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A SOCIETY WITHOUT COMPASSION

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Under watch

Sri Lanka has been so brutalized by thirty years of ethnic strife that it has become immune to violence. “We have lost the capacity to feel outraged,” remarked a senior Colombo politician.

The ethnic cleavages run deep, yet the current situation is the worst in recent memory. Five years of cease-fire have made the two sides believe that they have consolidated themselves militarily. Since January this year, on an average, 100 people are being killed every month.

Every day in the capital city of Colombo, three to four people are killed. About 200 people have disappeared in Colombo alone and kidnapping is rampant. There is widespread belief that the armed groups of kidnappers operate with the tacit approval of the military. All structures that citizens could normally rely on have collapsed.

It took six months of pressure from donors after the tsunami to force the conflicting sides to agree to a post-tsunami operational management structure to help the Tamils affected by the disaster. Colombo rejected even this mechanism, thus preventing aid from reaching the Tamils.

The Supreme Court has undone the merger of the Northern and Eastern province inhabited by the Tamils on technical grounds without giving the latter a hearing. The two provinces were merged temporarily, pending a referendum, in the wake of the India-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987, to meet the political grievances of the Tamils. The offices of the National Human Rights Commission in the North and the East are unmanned. Colombo, meanwhile, has re-imposed its economic embargo on the Tamil areas under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam by closing the main A9 route, resulting in a massive humanitarian crisis. International aid workers have withdrawn from the Tamil areas after the security forces made it impossible for them to work there.

In August this year, 17 aid workers from the French NGO, Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger), were killed at Muttur in Trincomalee district. The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission held that since the security forces had been present in Muttur at the time, “it appears highly unlikely to blame other groups for the killing”.

The absence of international agencies in the Tamil areas has taken away one more watchful eye over human rights violations.

That only left the media to highlight the plight of the Tamils. This has proved to be illusory. The Sinhala media does not report on the human tragedy in the Tamil areas. The Tamil media, which does, is targeted. The International Federation of Journalists has noted that since 2001, except for the killing of one freelance Sinhala journalist, Sampath Lakmal de Silva, in July this year, every single mediaperson murdered in Sir Lanka has been a Tamil. Seven media workers have been killed by paramilitary groups since January this year alone.

The IFJ, which has sent two international missions to Sri Lanka, has pointed out: “The overwhelming majority of media workers who have been subject to intimidation, harassment and threats are also Tamil, and almost all media institutions that have been bombed, set on fire and attacked have been engaged in publishing and broadcasting in Tamil.” The LTTE had already silenced those opposed to it. Now the army is silencing alternative voices in Tamil society.

Sinhala journalists who write about human rights violations in Tamil areas or talk of reconciliation are dubbed “Sinhala Tigers” by their fellow journalists, and targeted. The prevalent chauvinism is so strong that Sinhala journalists have formed an organization called “Journalists for the Nation”.

President Mahinda Rajapakse himself meets senior journalists every month for breakfast and is known to reprimand the state media. The military openly questions the figures of the dead and certain categories and the language used in the reportage. In Jaffna, summoning ‘erring’ editors to the military base at Palali is a regular phenomenon.

Even without a formal coup, the power of the army is formidable. Retired military officers head commissions of inquiry; they are appointed provincial governors and government agents. There is no point complaining to them about anything, claimed a human rights activist, because “it would be like asking a thief’s mother to investigate a theft”.

Sinhala leaders in power project an image before the world and the donor community that peace is their primary agenda. Yet, they have a chauvinistic face for their domestic constituency that is aggressive, anti-reconciliation and militaristic. The dialogue that took place last weekend in Geneva is the result of international pressure, especially from the donors fed up with the conflict. Since there is no sincerity either in the government or in the LTTE, it is unlikely to lead to anything significant.

The Sri Lankan state under Mahinda Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party is virtually identified with Sinhala nationalism. It rode to power on the crest of Sinhala chauvinism supported by the ultra-nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the Jathika Hela

Urumaya, a party of the Buddhist clergy.

Their thinking, till recently, was that the LTTE could be militarily defeated, if only the army was given a free hand. Rajapakse hoped to negotiate with the LTTE from a position of military superiority.

These hopes have come to naught. The attempt of the Sri Lankan army to seize the Elephant Pass on October 11 from the LTTE failed within hours, leaving 130 soldiers dead and a large number injured. On October 16 — after the Supreme Court's judgment on de-merger of the northern and eastern provinces, a suspected LTTE suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with explosives into a convoy of the Sri Lankan navy, killing and injuring a large number of soldiers. The strategy of defeating a militarily weakened LTTE before engaging it in any dialogue does not seem to be working.

Under these circumstances, does the memorandum of understanding signed between the SLFP and the United National Party really mark a new beginning?

The two main political parties have agreed to pursue a common agenda on the conflict in the North and the East (Tamil areas), electoral reforms, good governance, social development and on a proposed structure for collaboration. The most important issue is cooperation on the ethnic question with the opposition UNP agreeing to support any negotiated settlement in parliament.

The agreement has been hailed as the harbinger of a new "southern consensus" on the key issue of the ethnic conflict. The SLFP and the UNP have ruled Sri Lanka almost alternately since independence. Any initiative of the ruling party on the ethnic question was routinely rejected by the opposition in the past.

The present agreement could put pressure on the LTTE, which has up to now said that it could not trust any government with a settlement as no agreement survives an election.

However, both Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe needed the agreement for their own purposes. Rajapakse runs a minority government and has a budget to get through in November and is unsure of the support of its smaller allies like the JVP.

Wickremesinghe also gains from the agreement. He was faced with retail desertions from the UNP to the SLFP. The so-called proposed structure for collaboration presents the tantalizing prospect of a national government with the participation of the UNP.