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Sri Lanka

West looks on as repression escalates

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The vicious offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) launched by the Sri Lankan army at the start of 2006 ended in May with a brutal defeat for the Tamil national liberation movement. Civilians taking refuge in agreed no-fire zones were bombarded along with the few medical facilities. Between January and May this year, over 30,000 Tamils were killed. The leaders of the LTTE were executed summarily, as well as soldiers taken prisoner.

Now over 285,000 Tamils who lived in the North of the island are interned - allegedly to be screened for links with the LTTE - in what are nothing less than concentration camps.

Despite its criticism of the Sri Lankan government's conduct in the war Britain has allocated Â£4.8million to assist in the "resettlement" of those interned. This resettlement may mean that Tamils are dispersed over the island and not allowed to return to their homes.

Since the establishment of the camps 60,000 Tamils have been freed. Amnesty International has called for the immediate release of all the prisoners and warned of a major public health disaster waiting to happen, especially with the approaching monsoon season.

No access to camps

The fact that the Sri Lankan government denies the conditions in the camps and refuses access to NGOs such as the Red Cross, can only raise the question of what is happening there. These camps must be closed immediately, and the Tamils allowed to go back to their homes and administer the aid themselves.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa has used the argument that this war was part of Bush and Blair's "war against terror" to act with as much impunity as possible. But the terror unleashed on the Tamils was too much even for the US, well known for supporting other wars such as that conducted by Israel against Gaza in which war crimes were committed.

The conduct of the Sri Lankan army was so appalling that a US State Department report published in October states "incidents that occurred during the final months of the conflict between the government and the LTTE might constitute violations of international humanitarian law or crimes against humanity". This report also condemns the LTTE for the forcible recruitment of children to serve as soldiers and its indiscriminate attacks on civilians.

The government has called this report "unsubstantiated and devoid of corroborative evidence", but the head of the army has nevertheless gone to the US to discuss human rights violations. It has also expelled James Elder, a senior UNICEF official, for speaking out against the treatment of Tamil civilians. In February this year Gordon Brown tried to placate public opinion in Britain about the viciousness of the army assault by appointing Des Brown as a "special envoy" to Sri Lanka. But President Mahinda Rajapaksa rejected this special envoy as "intrusive". Up until the present crisis, Britain and the USA were some of Mahinda Rajapaksa's best friends and the top two recipients of Sri Lanka's exports. The President has visited twice Britain in recent years and shaken hands with both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown at Downing Street. During the last 10 years, more than Â£48million worth of British arms were sold to Sri Lanka, including Â£14million since 2006 when the Sri Lankan government unilaterally broke the ceasefire with the LTTE which had been brokered by the Norwegians in 2002.

Back to business

The snub to Brown's "special envoy" is only a temporary diplomatic row and normal relations with imperialist countries and their agencies are being resumed. In May, an US\$12.9billion request for an emergency loan from the IMF was turned down, but in October Sri Lanka received an emergency IMF credit of US\$2.6billion. This was just a few weeks after Mahinda Rajapaksa increased the military budget by 20% to a record US\$1.6billion. Even after the war was declared over, Sri Lanka continues with its military drive by launching a recruitment campaign for 100,000 soldiers. The actions of successive governments in Sri Lanka are reminiscent of Zionist governments in Israel in their treatment of Palestinians. The racist mood of the Sinhala majority in the island absolves the government from any inhibitions. It feels confident to continue discrimination against Tamils with impunity and attacks against those campaigning for national and democratic rights. The end of the war has been used by President Mahinda to eliminate the LTTE and prevent a renewal of the fight for national rights by Tamils which successive pogroms since independence have failed to quell. The government organised celebrations for its military victory in the 26-year civil war as a green light to step up the persecution of Tamils but also of all those who speak up of democratic rights in Sri Lanka. Amnesty International produced a report in June documenting how over 20 years successive Sri Lankan governments have tolerated serious human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, killings and torture. Over 10,000 people are held without trial, some for over a decade, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Journalists under attack

Journalists critical of the government, even if they are no friends of the LTTE, are regularly threatened and often assassinated, like Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of the Sunday Leader. More than 12 journalists have been killed since 2006. Others face long prison sentences, such as the Tamil journalist J S Tissainayagam whose case has been taken up by PEN, the human rights organisation defending persecuted writers. On the 31 August 2009 J S Tissainayagam was sentenced to 20 years' hard labour under the PTA, for "causing communal disharmony" in articles published in 2006 in North-Eastern Monthly. He was convicted on the basis of his confession under torture. Socialists, such as those of the NSSP (Nava Sama Samaja Party), who have campaigned against the government are also being targeted. The refusal of governments since independence to reach a just political solution with the Tamils has driven many of them to embrace a military solution, including acts of terror, as being the only way to achieve an independent state free from discrimination. In the long run a military victory was impossible against the superior forces of the Sri Lanka army.

The nationalism of the LTTE prevented it from seeking political allies from the working class and peasants in other communities of the island who were also suffering from the economic consequences of neo-liberalism over the last thirty years. The military victory of the Sri Lanka government in May against the LTTE does not resolve the political problems that led to this 26-year civil war and the struggle for the right of self-determination for the Tamil people continues. In Britain, a broad-based solidarity campaign like the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, is needed that would call for a boycott, disinvestment and sanctions against the brutal regime in Sri Lanka and for the punishment of those responsible for war crimes and abuses of human rights.

Backstory

The racism endured by the Tamils is a legacy of the British Empire which established its rule by entrenching communalist divisions. Tamils and Sinhalese have lived on the island for centuries together and do have some differences in language and religion. When independence was won in 1948, the British Governor General's constitution offered the sizeable Tamil minority no protection. Sinhalese nationalists have regularly launched

pogroms, such as in 1958, 1977 and 1983, when Tamils protested against discrimination. Thousands were killed and tens of thousands fled abroad. The actions of the Sri Lanka government against the Tamils can only be described as ethnic cleansing if not genocide. "Genocide" is defined by the UN as any act "committed with the intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial or religious group". This word can adequately describe the massacres of the Tamil people earlier this year, and the continued imprisonment of 285,000 in concentration camps.

References

I hope my murder will be seen not as a defeat of freedom but an inspiration final article by Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of the Sri Lankan Sunday Leader, published three days after he was shot dead in Colombo (The Guardian, Tuesday 13 January 2009)

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When memory dies, A Sivanandan, Arcadia 1997

Nava Sama Samaja Party <http://www.nssp.info>

British Tamils Forum <http://www.tamilforum.com>