

## Possible Futures in Post-War Sri Lanka

### by Tisarane Gunasekara

"The civilians risked their lives while fleeing from the LTTE held areas.... If the government suspects such people as Tamil Tigers, then the entire population of the two districts – Killinochchi and Mullaitivu – should be suspects. Then the government will never solve the problem."

V Anandasangaree (Tamilweek – 3.6.2009)

Post-war, Sri Lanka is a country of symbols. Cheering crowds and lion flags, mammoth cut-outs of President Rajapakse (often hailing him as Maha Raju) and pictures of servicemen dominate the landscape, embodying the hope of a future better than the past. There are other symbols too, less visible, though no less relevant – camps in which masses of civilians are held, a plan to expand the military to three hundred thousand, a journalist abducted and beaten up. These antipodal symbols reflect the multiple realities that make up post-war Sri Lanka and the many futures awaiting different segments of her populace.

The President in his speech at the latest Victory Celebration emphasised his determination to reject any ‘solution’ which ‘encourages’ separatism. Since devolution is seen by many presidential allies as a fillip to separation rather than an antidote to it, this statement may well indicate the regime’s intention to devolve as little as possible, just enough to placate India. In any case Mr. Rajapakse (by his own admission) does not believe in the existence of an ethnic problem; consequently he is unlikely to see any need to make political concessions to win over Tamils. Therefore, given the symbiotic relationship between the regime and Sinhala hardliners and given the President’s own ideological predilections, the political will to devolve is unlikely to be present. After all, what need of devolution, if you believe that Tamils have no problems other than economic ones, and 1956 was actually an attempt to correct the colonial bias in favour of minorities?

There is much talk about a ‘home-grown solution’ but little evidence of one being fashioned, since the APRC has gone into the hibernation mode, again. In any case, in Sri Lanka, ‘home-grown solutions’ have an unfortunate history, from the B-C Pact and the D-C Pact onwards. The 13th Amendment was not a ‘home-grown solution’ but one imposed on us by India (thus the only time we went through with a devolution deal was as an outcome of direct foreign intervention in favour of devolution!). Consequently it is irrational to expect anything concrete on the political front; just a handful of vague statements and non-serious deadlines, as and when required to deflect Indian pressure. The Tamils may be accorded a dash of development and more than a dash of security measures – a wizened carrot and a hefty stick to keep them from creating problems again.

Collective Punishment?

What if after the death of Rohana Wijeweera and the top JVP leadership, the government decided to incarcerate all residents of the areas previously under de facto JVP control

(such as most of Hambantota and Moneragala districts), in order to catch a few thousand JVP operatives? What if huge 'welfare camps' were built and hundreds of thousands of Sinhalese were herded into them, so that the Security Forces could weed out a few thousand JVP cadres hiding amongst them? Would that not have been as illegal as hell and a moral outrage? Counterproductive too, as it would have further polarised the South, rendering impossible any reconciliation, any return to normalcy. Sri Lanka would have remained an unstable land, riven by fear, suspicion, bitterness and hatred. For the few hundred JVPers who could have been caught via such an extreme measure, many more thousands would have been created anew, suffused with rage and intent on revenge.

In a string of camps across the North, more than 300,000 people, almost the entire population of the Killinochchi and Mullaitivu districts, are being held, so that a few thousand Tigers hiding amongst them can be weeded out. According to V. Anandasangaree, the leader of the TULF and an outspoken critic of the LTTE, the conditions are 'good' in some camps and 'horrible' in many others: "Health, water and sanitation situation is horrible. Many people have skin diseases as they don't get a chance to have a shower for days because of water shortage... Pregnant mothers and newborn babies go through a harrowing time in the camps due to scorching heat" (Tamilweek – 3.6.2009). With the coming of the monsoons, the conditions are likely to become infinitely worse, resulting in more diseases and more deaths, and perhaps even outbreaks of epidemics. According to UN estimates about 43% of camp inmates are children, many of them deprived of their natural caregivers cum protectors by the war and thus more vulnerable to illnesses and abuses.

Given the government's gross underestimation of the number of civilians living under Tiger control, it is understandable that most camps would lack even the basic facilities for their desperate and destitute inmates, who had been on the run for months to escape both the Tigers and the Lankan Forces. However, even possible improvements are often being impeded by the government's ruthlessly inane attitude. A top official boasted, on record, that the government turned down an offer of several hundred used blankets by a Five Star Hotel, because the 'First Class Citizens' in the camps do not need second hand things. The regime is taxing many of the goods brought by international aid agencies for the inmates, arguing that these items should be brought from the local markets rather than imported. Clearly the wellbeing of the inmates is not quite a top priority with the government.

In one of his final addresses as Chief Justice, Sarath N Silva spoke forthrightly about the abysmal conditions in the 'welfare camp' he visited (ten people to a tent in which standing up is impossible except at the middle, yards long queue to the single 'toilet'). He also stated that the inmates of these camps do not have any recourse in law as they exist outside the law (Sirasa News First – 3.6.2009). If a prison is a place where a person is kept in captivity, the 'welfare camps' in the North are prisons, because their inmates cannot leave them and outsiders (including closest relations) cannot go in, without official permission. The men, women and children in these camps are not de jure prisoners because they have not been found guilty of or even been charged with any crime. They are de facto prisoners, whose sole 'crime' was living in 'enemy territory'.

The camps represent nothing less than the extra-judicial internment of almost the entire population of the Northern districts which were under Tiger control during the last phase of the war. If this is not ethnically based collective punishment, what is it?

Even apologists for the regime do not deny that the camp inmates are deprived of the freedom of movement, the right that defines a free man. They merely justify it by arguing that these restrictions are necessary to catch Tiger cadres masquerading as civilians and hiding among the displaced. Had Vellupillai Pirapaharan survived to fight another day, had he escaped to re-launch the war as a guerrilla struggle, such harsh security measures may have had some justification. But given the demise of Mr. Pirapaharan and other top leaders, the government could have eased the restrictions on the displaced. The continued existence of camps as prisons demonstrate that as far as the regime is concerned security concerns will overshadow humanitarian concerns, even in the absence of war.

In June 2007, the Rajapakse regime came up with a plan to expel all North Eastern Tamils living in Colombo lodges because some of them could have been Black Tigers. That plan had to be abandoned due to the outcry from a segment of polity and society and the intervention of the Supreme Court. The mentality behind that measure was blatantly ethno-centric, discriminatory and unjust. Similarly, the internment of hundreds of thousands of civilian Tamils, simply because of the possible presence of a few thousand Tiger cadres amongst them, is a disgrace, a shameful act which goes against the very essence of Sri Lanka, as a pluralist society and as a democracy. It is an act of blatant ethnic discrimination as it applies only to members of one community, an outrage which demonstrates the ethno-centric worldview of this administration. A clearer signal could not have been sent to the Tamils about the place allotted to them in a post-war Sri Lanka. How can we expect Tamils to feel loyal to a country that treats them with such injustice? How can the dream of separatism die, in the presence of such outrageous treatment? How can a Sri Lankan identity be born amidst such discrimination?

#### Southern Hopes and Realities

Will the end of the war bring about an alleviation of the economic problems of the Southern masses? Will there be a peace dividend - from less inflation and lower taxes to fewer road closures?

According to media reports, the Lankan military is to be expanded substantially, from 200,000 to 300,000, to prevent the rejuvenation of the LTTE: If a 200,000 strong military is sufficient to defeat the LTTE led by Vellupillai Pirapaharan, why is a 300,000 strong military necessary to prevent the resurrection of the LTTE, sans Mr. Pirapaharan? What is a 300,000 strong military going to do, sans a conventional war? Keep Tamils under control, in the North and the East and perhaps elsewhere, under the guise of preventing the resurrection of the LTTE? Is the government planning to turn the North and the East into garrison provinces, controlled by the mainly Sinhala Armed Forces and their Tamil adjuncts?

How will such a militarised future for the North impact on the development of and living standards in the South? If the military is going to be expanded, will there be any

reduction in defence expenditure, even in the absence of the war? And without a considerable reduction in defence expenditure, can there be a peace dividend, sufficient to benefit the masses? Where is the money for the maintenance of such a mammoth military going to come from? More indirect taxes would mean more inflation; more government spending will also mean more inflation. In other words the South may not get the economic relief it expects from peace, since a cash-strapped country cannot continue indefinitely with a huge defence bill, without cutting into welfare and development expenditure. Will this gargantuan military machine be turned against the Southerners themselves when they begin to protest about economic difficulties and engage in strikes to win economic demands?

The abduction of yet another journalist, in broad day light, from a busy junction, (even as representatives of several media organisations were, reportedly, discussing media freedom with the President) indicates that the movement away from democracy towards violent intolerance and the proclivity to replace the rule of law with the law of the rulers will continue. The dominant dichotomous worldview of a country consisting of patriots and anti-patriots and the definition of politics as a holy war between these two camps would enable the stifling of dissent by labelling it 'pro-Tiger' and thus 'treacherous'. This is a label that can cover a multitude of deeds, from economic strikes to political demonstrations, from protesting about the abysmal and illegal conditions in the 'welfare camps' to exposing abuses of power by the powers that be, from talking about civilian casualties in the war to speaking out against attacks on journalists. After all, senior journalist Bennet Rupesinghe (currently the news editor of Lankaenews website) who informed the IGP about Poddala Jayantha's abduction was summoned forthwith to the Mirihana police station and kept overnight for interrogation. If that is an indication of how the wind is blowing, post-war Sri Lanka may experience the enshrinement of extra-judicial and arbitrary rule, in the name of patriotism and national interest, behind the comforting façade of a democratic system.

**Source: The Island Online**