonstrates that such contradictions have not escaped the TNA. Speaking to Daily Mirror newspaper Premachandran said: "We're not mad to believe that Sarath Fonseka will deliver everything. We believe the parties supporting him will send him in the right path."

It should not be forgotten, not

long ago Fonseka in an interview with Canada's National Post newspaper said: "I strongly believe that Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhalese, but there are minority-communities and we treat them like our people ... They can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things."